

# Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt

BERLIN COSMOS

edited by Paul Spies, Ute Tintemann, and Jan Mende

WIENAND

CONTENTS

7	PREFACE		
	ESSAYS		
11	I The Brothers Wilhelm & Alexander von Humboldt		
19	II Wilhelm & Alexander von Humboldt or: Humboldtian Science		
25	III The Glow of the Exhibits. The Humboldt Brothers’ Museum Concepts		
	PLACES		
36	1. PANORAMA – Berlin Scholars		
40	2. SPREE-ATHENS – The Horse’s Head		
46	3. SALON – Hebe		
50	4. THE ROYAL HOUSE – The Key		
54	5. MUSEUM – The Horse Tamers		
58	6. THE ACADEMY – The Clock		
64	7. UNIVERSITY – The Building		
	LIFE		
72	8. EVERYDAY LIFE – The Bed		
78	9. FAMILY – The Sculpture		
82	10. TEGEL – The Gallery of Antiquities		
88	11. BERLINER – The Death Mask		
	COLLECTIONS AND RESEARCH		
94	12. NETWORK – The Ornithologist		
98	13. DATA – The Chronometer		
104	14. COMPARING – The Languages of the South Pacific		
110	15. ROCKS AND MINERALS – The Gold		
114	16. FLORA – The Plants		
118	17. FAUNA – The Bird		
122	18. THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE – The Desk		
128	19. AMERICA – The Dictionary		
132	20. EGYPT – The Lion-Headed Goddess		
136	21. URANIA – The Meridian Circle		
140	22. GENDER CHARACTER – The Genius		
	IMPACT		
148	23. RESONANCE SPACE – The Cosmos Lectures		
152	24. REPRESENTATION – The Statue		
156	25. TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE – The Model		
160	26. TRANSLATING – Greek		
	MONUMENTS		
166	27. CONFERENCE – The Medal		
170	28. HONOURS AND DISTINCTIONS – The New Orders and Ceremonies		
174	29. CONVERSATION – The Knoblauchhaus		
180	30. POSTHUMOUS FAME – Humboldt Places		
	ESTATES		
189	I The Humboldt-Collection Hein in the Stadtmuseum Berlin		
192	II Alexander von Humboldt’s personal papers collection in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz – The Travel Journals		
196	III The Linguistic Estate of Wilhelm von Humboldt in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz		
	APPENDIX		
202	Annotations		
220	Chronology Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt		
222	Picture Credits		
226	About the Authors		

12 education system (1809/10). His most momentous act in terms of world culture was the founding of the University of Berlin. According to Humboldt, ‘continual research’ is the obligation of the university, a major and revolutionary reorientation of the university as an ‘institution of higher education.’<sup>1</sup> After his journey to America, Alexander lived in Berlin in 1805–07, then in Paris until 1827 – the intellectual centre of Europe. It was here that he met his lifelong friend François Arago, and where he reaped the scientific harvest of his American journey in the twenty-nine-volume opus on America: *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1805–39). This monumental work is an attempt to represent the entire natural and social reality of Central America linguistically and artistically in book form. In 1808, Alexander published *Ansichten der Natur* (Views of Nature) in German, dedicated to ‘his dear brother Wilhelm von Humboldt in Rome.’

During this time of war (1809–19), Wilhelm was in the service of Prussia in various cities throughout Europe – Königsberg, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, London, and Frankfurt am Main – and met his brother on numerous occasions. In 1820, he retired to his house in Tegel. The victory of the reactionary forces after the Napoleonic Wars did not allow the liberal Humboldt any further political activities. From 1827 onwards, the brothers once again lived in the same city: Alexander returned to Berlin as a world star of the sciences, and captivated its citizens with the spectacular ‘Cosmos Lectures’ of 1827/28. In his function as chamberlain, he advised the king, whose protective hand shielded him against numerous hostilities (after all, he was considered – rightly so! – a democratic, agnostic, and cosmopolitan friend of the French). Alexander’s travels to Russia and Asia in 1829, unlike the journey to America, were something of a scientific act of state. After 1820, Wilhelm lived in his house in Tegel, which he had rebuilt by Karl Friedrich Schinkel into a classicist ‘domestic museum’ and where he devoted himself above all to his linguistic studies, which he regularly presented to the academy by way of lectures. In 1830, he was commissioned by the king to chair the committee for the establishment of the Roy-



Fig. 1: Christian Gottlieb Schick, *Portrait of Wilhelm von Humboldt*, 1808/09, Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin

al Museum (today Altes Museum, Eng.: Old Museum), built by Schinkel. Alexander later continued this last public task of his brother by collaborating on the conception of the Neues Museum (New Museum) built by Friedrich August Stüler.

Wilhelm died in the presence of his brother in 1835. His main work, *Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java* (On the Kawi Language on the Island of Java), was published posthumously in 1836–39, with a foreword by Alexander, who also initiated the first edition of Wilhelm’s works,<sup>2</sup> a further sign of his strong solidarity with his brother. Alexander wrote his grandiose *Cosmos* (Cosmos) in Berlin, where he died in 1859, advanced in years and highly esteemed as a monumental representative of science.

### Difference and Complementarity

Mutual companions repeatedly pointed out the different characters of the two brothers. Compared to the obviously lively and forward Alexander, Wilhelm was the quieter and more sedate Humboldt, who at times even came across as being cold. When it comes to sexual preferences, the brothers were also extremely divergent. The young Alexander was rapturously attracted to other young men (acting out one’s homosexuality was not common at the time), while Wilhelm maintained a lifelong, profound erotic relationship with his wife Caroline von Dacheröden, while at the same time experiencing exuberant sexuality with a sadomasochistic touch.

This difference in their characters also corresponds to the different scientific orientation of the two brothers: an orientation towards the outside world with Alexander, and an orientation towards the human interior with Wilhelm, resulting in a ‘complementary’ relationship.<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, Alexander dedicated himself to nature, to the cosmos, and Wilhelm to man, the *anthropos*, the ego, and culture, especially the languages of man.

The dichotomy of *cosmos* and *anthropos* is, however, not exclusive; the areas of overlap, especially in Alexander’s work, are great: on his expeditions, Alexander was interested not only in plants, animals, and geological conditions, but also in the social conditions and cultures of the countries he explored. His *Vues des Cordillères* is a vital book about the monuments of ancient American cultures.<sup>4</sup>

Alexander was particularly passionate and detailed about the *political* circumstances of the countries he visited. The books on Cuba and Mexico – *Essai politique sur l’île de Cuba* and *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne* – are astute economic, social, and political analyses of these countries of the Spanish Empire.<sup>5</sup> Having studied cameralistics, Alexander was well prepared for these political-economic investigations. Politics is the largest overlap in the work of the two Humboldt brothers. Young Wilhelm’s first major book

(written in 1792, published posthumously in 1851) is devoted to political theory: *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (Ideas for an Attempt to Determine the Limits of the Effectiveness of the State). His writings on educational policy, the constitution of Germany, and the emancipation of the Jews are milestones of political literature. Furthermore, active politics in the Prussian civil service was his primary field of activity for nearly twenty years. Alexander also worked in many ways in the service of Prussia.

### Travels and Writings

What is truly interesting about the brothers’ different scientific orientations, however, is the profound similarities of their ‘worldviews’ (to use one of Wilhelm’s central terms), a profound parity in their intellectual approach to the world, of which the two had divided large areas between themselves.

*Travel* was the research method preferred by both scholars. For Alexander, the central importance of the research expedition is evident. Like Cook, Bougainville, and Darwin, he was one of the great travel researchers of world science. The journey to America was the most decisive event in his life as a scientist. But Wilhelm travelled, too. Both brothers began to travel for research purposes as young men, initially in Germany and Western Europe. The necessity of *autopsie* (seeing for oneself) as well as *autakusie* (hearing for oneself) drove both brothers into the world. Wilhelm also spent more than half of his life travelling, after his travels as a student and young man (‘to the Empire’, to Paris and Switzerland), then with his family, finally on a political mission across Europe: Paris, Spain, the Basque Provinces, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Berlin, Königsberg, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Vienna, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, London, Tegel, to name only the most important stages, certainly with longer stays in various cities, but also in a constant state of moving on. These movements, unless they were business trips (as for Alexander), served research purposes, above all through conversations with



Fig. 2: August Desnoyers after François Gérard, Alexander von Humboldt, Paris 1805, Stadtmuseum Berlin

The view of a natural scientist could not be broader and more comprehensive. An 'interdisciplinary' and truly global approach to the world is characteristic of Humboldt's research. 'Humboldtian Science', as the American history of science has coined it, cannot be applied to any single natural science. It should not be confined

to the natural sciences but should include socio-political and cultural aspects in an overall view of the world. From today's perspective, Humboldt transcended all disciplinary boundaries (which, of course, did not yet exist at that time). Although he certainly drew a line between the realm of the spirit and the world of nature

and did not intend to transgress this,<sup>17</sup> he nevertheless indeed crossed it with sovereign professionalism. For the world is indeed *one* world. And this one world of nature and spirit is of course also one world insofar as it encompasses all continents on earth, in the 'telluric'. Humboldt's world was not only Europe. He travelled from Europe to Central America, to today's Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Cuba, and the United States. The second major journey – the Russian one – took him from Saint Petersburg via Central Asia to the Ob and the border of China.

The fact that cultural studies scholars have recently discovered in Alexander von Humboldt an author who can be read anew as a discoverer of 'another modernity'<sup>18</sup> has recently brought Humboldt's 'historical' books more to the fore. *Vues des Cordillères* (Views of the Cordillera), now available in German and English, provides insight into American cultures. Under the title *Die Entdeckung der Neuen Welt* (The Discovery of the New World), one can now also study the so-called *Examen critique*, the history of knowledge about America, in German. And the second volume of *Cosmos*, this astonishing attempt at a 'physical description of the world', is one of the most important works on the history of European thought. It describes the emergence of a sense of nature in literature and painting, as well as the history of the idea of the cosmos, that is to say, of nature as a totality. This book is a model for a truly global science: it is written in one of the great languages of the sciences, in German; it deals with all European literature since antiquity and, of course, quotes in the original Latin, French, English, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. This, and not the provincial narrowness of a single language, however global it may be, is world science.

After all, no one recognised the colonial conditions in all their exploitative reality like Alexander von Humboldt when he spoke of the 'principe odieux du système colonial',<sup>19</sup> the 'despicable principle of the colonial system'. Slavery disgusted him; no one analysed and rejected the social inequalities of the Spanish colonial empire as clearly as Alexander von Humboldt. He called the great guilt of the Europeans with regard to genocide

and slavery 'l'éternelle honte de l'Europe chrétienne' ('the eternal shame of Christian Europe').<sup>20</sup> There is no other author in German literature who has been as passionately anti-colonialist as Alexander von Humboldt: 'L'esclavage est sans doute le plus grand de tous les maux qui ont affligé l'humanité'<sup>21</sup> ('Slavery is undoubtedly the worst of all evils that have ever befallen humanity').

The first volume of *Cosmos* ends with a programmatic statement against racism: 'By asserting the unity of the human race, we also resist any unpleasant assumption of higher and lower human races.'<sup>22</sup>

And Alexander proves this statement with the same passionate conviction as his brother Wilhelm that it is necessary 'to abolish the barriers which prejudice and one-sided views of all kinds place hostilely between men, and to treat all mankind, without regard to religion, nation, and colour, as one great, closely fraternised tribe, as a whole existing for the attainment of one purpose, the free development of inner strength.'<sup>23</sup>





London, so that their holdings were ultimately scattered by sales to Berlin, Gotha, Florence, Göttingen, Halle, Jena, London, Mainz, Munich, Oxford, Stockholm, and Wörlitz, as well as to other places in Australia, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Austria, Russia, and Switzerland.<sup>6</sup> Lichtenberg, who had still been able to

view the entire collection, reported to his colleagues in Göttingen on the possibilities that had opened up here.<sup>7</sup> His colleagues were receptive, since the university had its own museum since 1773. In July 1782, the curator Johann Friedrich Blumenbach succeeded, with the help of King George III, in acquiring more than 350 precious

objects from the Forster Collection for Göttingen.<sup>8</sup> Blumenbach, who had already left a lasting impression on Wilhelm von Humboldt, introduced Alexander von Humboldt to the museum.<sup>9</sup> The lectures of Christian Gottlob Heyne also impressed both Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt. Through Heyne, Alexander came

Fig. 1: The Humboldt Forum, 2019

into contact with Georg Forster, who had married the daughter of this important classical philologist.<sup>10</sup> This enabled Alexander von Humboldt to become acquainted with the holdings of the Göttingen museum which had been sent from London first hand, and to benefit from the museological knowledge of Georg Forster, who had been an employee in Kassel since 1780 and, in this function, had been in charge of the Natural History Cabinet of the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel since 1784.<sup>11</sup> This encounter led to the plan to undertake a journey along the Lower Rhine in 1790, where, in addition to their studies of nature, Forster and Humboldt also visited natural history exhibitions, art galleries, and the museum of art in Düsseldorf.<sup>12</sup>

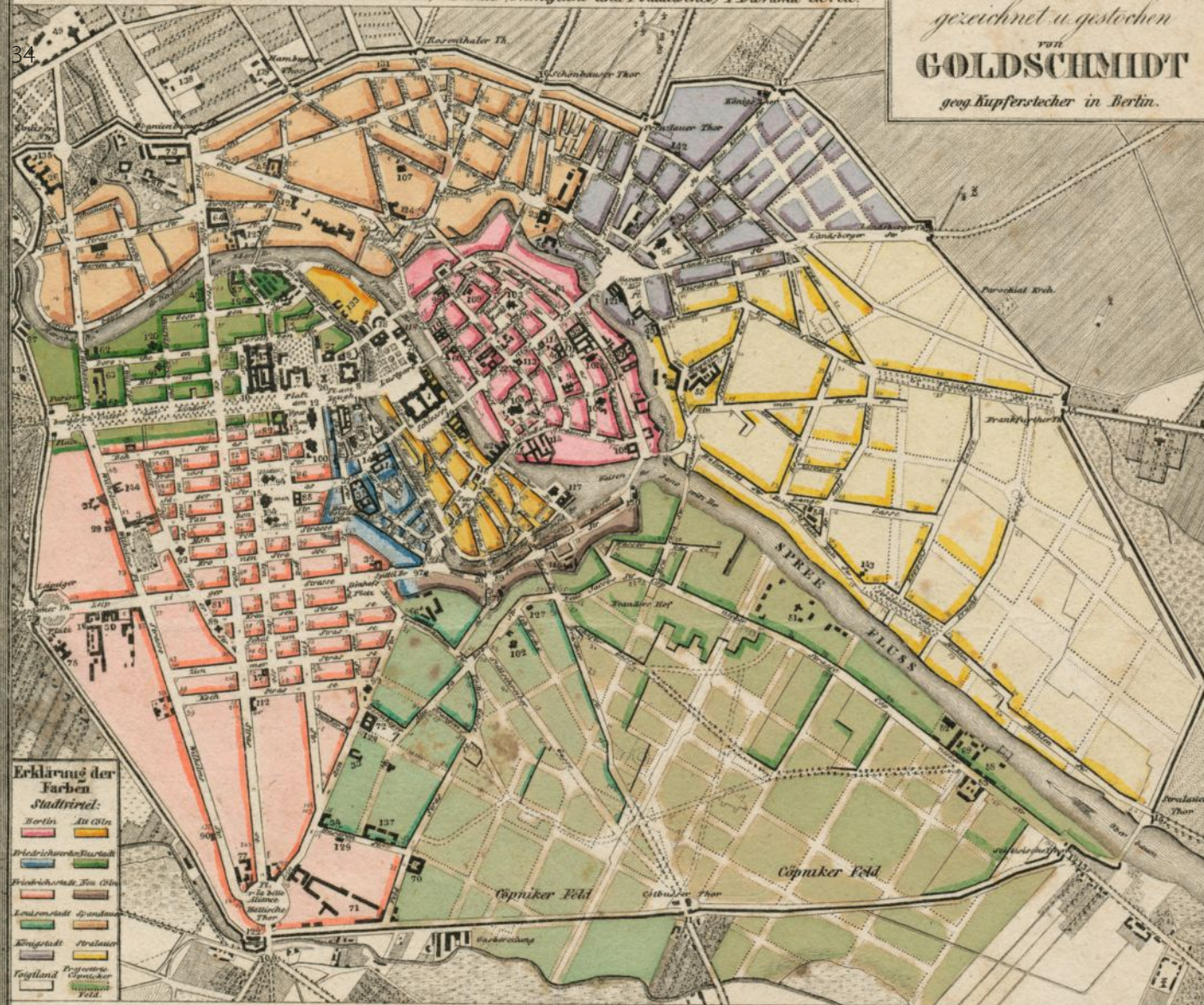
On this journey, wanderlust, the joy of discovery, the urge to explore, and the desire for collections merged. On the beach of Dunkirk, Georg Forster felt, in the presence of Alexander von Humboldt, a 'sublime perfection' vis-à-vis the sea, which was threatening in its immensity but also opened up the possibility of a comprehensive encounter: 'A new world opened up for us. [...] How sacred is the element that unites continents?'<sup>13</sup> A short time later, Humboldt, with a view to his journey taken with Forster, noted: 'An indeterminate quest for the distant and the unknown, everything that greatly stirred my imagination, the danger of the sea, the desire to survive adventures and to be transported from an everyday common nature into a miraculous world, appealed to me at that time.'<sup>14</sup> This feeling was transferred to the exhibits in the collections. In London, the subsequent station of his journey, Alexander von Humboldt was impressed by the private museum of the extremely wealthy Sir Joseph Banks: 'The sight of his collections, the Indian world of things and people in his house [...], this way of handling the collection strengthened my enthusiasm for natural history.'<sup>15</sup> In this context, he described his attraction to the foreign 'world of things'; at the sight of it, he reported, 'it glimmers and glows wonderfully.'<sup>16</sup> This was the key experience



STATISTISCHE NOTIZEN

Berlin hat einen Flächeninhalt von 975,745 Quadrat Ruthen, 14 Land und 2 Wasserthore, 41 Brücken, worunter 18 steinerne, 7 eiserne und 16 hölzerne, 280 Strassen und Gassen, 20 Plätze und Märkte, 27 Kirchen, 2 Bethäuser, 1 Synagoge, 17 Hospitäler mit Ausschluss der Militär-lazarette, 10,000 Gebäude in und ausserhalb der Mauern und 240,000 Einwohner mit Einschluss der 16,000 Mann starken Militär. Berlin zeichnet sich ferner aus durch: eine Universität mit einer Anzahl von 17 bis 1800 Studierenden; worunter 5 bis 600 Ausländer, eine Academie der Künste und Wissenschaften etc., eine Bau-Academie, 1 Taubstumm- und 1 Blinden-Institut, 5 Theater (2 königliche und 1 städtisches), 1 Diorama etc. etc.

Von  
**BERLIN**  
gezeichnet u. gestochen  
von  
**GOLDSCHMIDT**  
geogr. Kupferstecher in Berlin.



ERKLÄRUNG DER SCHWARZEN GEBÄUDE etc.

1. Schloss	19. Marktall	37. Bank	55. Fourage-Magazin	73. Kas. d. Grd. Artill.	91. Dorotheen Kic.	109. Jüdische Synag.	127. Colosseum	145. n. Charlottenburg
2. Königl. Palais	20. Neue Wache	38. Reithahn	56. Proviant-Mag.	74. Grd. Artill. Kas.	92. Dreifaltigkeit K.	110. Joachimsst. Cy.	128. Milit. Arrest	146. n. Pichelsberg
3. Pr. Carl-Palais	21. Lagerhaus	39. Montions-Dep.	57. alq. Milit. Laz.	75. Franz. K.	93. Franz. K.	111. Graue Kloster	129. künstl. Brun. Ant.	147. n. Spandau
4. Pr. Wilhelms P.	22. Port	40. Gewerbe-Institut	58. Armatur-Maga.	76. Lazar. d. Grd. Reg.	94. Franz. Dom.	112. St. Wilh. Gym.	130. Friedr. Hosp.	148. n. Bellevue
5. Pr. Albrecht-Palais	23. Louisa-Stiftung	41. Arbeitshaus	59. Salzshof	77. Lazar. d. Grd. Man.	95. Wendische K.	113. Rathaus	131. Taubstummen Jn.	149. n. Schöneberg
6. Museum	24. Monbijou	42. Mühlen	60. Allg. Kngs. Schule	78. Dom.	96. Georgen Kir.	114. Stadtsingtei	132. Mehlhaus	150. n. Brunenwald
7. Universität	25. Thierarznei-Sch.	43. Armen-Anstalt	61. Artu. Ingenieur-S.	79. Garnison Kirche	97. Spittel Kir.	115. Stadtgericht	133. Neue Packhof	151. n. Regnitz
8. Zeughaus	26. Amt Mühlenhof	44. Charité	62. Artill. Werkstadt	80. Hospital franc.	98. Heilige Geist K.	116. Cölnische Ratha.	134. das Schlösschen	152. n. Potsdam
9. Giesshaus	27. Finanz-Ministeri.	45. Posthof	63. Material-Dep. d. Art.	81. Minist. d. geistl. A.	99. Jerusalem K.	117. Proviant-Amt	135. Meierei	153. n. Hasenheide
10. Academie	28. Handels-Ministeri.	46. Exercier-Haus	64. Garde-Kaserne	82. Minist. d. Innern	100. Katholische K.	118. Börse	136. Circus	154. n. Tempelhof
11. Comandantur	29. Mor. d. ausw. Angl.	47. Exercier-Kas.	65. Grenadier-Kas.	83. Blinden-Anstalt	101. Kloster Kir.	119. Loge d. Weltkugel	137. Cavallerie-Ställe	155. n. Ricksdorf
12. Opernhaus	30. Kriegs-Ministeri.	48. Chrg. Pl. Institut	66. Grenadier-Kas.	84. Lithg. Institut	102. Louisa Kir.	120. Loge Royal York	138. Neue Krongießer	156. n. Prepten
13. Bibliothek	31. Justiz-Ministeri.	49. Krongießerrei	67. Grenadier-Kas.	85. Seehandlung	103. Marien Kir.	121. königl. Theater	139. Familienhaus	157. n. Gropnick
14. Münze	32. Staats-Kanzlei	50. Eisen-Magazin	68. Füseler-Kas.	86. Lotterie-Combiv.	104. Neue Kir.	122. Cavallerie-Kas.	140. Wendische Gym.	158. n. Stralow
15. Schauspielfhaus	33. Statistische-Bür.	51. Kalkscheunen	69. Grd. Schützen-Kas.	87. allg. Garnison-Laz.	105. Nikolai Kir.	123. Klinik	141. Schul-Garten	159. n. Friedrichsfeld
16. Porzellan-Fabrik	34. Kammergericht	52. Proviant-Amt	70. Werderische Muhl.	88. Böhmische Kirche	106. Parochial Kir.	124. Jüdische Lazar.	142. Kalk-Scheune	160. n. Pankow
17. Bau-Academie	35. Hausvogtei	53. Train-Magazin	71. Cavallerie-Kas.	89. Böhm. Brüdergym.	107. Sophien Kir.	125. Gr. Landes-Loge	143. Pe-August-Palais	161. n. Weissensee
18. Steuer-Amt	36. alte Packhaus	54. Bauholz-Mag.	72. Kaserne u. d. d. Art.	90. Kaserne u. d. d. Art.	108. Waisenhaus Kir.	126. Diorama		162. n. Tegel

PLACES



### 3. SALON – Hebe

The relationship of Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt to the salons in Berlin brings together several moments in the city's cultural history, which have since become iconic. The 'Berlin Jewish Salons,' which were only later referred to as such, were discussed in both positive and negative terms as a symbol of Jewish and women's emancipation, and individual women became figureheads of a movement.<sup>1</sup> The portrait of the *salonnière* Henriette Herz as Hebe (fig. 1) was perceived on several levels as a transgressive and symbolic image of the Enlightenment in Berlin: a married Jewish woman openly shows her hair (and more); a Jewish couple makes use of the classical Greek world of gods as a symbolic anticipation of acculturation.

Cultural-historical representations in the style of 'men such as ... socialised with ...' interpreted the close interweaving of the famous brothers with the salons as a positive sign of 'German-Jewish' dialogue. The truth behind this interrelationship, insofar as one can ascertain any truth two hundred years later, is more multifaceted, scintillating, and ambivalent – and thus it corresponds above all to the appearance of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was known among the friends of the

salons as 'Mephisto'. The ambivalence of the lifelong relationships, the different, in part conflicting attitudes of both Humboldt brothers and their friends to Jews and Judaism reveal essential tendencies in Prussian intellectual and cultural history.

When the Humboldt brothers first met Henriette Herz, they were by no means statesman and minister, but rather young men under the age of twenty who were accompanied by their Hofmeister, Gottlob Johann Christian Kunth, to one of the many private lectures in Berlin. The scholar and physician Markus Herz presented a lecture in his house on lightning conductors, an invention that Kunth was considering for the Humboldt Palace in Tegel. The fact that the encounter with Herz's much younger, beautiful, and highly educated wife – the famous bridal picture, created a few years earlier, hung in the couple's flat at Spandauer Strasse 35 – must have been electrifying, not only stands to reason but can also be verified. From 1786 onwards, the brothers were regular guests at the home of the Herz family and other Jewish open houses in the city.

At the Herz couple's tea table, the special character of Berlin sociability around 1800 becomes clear in an exemplary way: the good networking of Jewish households, their quasi 'extraterritorial' situation in Prussia, opened spaces for a social experiment.<sup>2</sup> The daughters, amongst whom, to name a few – also lesser-known –



Fig. 1: Anna-Dorothea Therbusch, Henriette Herz as Hebe, 1778, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin PK/Nationalgalerie





Fig. 3: J. Bardtenschläger after Eduard Hildebrand, Alexander von Humboldt in seinem Arbeitszimmer (Alexander von Humboldt in His Study), 1845, Stadtmuseum Berlin

the sleeping alcove was also located.<sup>20</sup> Humboldt, like Goethe on occasions, loved to have the stoves in the study heated up excessively.<sup>21</sup> He flirted with being a ‘tropical type’, a ‘forest dweller from the land of parrots’, who felt most comfortable at room temperatures of 24 to 27 degrees Celsius. Summer heat was refreshment for him. But Humboldt not only loved the warmth, he was also a night worker, who after a long day still sat down to work and occasionally only went to bed around four o’clock in the morning. He needed little sleep; four to five hours were enough for him in old age.<sup>22</sup> Charged with coffee and ‘lots of sugar’,<sup>23</sup> he devoted the morning to working on manuscripts and answering letters. When writing, he was forced to sit in a bent posture and hold the sheets of paper on his crossed knees – a late consequence of a paralysis of the right arm incurred while in the tropics; the typical diagonal texture of his handwritten texts testifies to this.

There are two depictions of the interior of this flat, created by the painter and Brazil traveller Eduard Hildebrand and authorised by Humboldt. Reproduced in a large edition, to this day they continue to convey Humboldt’s image as a ‘Weltweiser’ (wise man of the world) dedicated entirely to his research – indeed, a nerd of sorts in his natural habitat. Humboldt’s guests were particularly impressed by the library (fig. p. 186/187)

with its enormous bookshelves, works of art, animal hides, maps, rolls of paper, and bundles of manuscript. A stately palm tree stood near the window.<sup>24</sup> Humboldt owned a parrot [see Chapter 17: Fauna], and there are even reports from visitors that a live chameleon was kept in a small box with a glass lid.<sup>25</sup> It is fitting that, for a time, Humboldt took in a travel writer who had returned from America, together with his feisty raccoons and snappy young foxes.<sup>26</sup>

This sounds expectably like ‘creative chaos’, such as that depicted in the illustrations of the studies of the philologists Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm. The opposite was the case, however, because everything in this library had its fixed place – Humboldt was known for his meticulous sense of order.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Hildebrand’s picture of the library orchestrates Humboldt’s scholarly existence and, with this, science in general – it thus stands in a long tradition that reaches as far back as Albrecht Dürer’s *Saint Jerome in His Study* (1514). For the library was supposed to have a representative function for Humboldt’s guests. It was a showroom related to Humboldt’s profession, comparable to the sculpture hall of the sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow, Goethe’s so-called ‘Juno Room’, and the opulent music salon of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy.





UTE TINTEMANN

79

## 9. FAMILY – The Sculpture

On 24 February 1810, Caroline von Humboldt reported to her husband from Rome that the sculptor Christian Daniel Rauch had given her a sculpture of their second eldest daughter Adelheid (b. 1800) (fig. 1) for her birthday: ‘Adelheid’s figure, first in clay, seated in natural size, with a butterfly in her small hands. The similarity of the head is striking and beautifully rendered; the youthfulness, childishness, and purity of the figure are very beautiful: she is half dressed, only her neck, arms, and chest are bare [...]. If possible, I would like to have it carved in marble.’<sup>1</sup> Caroline’s wish to have a version in marble was not fulfilled by Rauch until 1826; in this year, after many years of work, he completed the version in Schloss Tegel, depicted here [see Chapter 10: Tegel].<sup>2</sup>

Rauch was one of the artists whom Wilhelm and above all Caroline von Humboldt supported during their years in Rome. After Wilhelm von Humboldt was appointed Prussian envoy at the papal court, the couple and their five children<sup>3</sup> lived in Rome from November 1802 to September 1808. These years together were only interrupted in 1804 by Caroline’s eleven-month journey to visit her father in Erfurt and her stay in Paris after that. Between September 1808 and September 1810, she

lived in Rome with her daughters and her son Hermann (b. 1809) but without her husband. Humboldt travelled back to Berlin with their son Theodor, where, in early January 1809, he was appointed head of the section for ecclesiastic affairs and public education in the Prussian Ministry of the Interior. In the following months, he initiated the founding of the Berlin University [see Chapter 7: University] and the reform of the Prussian educational system.

Soon after their arrival, the Humboldts’ house in Rome became a social hub of the city: travellers to Rome and resident German artists were regular guests. Caroline in particular supported the artists, most of whom lived in difficult financial circumstances, in many ways, for example by mediating commissions and making her own purchases, but also through personal care. Along with the sculptor Rauch, who lived in the household after Humboldt’s departure, gave the children drawing lessons, and accompanied Caroline on her excursions, the painter Gottlieb Schick was one of the artists she most supported. She commissioned several family portraits from Schick,<sup>4</sup> including the portrait illustrated here (fig. 2) of her two daughters Adelheid and Gabriele in 1809. She commissioned it as a birthday present for her husband, ‘in memory of their childlike beauty.’<sup>5</sup> Even before the picture was finished, she described it to him with the following words:

Fig. 1: Christian Daniel Rauch, Adelheid von Humboldt als Psyche (Adelheid as Psyche), 1826 (model 1810), Schloss Tegel, Berlin



## 13. DATA – The Chronometer

Alexander von Humboldt was a friend of modern technology, and he loved precision instruments. 'I am obsessed with exact numbers', he confessed at one time.<sup>1</sup> Constantly busy with carrying out a wide variety of measurements and combining these into data series, he was driven by the idea that the laws of nature 'could be traced back to mathematically identifiable explanations'.<sup>2</sup> On his expeditions to America and Asia, he carried a large number of instruments with him. These instruments enabled him to make astronomical measurements as well as to record geomagnetic, geodetic, and above all atmospheric data (temperature, air pressure, humidity, atmospheric electricity). Even a 'cyanometer for measuring the blueness of the sky' was part of his luggage.<sup>3</sup> The South American expedition was later described as a highly mobile observatory, a 'wandering academy', the inner core substance of which consisted of high-quality measuring and observation devices that required special care.<sup>4</sup>

In 1829, shortly before his departure for the 'state expedition' to Russia, Humboldt received a pocket chronometer (fig. 1) as a gift from King Frederick VI of Denmark and Norway. With its eighteen-carat gold

case and platinum chain it was far too valuable to be exposed to the risks of such a journey. The chronometer remained behind in the Berlin observatory, was later in Humboldt's estate, and today belongs to the collection of the Deutsches Technikmuseum. This precision timepiece with an extra-large hand for the seconds, which the scholar had requested on account of his decreasing visual acuity, was made especially for him by the Altona-based precision mechanic Heinrich Johannes Kessels. Chronometers are special precision timepieces which were used primarily on sea voyages to determine the exact geographical longitude. At a fixed hour, usually at noon, they were used to establish a relationship to the reference time of the Greenwich zero meridian. It was a marine chronometer, albeit one made by Louis Berthoud, with which Humboldt was able to astonish even seasoned sailors on their South American voyage with the most accurate positioning.<sup>5</sup>

One of the instruments possibly carried on the journey to Asia, a universal theodolite weighing twenty kilograms, has been in Deutsches Museum in Munich since 1918 (fig. p. 92).<sup>6</sup> Humboldt had left it to the Prussian general staff, which was responsible for trigonometric topographical surveys. It is a 'high-tech product' from the precision instrument workshop of Henri-Prudence Gambey in Paris. Mounted perpendicularly on a tripod, this classical land surveying instrument was

Fig. 1: Johann Heinrich Kessels, Pocket chronometer no. 1289, Altona 1828, Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin







## 18. THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE – The Desk

After the Second World War, the large mahogany desk had disappeared from Schloss Tegel, which suffered great losses through theft and confiscation. The desk (fig. 1) that now stands in the study is a very similar piece of furniture, which the von Heinz family, the descendants of Wilhelm von Humboldt, found at an antiques market; it is a worthy surrogate of the lost original.

Humboldt worked here during the years he spent in Tegel, after his political career as a reformer of the Prussian educational system, as a diplomat, and a minister. The reactionary political camarilla surrounding the king had put an end to Humboldt's political career and thus destroyed hopes of a liberal development in Germany. The study – and consequently the desk – are located in the new part of the house, which Schinkel added to the old building during the classicist transformation of the residence. From the completion of the reconstruction in 1824 until his death in 1835, Humboldt worked 'vis-à-vis a grave', as he once wrote, with a view from his study onto the grave of his wife Caroline, who had died in 1829, at the end of the field. This is the desk at which he developed his linguistic studies. At the academy, he presented linguistic topics in the narrower

sense; the philosophical foundations of his comparative study of language remain here, so to speak, on the Tegel desk.

In his first academy lecture [see Chapter 6: The Academy], Humboldt drafted the programme of a 'comparative study of language', a science that strove to describe all the languages of the world as 'organisms', that is to say as individuals. Leibniz had demanded in 1765 that one must describe all the languages of the world in grammars and dictionaries and compare them with one another. Leibniz had also explained why one should do this: because they contain a certain knowledge about the world and the human mind, and thus document the wonderful diversity of the human mind.<sup>1</sup> Comparative linguistics is the science of the human mind, what one might call 'cognitive linguistics' today.

In his first academy lecture, Humboldt only hinted at the philosophical justification of this new science of languages, which he developed over many years in ever new approaches. Already in the first sketches for a comprehensive description of all languages, an 'encyclopaedia of all languages' – in particular in the *Essai sur les langues du Nouveau Continent* (1812) – he stressed two main ideas for the justification of this project: language is not primarily a tool of communication but above all a production of human thought, and this thinking manifests itself in great diversity, as different 'world views'

Fig. 1: Wilhelm von Humboldt's desk, 1820s, Schloss Tegel