

**HUMBOLDT
FORUM**

IMPRESSIONS. THE HUMBOLDT BROTHERS

PRESS FILE



**A STIFTUNG HUMBOLDT
FORUM IM BERLINER
SCHLOSS EXHIBITION**

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“I see the name-giving as a call to think about the global connections of the present and the tasks for a common future, with openness and in a spirit of curiosity, just as Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt did in their time. Our goal now is to confront the historical values and contexts for which the Humboldt Brothers stand with questions that are pertinent today.”

Hartmut Dorgerloh, General Director of the Humboldt Forum

Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt are the brothers after whom the Humboldt Forum is named. Their manner of interconnected thinking, their curiosity and their openness have been the guiding influence on the Forum's design. The exhibition *Impressions. The Humboldt Brothers* casts a spotlight on their work, the circumstances of the times in which they lived, and creates connections with the principles and contents of the Humboldt Forum.

The life and work of Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt are multilayered and link to global questions that extend to our reality in the present. They connected public education, a new understanding of nature and an occupation with languages and cultures.

The perspectives on the brothers are diverse: Alexander (1769–1859), the globe-trotter, who turned his attention to local and global interactions, and viewed people and nature in context. Wilhelm (1767–1835), whose occupation with many languages is described as the basis of his comparative view of people and their cultures. The cosmopolitan thinking of the brothers, which was oriented in the philosophies of the Enlightenment and the modern sciences that arose around 1800, saw freedom as a right of all people. They were patrons of art and culture, combining an overriding concept of education with social participation. But there is also the view of the Humboldt Brothers as exponents of a universalism with a European stamp, as players in colonial contexts, and voices of a system of knowledge dominated by Europe.

The Humboldt brothers combine an exploratory approach to the world, the movement and observation in cultural and linguistic, colonial and imperial contexts, with stories of humanity and the social and political circumstances of their epoch and with perspectives for the future.

CORE THEME – THE HUMBOLDT BROTHERS

As namesakes – also as Berliners, founders and lecturers at the Berlin University as well as collaborators in the creation of the first public museums in Berlin, the work and biographies of the brothers reference all the people involved in the Humboldt Forum. Along with the *History and Architecture of the Site* as well as *Colonialism and Coloniality of Power*, the Humboldt Brothers is therefore one of the three core themes that will be treated in the Humboldt Forum in every area and by all participants.

Their creative activities offer diverse linking points for the scientific and artistic objective for the building: In this way, the Humboldt Brothers will confront visitors at events and at points of mediation. Highlighted objects on the surfaces of the permanent exhibitions and digital resources communicate, explore and treat the references between the brothers and the Humboldt Forum – viewed from various perspectives.

IMPRESSIONS. THE HUMBOLDT BROTHERS

The exhibition *Impressions. The Humboldt Brothers* spot light on the life and times of the brothers. The title *Impressions* refers to the spatial representation of the exhibition: It is situated between the Passage, which, as the core of Franco Stella's design, creates a public urban space accessible by day and by night within the building complex, and the Stair Hall of the Humboldt Forum. As you cross the Passage, pictures and words appear on the window surfaces of the Stair Hall, from which an association game develops between the brothers and the contents and programme of the Humboldt Forum. The pictures on the inside of the window niches become theme fields and stories.

The exhibition does not follow a biographical or linear narrative. Neither is it a grand narrative: rather, it forms open "windows" into history. In part, the themes are closely connected with the life and work of the brothers, and in part they take an expanded or altered perspective of a look at the circumstances of the times in which they lived and bigger connections.

"To look at the Humboldt brothers in connection with the Humboldt Forum holds the challenge of putting many seductive tales to one side in order to direct one's gaze at the actual activities, which is often a story quite different from the traditional idea."

David Blankenstein, Exhibition Curator

The monumental image sections come from various epochs and regions, and they represent a wide variety of techniques of image production. The oldest image template is a mogul pictorial manuscript from around 1600 – it shows a yogi in the lotus position. The most recent is a still from Rainer Simon's 1989 film *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo*, the masterpiece co-produced by the GDR and FRG on Alexander von Humboldt and his failure on the "highest mountain in the world", as he thought. The joining element of all the images in the windows is the human body, its attitudes and gestures. They refer to the subject being treated and by extension to the term "activity", which not only defines the Humboldt brothers themselves: In Wilhelm's philosophy of language and theory of education, it stands for the changing power of language and for the free development of the human being. The observation and representation of what the human being is as an individual in the community and in humanity as a whole, is a central component of a type of anthropology which the brothers pursued with partly different and partly overlapping approaches.

In this sense, the narratives on the themes start from the human being in action: Vitality – Continuing Education – Cow Tree – Gender Trouble – Helping Hand – Revolutions – Other Antiquities – Dual – Slavery – Cherokee – Cassandra – Chimborazo - Yoga

SELECTED THEMES FROM THE EXHIBITION



Unbekannter Künstler, Hinduistische Asketen unter einem Baum [Detail], um 1600, Jahangir-Album, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Libri picturati A 117, fol. 6v, Foto: kienzle.oberhammer 1

YOGA

Wilhelm von Humboldt first encountered the philosophy of yoga when he was studying ancient Indian texts written in Sanskrit. He was one of the first European scholars to learn this language; it is even said that he spoke it with his daughters at the dinner table. He was fascinated by the beauty of the language, which gave him access for the first time to a complex philosophy that originated outside of Europe. He and his contemporaries were faced with a problem, however: how could they translate this way of thinking into their own languages?

Starting in the early nineteenth century, European scholars competed to become experts in Sanskrit, believing to have found in it the origins of European languages. They argued about whether Indian thought was equal or inferior to European thought. At the same time, Indian intellectuals sought to integrate their old religious culture with contemporary science and philosophy. This amalgam of Indian and Western influences laid the groundwork for modern forms of yoga, which have now spread throughout the world.

SELECTED THEMES FROM THE EXHIBITION

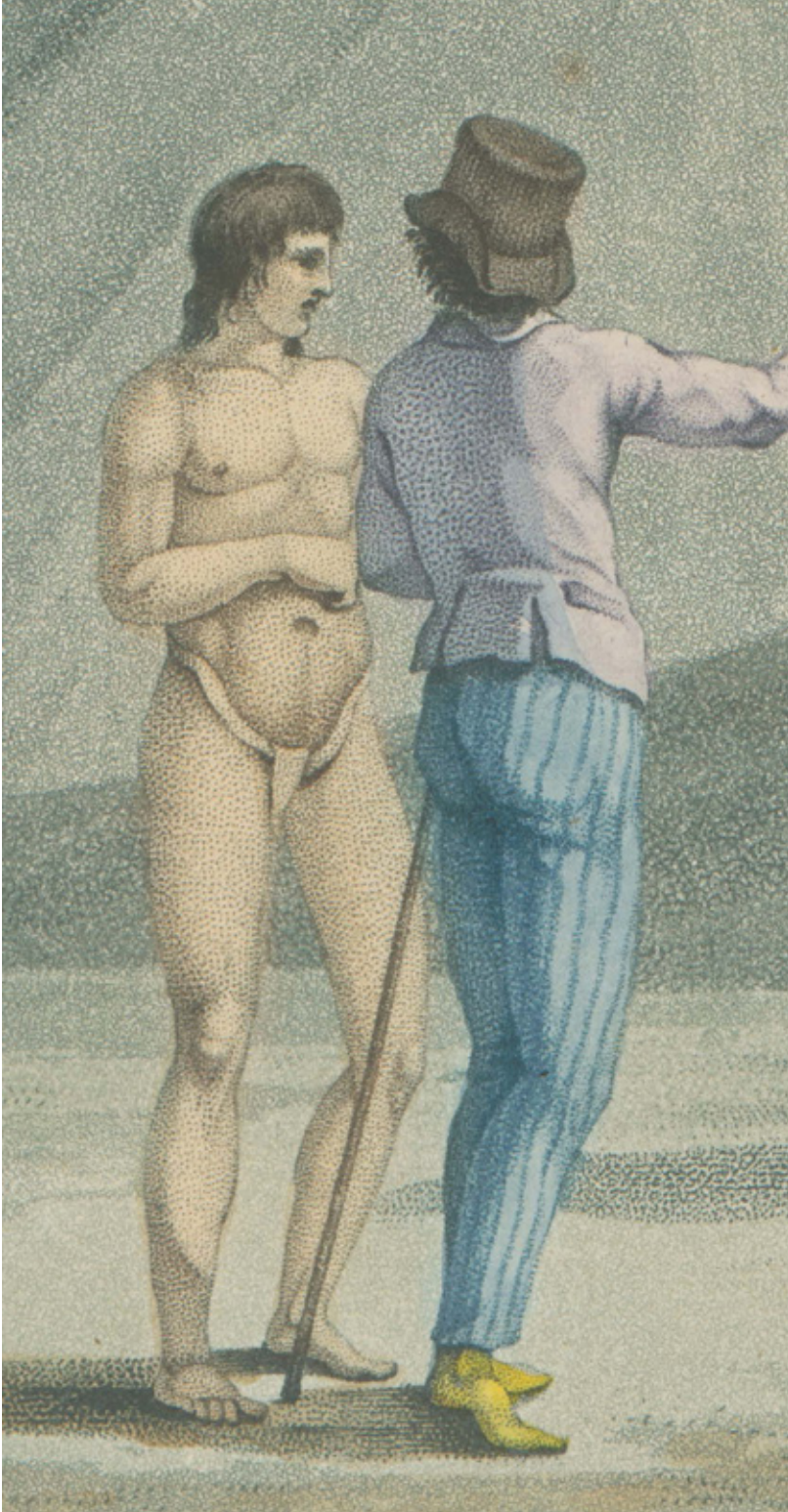


OTHER ANTIQUITIES

An exhibition visitor bends over an Aztec sculpture and appraises its details. What will probably happen many times daily in the future in the Humboldt Forum is in the image section, a detail from the view of an exhibition in 1825 at Piccadilly Circus in London, which drew 10,000 visitors to the Egyptian Hall of the exhibition entrepreneur, William Bullock. Two years earlier, with Alexander von Humboldt's writings on Mexico and the monuments of the indigenous peoples of the Americas in his luggage, he had travelled in the young republic, collected original Aztec sculptures and had replicas made of the great stone works that Humboldt had described in his works. The exhibition in London brought ideas about the pre-Columbian cultures of America as Alexander von Humboldt represented them in two dimensions in his works and shared with the European public spatially and immersively amongst people. During this period, Alexander von Humboldt himself was one of the most important pioneers of material collections of cultural artefacts from regions outside Europe, from Egypt, America and Asia, not only through his works but also through his expert opinions and reports on collections of American artefacts arriving in Europe; many of the objects he arranged are now part of the collections of the Staatliche Museen Berlin, and some will be on display at the Humboldt Forum.

Agostino Aglio, Exhibition on Ancient Mexico at the Egyptian Hall, Picadilly [Detail], Lithografie, um 1824, in: William Bullock, A description of the unique exhibition, called Ancient Mexico: collected on the spot in 1823 ... for public inspection at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, London, 1824, Franckesche Stiftungen zu Halle, S/THOL:V 050,

SELECTED THEMES FROM THE EXHIBITION



Louis de Rieux (nach), Volcans d'air de Turbaco (Detail), kolorierter Kupferstich, in: Alexander von Humboldt, Vues des Cordillères et Monuments des Peuples indigènes de l'Amérique, Bd. 2 (planches), Paris, 1810, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2° Kart. GfE M 390-1,1, Planches, 41,,

COW TREE

During their travels in the Americas, Alexander von Humboldt and French botanist Aimé Bonpland collected about 6,000 different plants. Rather than simply describing them, as was common at the time, Humboldt classified them according to the elevation at which they grew. This allowed him to see connections to the other data and observations he had recorded. He realised that plants, animals and people lived in a state of interdependence and were influenced by local climatic and geographic conditions.

The description, naming and collection of all life of Earth according to universal categories was one of the most important endeavours of European science. The scientific names given to these plants and animals were – and continue to be – Latin names, often referencing other scientists, expedition sponsors or other prominent figures. Any names given by indigenous communities were generally of little interest to Europeans, who were equally uninterested in the uses the plants and animals were put to and any spiritual significance they held. Alexander von Humboldt occasionally made exceptions to this rule, and in his travel journals he recorded how the local people related to nature.

SELECTED THEMES FROM THE EXHIBITION



UNFREEDOM

A rebel soldier fighting against soldiers of the French colonial power in Saint-Domingue is shown in another window of the exhibition. The detail comes from an engraving by Auguste Raffet, part of the book of engravings "Vignettes et portraits pour le consulat et l'empire" that appeared in 1845. The struggle of people against violence and repression by the colonial power, who came mainly from Africa and were carried off and enslaved, took place parallel to Alexander von Humboldt's American journey. Twice during the journey, Humboldt stopped off at Cuba, the neighbouring island to Saint-Domingue, where he witnessed, as in Europe, the „Great Fear“ of the whites of the uprising of enslaved people from Africa. The independence of the island of Haiti was proclaimed on 1 January 1804; in the year after Humboldt returned to Europe, 1805, the kingdom of Haiti gave itself a constitution, whose first article the exhibition shows next to the rebel soldiers. It shows what Alexander von Humboldt never shows when he (almost) exclusively takes up the role of critic of the European or white practice of slavery and repression within a European discourse on humanity and justice: the productive power of intellectual black people to determine the form of their freedom themselves. From the contemporary European (and also Humboldt's) perspective, this revolution remained, above all, a horrible catastrophe. The voices of black people are missing, as are the names of those who founded and built the state of Haiti. This is also a reason to make this an issue.

Auguste Raffet (nach), St. Domingue. 1802-1804 [Detail], Radierung, um 1845, in: Adolphe Thiers, Vignettes et portraits pour le consulat et l'empire, Paris, 1845, Universität Mainz, Zentralbibliothek, RARA 4° AB 2355y

WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT

22 JUNE 1767

born in Potsdam

1789

travels in Europe, to Paris among other places

1790 – 1791

works as a civil servant in Berlin

1794 – 1797

pursues interests in antiquity and anatomy, forms friendships with Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe

1802 – 1804

Prussian ambassador to the Holy See in Rome

1808

becomes a member of the Academy of Sciences in Berlin

1809 – 1810

reforms the Prussian school system and founds the University of Berlin (the city's first university, now called Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

1810 – 1818

Prussian ambassador to Vienna, works at the Congress of Vienna on plans for reorganising Europe after the Napoleonic Wars; ambassador to London

1819

appointed minister in the Prussian civil service, dismissed after five months

1820 – 1835

devotes himself to the study of language; holds a total of 27 lectures at the Academy of Sciences

1827

meets a Hawaiian named Harry Maitai in Berlin, a rare opportunity to question a native speaker of one of the languages he studied

8 APRIL 1835

dies at Schloss Tegel, with his brother at his bedside, and is buried in a park on the estate

THE HUMBOLDT BROTHERS

1777 – 1787

the brothers are raised at home and privately educated by Berlin scholars

1779

death of their father Alexander Georg von Humboldt, a military officer, entrepreneur and royal chamberlain

1785

the brothers regularly attend soirées and salons in Berlin

1787

they enroll in law programmes at universities in Göttingen and Frankfurt an der Oder, but also continue to study classics, natural history and anthropology

1796

their mother Marie-Elisabeth dies and the brothers inherit a substantial fortune

1799

Wilhelm helps publish Alexander's treatise On the types of subterranean gases and means of minimizing their harm

1805

after a separation of seven years, the brothers see each other in Rome; Alexander brings Wilhelm dictionaries and grammars of Native American languages; they plan to work on them together

1813 – 1815

Wilhelm and Caroline are concerned that Alexander has become "too French"; both brothers are involved in the repatriation of European cultural property looted by the French

1820 – 1835

Alexander facilitates contacts between his brother and language scholars in Paris

1826 – 1830

Wilhelm and Alexander are involved in creating Berlin's first museum; Wilhelm heads the committee responsible for selecting its holdings; Alexander is offered the position of director but declines it

1836 – 1839

Alexander publishes his brother's magnum opus, On the Kawi language of the island of Java, which was unfinished at the time of his death

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT

14 SEPTEMBER 1769

born in Berlin or Tegel

1790

travels through the Netherlands and England, visits Paris

1790 – 1791

studies business administration in Hamburg and mining at the Freiberg Mining Academy in Saxony

1792 – 1796

works in mining, studies subterranean plants, conducts experiments in electricity

1798 – 1799

lives in Paris and travels through France and Spain with botanist Aimé Bonpland

1799 – 1804

undertakes a research expedition with Bonpland to the Spanish colonies, travels through regions of present-day Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Mexico; visits the US and returns to Paris

1805

becomes chamberlain to the King of Prussia and joins the Academy of Sciences in Berlin; travels to Italy and then to Berlin

1807 – 1827

Resides principally in Paris, publishes 29 volumes about the Americas; works on issues of nature, culture and history

1820 ONWARDS

Ankäufe und Gutachten für Objekte und Sammlungen aus Afrika, Amerika, Asien und Europa für Museen in Paris und Berlin acts as purchaser and expert advisor for collections of African, American, Asian and European objects held by museums in Paris and Berlin

1827

returns to Berlin, delivers lectures to students at the University of Berlin and to the broader public at the Sing-Akademie

1829

heads a research expedition that travels through the Russian Empire as far as the Chinese border

1845

the first volume of Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe is published; four more volumes follow between 1847 and 1862

6 MAY 1859

Alexander von Humboldt dies and is buried in the family plot at Tegel

IMPRESSIONS. THE HUMBOLDT BROTHERS

Dates and information

Location	Passage in the Humboldt Forum
Duration	from 20 July 2021
Opening times	Sun–Mon, Wed–Thur, 10 AM–8 PM Fri–Sat, 10 AM–10 PM
Entrance	Free
Information	Humboldt Forum Schloßplatz D-10178 Berlin Tel: 030-99 211 89 89 www.humboldtforum.org/
Curator	David Blankenstein The curator, art historian and Romance scholar David Blankenstein has worked on and published material for over 10 years on Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt and their role as protagonists of a European and global culture transfer history. After studying at the TU Berlin and the Université de Montréal, he curated exhibitions on the Humboldt Brothers at the Observatoire de Paris and the Deutsches Historischen Museum Berlin (with Bénédicte Savoy) as well as the permanent exhibition of the Casa-Museo Alejandro de Humboldt in Havana, Cuba (with Peter Korneffel).
Exhibition design	NLF team
Mediation and event programme	A multilingual and international mediator team supports the exhibition throughout the entire opening times. Guided tours, lectures, a themed day as well as other events and mediation programmes deepen and expand the core theme of the Humboldt Brothers from different perspectives.
Accessibility	The exhibition is inclusive and offers disability access. Audio descriptions are also provided for selected events on the core theme of the Humboldt Brothers.
Press Contacts:	Michael Mathis, Press Officer +49 30 265 950-525 michael.mathis@humboldtforum.org Andrea Brandis, Press and Communications +49 30 265 950-237 andrea.brandis@humboldtforum.org Mirko Nowak, Head of Communications +49 30 265 950-520 mirko.nowak@humboldtforum.org humboldtforum.org/presse