# Dusting for Humboldt's Fingerprints on American Art and Culture

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The best part of my job as an art museum curator is developing special exhibitions. Those exhibitions are designed to be visually enticing and tell a riveting story. Every project starts with a question that I can't answer at the outset, and I am something of an outlier in my field in that I spend somewhere between five and seven years working on a single project. The most recent one was *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture*, which looked at how we developed a nature-based sense of identity at the intersection of art, science, and nature, using the fine arts as a lens through which to understand the profound impact of the 19th century German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt had on American art and culture.[1] This project served as a kind of capstone to my career. Thirty some-odd years ago I started college as a geology major, where I promptly foundered on the shores of higher mathematics, and after a rather traumatic year panicking about my future, I ended up switching to art history. What has made that transition so satisfying is that I have centered my career on understanding the cultural significance of American landscape painting—or, geology without the math.

So, who is Alexander von Humboldt? Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was one of the most influential scientists and thinkers of his age (Figure 1).[2] A Prussian-born geographer, naturalist, explorer, and illustrator, he was a prolific writer whose books graced the shelves of American artists, scientists, philosophers, and politicians.

Figure 1. Friedrich Georg Weitsch, *Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859)*, 1806, oil on canvas, 49 5⁄8 × 36 3⁄8 inches. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

I first encountered Humboldt in my Historical Geology class, and I knew from Historical Geology that Humboldt spent his lifetime developing his web of life, understanding that there is an underlying unity of nature in which "nothing can be considered in isolation." As early as 1799 he expressed his belief in human induced climate change.

When I changed majors, I assumed I was leaving him behind, but in my first upper-level art history seminar, which was on American landscape painting, I was delighted to find that nearly every Hudson River School artist had not only read Humboldt, but that some, like Frederic Church, even lionized him. As a result, Humboldt came to be a familiar presence lurking in each of my major exhibition projects. In *The Painted Sketch* it was Humboldt's assertion that "Nature and Art are closely united in my work" which meant that 19th century American landscape painters read Humboldt's *Cosmos*, and absorbed his advice to landscape painters, and the realization that all of my artists wanted to be like Humboldt.[3] In *The Civil War and American Art* I learned that Humboldt was an abolitionist and believed in the equality of all peoples.[4] At this point I began to wonder—why do you keep lurking in all of my projects? I wondered what would happen if I trained the spotlight on Humboldt directly and made him the

focus of my next project. And then I discovered that Humboldt, who had lived 89 years and traveled the globe, visited the United States for six weeks in 1804, detouring on his way home after spending five years traveling and studying in South America and Mexico. I was intrigued.

Most biographies of Humboldt dismiss this interlude as something like an airport layover in his life because during his visit he invented nothing, discovered nothing, and did no exploring. We are fortunate to have Andrea Wulf's engaging biography of Humboldt, *The Invention of Nature*, which brings to life all of his fascinations, quirks, enthusiasms, and ideas.[5] "Nature" is a concept we take for granted today. Humboldt's belief in the "unity of nature," or a "web of life," was his idea that everything in the world, really, everything in the universe is interconnected. This belief developed from his four-year exploration of South America, Central America, Mexico, and Cuba between 1799 and 1804. Humboldt was passionate about networks—networks of scientists, artists, writers, and statesmen who collectively fed him information, conducted research on his behalf, and were part of a nearly global enterprise in what we would call crowdsourced information.

What began as published accounts of his travels turned into a series of lectures, and those lectures turned into a 5-volume epic series he titled *COSMOS*, which would encompass five volumes published between 1845 and 1859 (Figure 2).

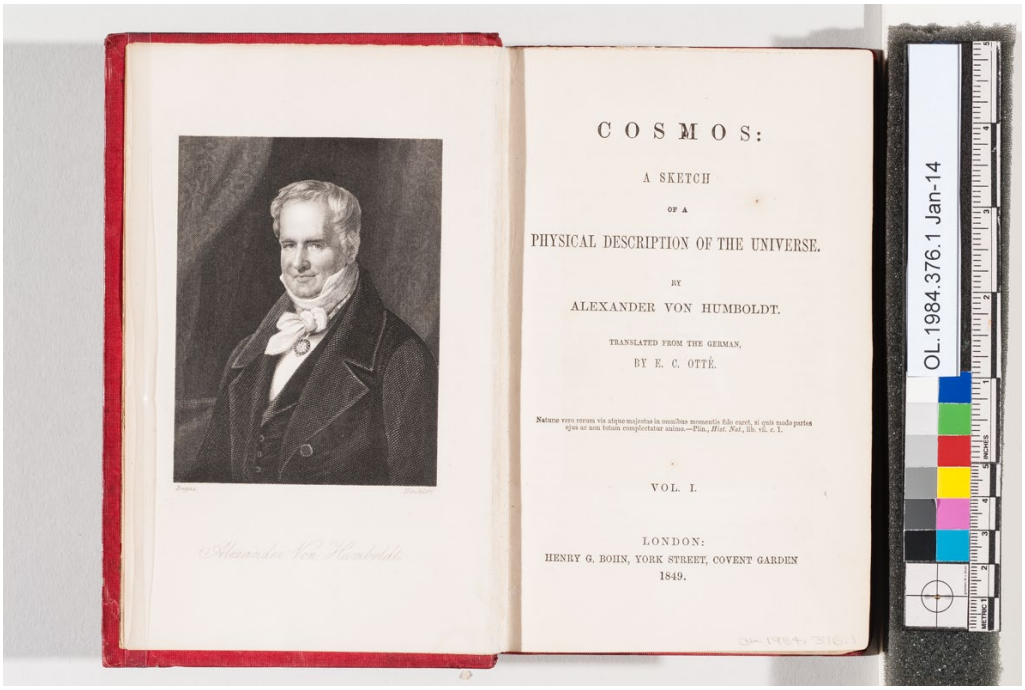


Figure 2. Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, 1849, ink on paper, open: 7 ½ × 10 inches. Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Humboldt advocated for Nature as the connection between Mind, Society, and Culture. He described his goal for *Cosmos*: To "enrich the intellect, enlarge the sphere of ideas, and nourish and vivify the imagination."[6] *Cosmos* was the expression of Humboldt's hope that he could unite "Both spheres of the one cosmos—the external world, perceived by the senses, and the inner, reflected, intellectual world. . . to represent nature as one great whole, moved and animated by internal forces."[7] But before there was *Cosmos* there were 34 volumes that chronicled his travels, advanced his ideas, and inspired a generation. No topic escaped his grasp; he did not coin the term "ecology," but he described it. "Plate tectonics" developed after his death, but he theorized it. Hints of evolution flow through his volumes.

In 1832 Charles Darwin took every volume of Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* with him on the *Beagle*, and in his Brazilian diary wrote, "I am at present only fit to read Humboldt; he like another sun illuminates everything I behold."[8] The two men met in the 1840s, when Darwin commented that his "whole course of life" was due to having "read and re-read" Humboldt as a youth.[9] In 1859, in a eulogy for Humboldt, Darwin proclaimed he could not have written the *Origin of Species* without him. Scottish geologist Charles Lyell affirmed that without Humboldt, there would be no systematic geology. The two men met in 1823, and Lyell credited Humboldt with shaping his own approach to geology and climate theories in his groundbreaking book, *The Principles of Geology*.

Humboldt created the field of plant geography, based on the idea that similar species of plants flourish at similar altitudes around the world. He charted mean temperatures around the globe, and drew the first isotherms and isobars, which allowed him to see that the entire planet had climatic belts, and in essence gave us the premise for The Weather Channel (Figure 3). He surmised that earthquakes and volcanoes were linked phenomena, and in 1799 he observed that by cutting down massive stands of trees around a lake in Venezuela, the inhabitants had changed evaporation and erosion patterns, and thereby altered their local climate.

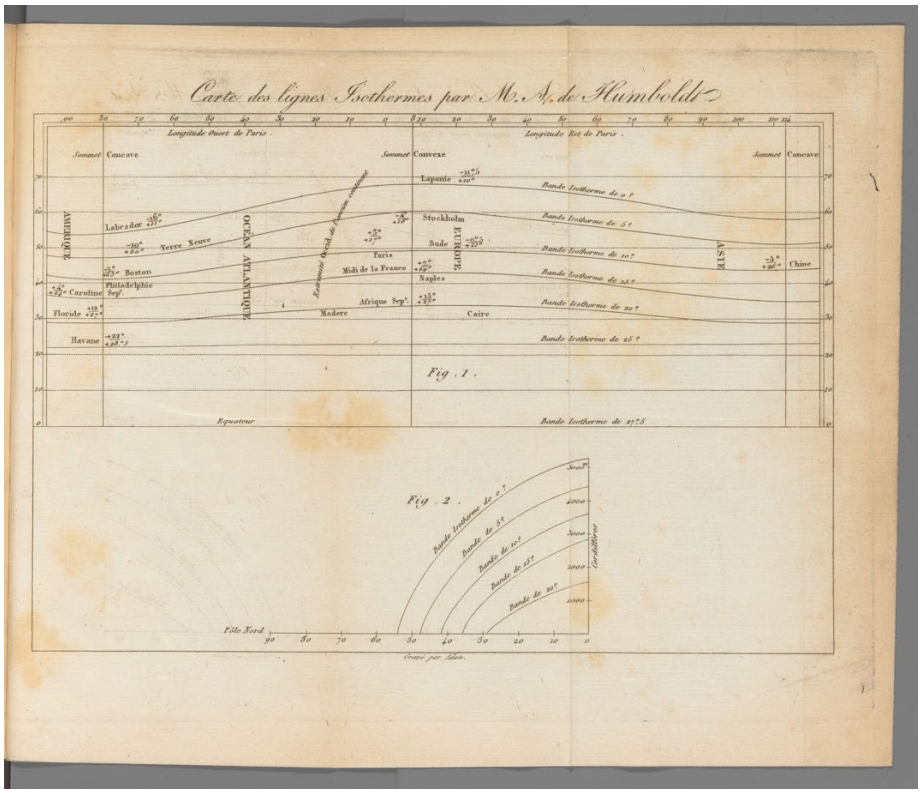


Figure 3. Alexander von Humboldt, *Isothermal Chart*, 1817, printer's ink on paper, approx. 8 ½ × 9 inches. Harvard University Libraries, Widener Library.

In fact, if you consider Humboldt's contributions to many of today's separate disciplines, we could cover the entire range of a liberal arts college course catalogue, not to mention the Smithsonian Institution, from anthropology, botany, geography, geophysics, oceanography, and physiology to zoology. His observations changed our understanding of volcanics; he discovered the location of the Magnetic Equator which changed cartography of the Americans. His measurements of longitude, latitude, temperature, humidity, and barometric pressure accelerated the development of climatology, meteorology, and cartography. We stand on broad shoulders. And by realizing this, we come to appreciate the vast, unruly aspect of the Smithsonian as an organism as restlessly curious as Humboldt himself, needing both sides of its brain to thrive, to make connections, to develop insights and advance scholarship in the arts, the sciences, and in history.

Alexander von Humboldt never really intended to visit the United States; he was in Cuba, waiting for a ship to take him and his 35 trunks of materials back to Paris. But the assistant consul, Vincent Gray, talked him into making a detour, and in late May he arrived by ship in Philadelphia. His goal was to meet the President of the United States, one Thomas Jefferson, and to accomplish this he mentioned in his letter of introduction that he had found fossilized mastodon teeth in the Andes. Humboldt, you see, had

read Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and he agreed with Jefferson that the French naturalist, the Comte de Buffon was wrong in his belief that every plant and animal species in America was a smaller or more degenerate version of its European counterpart. He also knew that Jefferson shared his fascination with mastodons. Humboldt didn't need to bribe Jefferson to arrange a meeting; Jefferson was eager to meet the young naturalist and invited him to the White House.

Shortly after Humboldt landed in Philadelphia, he met Casper Wistar, a physician, anatomist, and Vice President of the American Philosophical Society. Humboldt was the guest of honor at one of his celebrated "Wistar parties," gatherings for all of the leading scientists in America; he spent time in John Bartram's famous gardens; and not surprisingly the APS made Humboldt a member. His escort in Philadelphia and his traveling companion to the White House was the artist Charles Willson Peale, who was understandably elated with the task. Peale had opened his famous museum in 1786, encompassing natural history and a portrait hall of eminent Americans. The galleries were housed in part of the American Philosophical Society, and one memorable dinner honoring Humboldt took place in Peale's Museum, underneath the mastodon you see behind the curtain (Figure 4). That mastodon**,** found in upstate New York three years earlier, was the first complete skeleton excavated in America. It was the central attraction of Peale's Museum and an emblem of the scale and scope of America's ambitions.

Figure 4. Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*,1822, oil on canvas, 103 ¾ × 79 7⁄8 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison Jr. Collection).

Inspired by Humboldt's enthusiasm for mastodons, Peale painted the *Exhumation of the First Mastodon in America*, in which he is literally excavating America's past and linking it to Humboldt's research (Figure 5). Peale's entire family lines the rim of the marl pit, while Peale oversees the draining of the swamp and the retrieval of the bones. Peale's friend, the ornithologist Alexander Wilson is there as a witness, while other scientists gather in the nearby tent. American ingenuity is on display, forming a kind of creation myth celebrating America's belief that nature would supply our emblems of national and cultural identity.

Figure 5. Charles Willson Peale, *Exhumation of the Mastodon*, ca. 1806–08, oil on canvas, 49 × 61 ½ inches. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore City Life Museum Collection, Gift of Bertha White in memory of her husband, Harry White.

When Peale and Humboldt arrived in the nation's capital, Jefferson welcomed them to the White House with open arms. Humboldt's meetings with President Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State James Madison, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, and Charles Willson Peale sparked a lively exchange of ideas about science, the arts, American politics, and exploration that shaped the nineteenth century in America. Although Humboldt is widely recognized in the sciences for his contributions, he casts an equally long shadow over major developments in American culture that have yet to be explored. Gallatin, mesmerized by Humboldt, wrote to his wife that "[H]e speaks twice as fast as anybody I know, German, French, Spanish, and English, all together. But I was really delighted and swallowed more information of various kinds in less than two hours than I had for two years past in all I had read or heard."[10] Gallatin became a lifelong friend, corresponding with Humboldt for the better part of 50 years. And it was Humboldt who encouraged him to write his monumental ethnographic treatise on North American Indians published in 1836, the first volume of its kind.

In 1804 Humboldt wrote to James Madison, "After having witnessed the great spectacle of the majestic Andes and the grandeur of the physical world, I intended to enjoy the spectacle of a free people worthy of a great destiny."[11] His conversations with Jefferson and Gallatin ranged from fossil evidence of

mastodons to Humboldt's fervent plea for the abolition of slavery, on the grounds that a man's appearance and race had no intrinsic bearing on his intelligence or capabilities. He suggested to Madison no fewer than seven proposed locations for a canal to be cut across the Americas, ranging from a northwest passage across Canada to several places along the Isthmus of Panama to facilitate exploration and trade.

His recently drawn map of the Texas/Mexico border region (Figure 6), which Humboldt shared with the assembled group, provided Jefferson with detailed information about a part of the Louisiana Purchase contested by New Spain, potentially the single most important piece of geopolitical intelligence provided to the United States during this period. Jefferson had just acquired the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon, which angered the King of Spain, and as he and Jefferson argued over where the border would be, you can see why Humbolt's maps filled significant gaps in Jefferson's knowledge of what he had just acquired. Armed with Humboldt's map, Jefferson was able to argue to establish the border between Mexico and the United States.

Figure 6. Copy after Alexander von Humboldt, *General Chart of the Kingdom of New Spain between Parallels of 16 & 38° N.*,1804, pencil and ink on tracing paper, 37 ¾ × 26 inches. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

Several decades later, the U.S. Congress took up the debate whether to accept the unexpected bequest of one James Smithson, an English scientist of some renown, who had no ties to the new world, but who was willing to leave his fortune to found an institution in Washington DC dedicated to the "increase and diffusion of knowledge among men."[12] A heated debate ensued on Capitol Hill as to the appropriateness of accepting foreign money, and it would be former President and current Congressman John Quincy Adams, who had also met Humboldt, who returned to Washington to endorse this as the perfect opportunity to build on that early idea.

My research has convinced me that Smithson himself may have had Humboldt in mind as he outlined his wishes—for we know the two men met in London in 1790 and spent a year together in Paris in 1814, where they were often in each other's company. Smithson's traveling companion, Charles Blagden, Secretary of the British Royal Society, kept a diary**,** and he recorded the times they spent with Humboldt over the course of a year. At a dinner for French scientists Blagden recorded the names of the guests, and on the page bearing Smithson's and Humboldt's names, Blagden drily noted, Humboldt, "talked away as usual."[13] Humboldt was a vocal proponent of American democracy and the country's scientific potential, and I believe that the germ of the idea that became the Smithsonian Institution might have developed in part as a result of that dinner, and the electricity surrounding Humboldt's career, his writings, and his ideas. Humboldt invoked the phrase about the need for the increase and diffusion of knowledge—in fact it's something of a catch phrase from the period—expressing in its vagueness the desire and desirability of wanting to know everything about everything and be in a company of men who will share their knowledge, and their eagerness to learn. I can think of no better way to describe the ethos surrounding the Smithsonian Institution.

What Humboldt did accomplish in his brief six weeks in America was to cement a lifelong friendship with Jefferson and assert that America's future would be grounded in our exploration of the continent, and our subsequent contributions to science and the arts. Humboldt's impact on American art was immediate, sustained, and profound. Before Humboldt left the United States, Peale painted one of the earliest portraits of Humboldt and installed it in his Gallery of great Americans alongside other famous portraits including George Washington. Peale's painting demonstrates the artist's world in miniature—combining art, nature, science, and politics as a civics lesson on American cultural values. Peale's youngest son, Titian Ramsay Peale, was raised on Humboldt's ideas that influenced his career as a naturalist and artist on the Stephen Long Expedition of 1818-19 and the Wilkes Expedition of 1838-42 (whose artifacts would go on display at the Smithsonian). Both expeditions carried Humboldt's books and maps with them.

Humboldt had left the United States intent on returning. In a letter to Jefferson's private secretary, William Thornton, Humboldt wrote, "I desire to explore Missouri, the Arctic Circle, and Asia."[14] I was

puzzled by this, until I realized that for Humboldt, Missouri was the embarkation point for Lewis and Clark, and thus represented the gateway to the American west; the Arctic meant the Pacific Northwest and Alaska; and Asia crossed the Bering Straits to Russia. These were three of the places Humboldt needed to complete his study of the world's climate, flora, fauna, and human beings. Humboldt had hoped to retrace Lewis and Clark's route. He had missed meeting those intrepid explorers by several weeks and fretted that they had not taken with them the proper instruments to correctly measure latitude and longitude and record the weather. Humboldt continued to Thornton, "This country that stretches to the west of the mountains presents a vast area to conquer for science!"[15] But the years flew by, and Humboldt finally recognized he would never make that trip. Instead, in 1832 he encouraged Prince Maximilian zu Wied**,** a friend and fellow explorer, and artist Karl Bodmer to make the trip on his behalf and gather those measurements, and information and artifacts concerning North American Indians that Humboldt could then compare with the data on South American Indians that he had compiled during his four years there.

A decade later, Humboldt expanded his understanding of North American Indians when he met George Catlin while the American artist was touring his Indian Gallery in Paris—all 500 of Catlin's paintings from his Indian Gallery are now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Catlin traveled with 14 Iowa Indians as touring performers, and in Paris Humboldt attended a performance of the Iowa Indians for King Louis-Philippe at the Tuileries, after which Catlin, Humboldt, and the Iowa toured the Louvre.

Some of America's finest visual artists helped define nature as the wellspring for American cultural values, and they drew their inspiration directly from Humboldt. In his second volume of *Cosmos*, published in English in 1849, Humboldt urged artists to approach nature with a scientist's eye, sketching carefully what they saw, and he implored scientists to allow themselves to experience nature as an aesthetic encounter.

Humboldt had encouraged Jefferson to construct America's cultural identity around what he called "natural monuments"—underscoring that we could not build our way to significance. Europe already had the Seven Wonders of the World—all man-made features like the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus—but Jefferson had extolled Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls, and Humboldt doubled down on this and incorporated them in his own writings, comparing the natural bridges in South America with Virginia's natural bridge and Tequendama Falls in Bogota with Niagara.

How do we know this took root? We look at maps. By 1823 Henry S. Tanner had created the most detailed map of the United States (Figure 7). Look at the cartouche which features the two sites mentioned in Jefferson's *Notes* and Humboldt's *Views of the Cordilleras* which had become pilgrimage sites—here elided, telescoping 800 miles of American geography to make it look like the Niagara River is running under the bridge. Plus, there is an eagle, a moose, a giant beaver, and a rattlesnake—endemic fauna.


Figure 7. Henry S. Tanner, Map of North America (detail), from *A New American Atlas Containing Maps of the Several States of the North American Union*, 1825, hand-colored engraving, 42 15⁄16× 57 7⁄8 inches. The David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

Frederic Church, the artist who painted these views, was foremost among the American landscape painters who took particular encouragement from statements from Humboldt such as, "A distinction must be made in landscape painting, as in every other branch of art, between the elements generated by the more limited field of contemplation and direct observation, and those which spring from the boundless depth and feeling and from the force of idealizing mental power."[16]

American Literature also found cultural resonance in the landscape, directly influenced by Humboldt. In Paris Humboldt spent several years with James Fenimore Cooper, who was writing *The Pioneers*, sequel to *Last of the Mohicans*, while the two men pored over the Long Expedition survey report. Humboldt met and inspired Fenimore Cooper's daughter Susan, who would go on to become a respected nature writer—and Humboldt has a long track record of supporting smart women—which is a topic for another lecture. Humboldt's maps and ideas would also work their way into American K-12 education in the botany books by Almira Lincoln Phelps whose frontispiece (Figure 8) is a translation of Humboldt's plant geography map (Figure 9). And Humboldt's isotherms and isobars demarcating lines of

air temperatures that inspired the standard for the zones of growing seasons (Figure 3) was presented in her sister Emma Willard's curriculum, published in *Woodbridge and Willard's Universal Geography* (Figure 10).

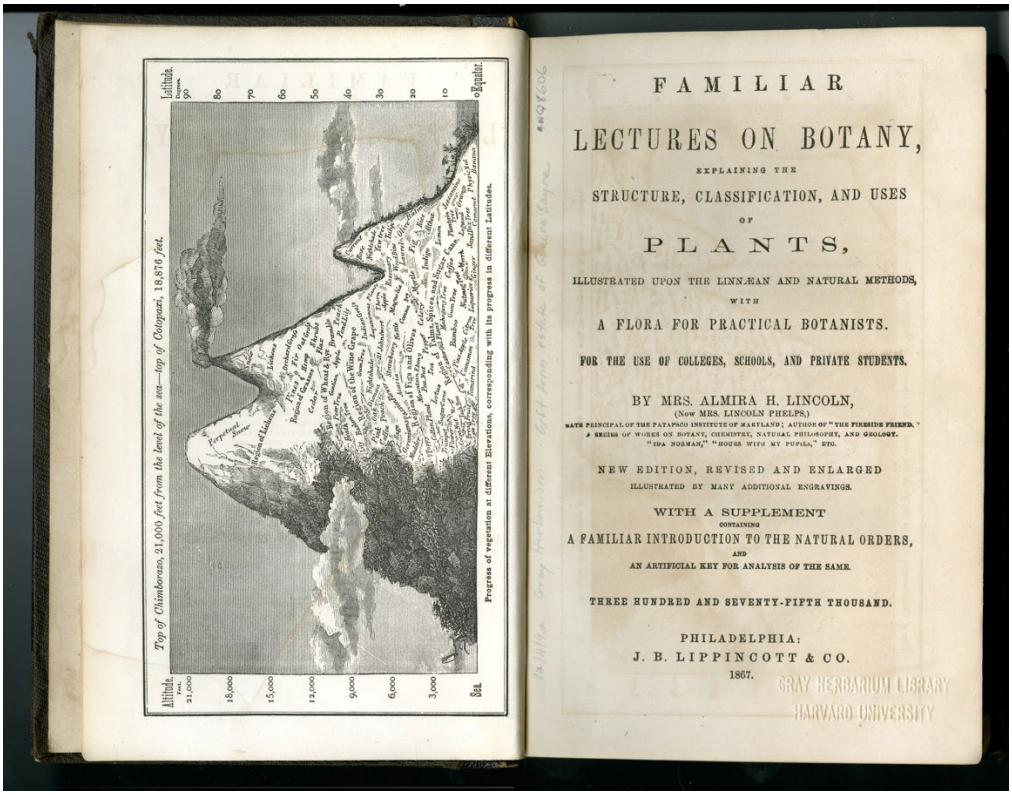


Figure 8. Almira Lincoln Phelps, frontispiece to *Familiar Lectures on Botany*,1829, engraving, 4 ½ × 7 ½ inches. Gray Herbarium Library, Harvard University.

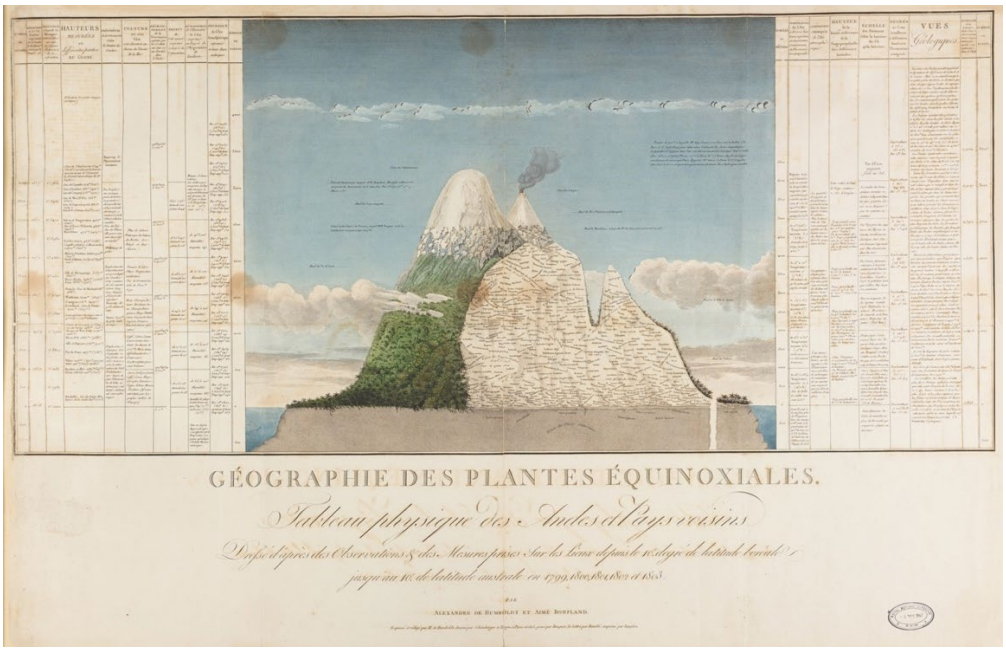


Figure 9. Alexander von Humbolt, *Géographie des Plantes Équinoxiales*, 1805, hand-colored print, 24 x 36 inches. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

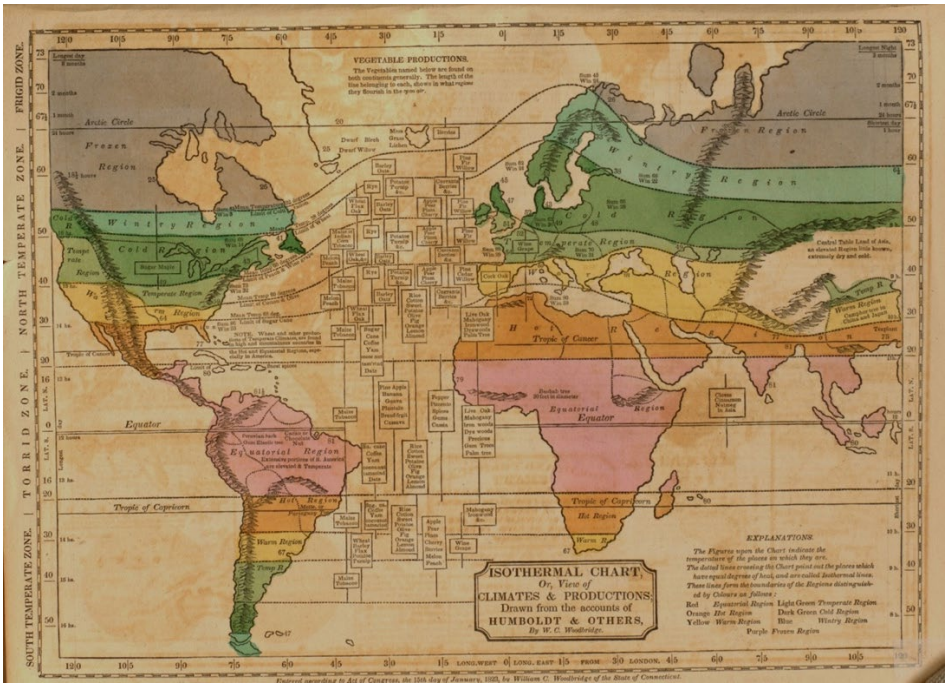


Figure 10. William C. Woodbridge, *Isothermal Chart, or, View of Climates & Productions; Drawn from the Accounts of Humboldt and Others*, from *Woodbridge's School Atlas*,1831, hand-colored copperplate print, 7 ½ × 11 inches. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

In New England, art and science blended seamlessly with nature-based literature under the tutelage of Louis Agassiz–and it should come as no surprise that it was Humboldt who helped Agassiz secure his teaching position at Harvard University. Agassiz was part of a group of scientists, artists, and writers, called the Adirondack Philosopher's Club, whose members included Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James Stillman, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Humboldt believed in the power of the written word, noting "Speech acquires life from everything which bears the true impress of nature, whether it be by the definition of sensuous impressions received from the external world, or by the expression of thoughts and feelings that emanate from our inner being."[17] Edgar Allan Poe dedicated his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, to Humboldt. Ralph Waldo Emerson summed up the breadth and range of Humboldt's interests, not to mention his galvanizing personality, when he observed "The wonderful Humboldt, with his extended centre, expanded wings, marches like an army, gathering all things as he goes. How he reaches from science to science, from law to law, tucking away moons and asteroids and solar systems in the clauses and parentheses of his encyclopedic paragraphs!"[18] Henry David Thoreau read Humboldt's writings on botany and wrote his own botanical treatise; he then took the framework of Humboldt's *Cosmos* and applied it to a humble pond in Massachusetts. "Walden" is *Cosmos* in miniature and was Thoreau's exercise in recording everything about that small ecosystem. Walt Whitman went the other direction. He wrote *Leaves of Grass* with a volume of *Cosmos* on his desk, including a poem in which he proclaimed himself a "Kosmos."

The American Transcendentalists were also among the most vocal abolitionists in the years leading up to the American Civil War. Humboldt cared deeply about racial equality. In 1804 Humboldt wrote that he considered himself half American, and that the sole flaw in American Democracy was the institution of slavery. To William Thornton he opined, "Before one is free, one must be just, and without justice there is no lasting prosperity." In 1842, in the first volume of *Cosmos*, Humboldt reiterated "While we maintain the unity of the human species, we at the same time repel the depressing assumption of superior and inferior races of men. . . . All are in like degree designed for freedom."[19] When Humboldt returned to Paris from the U.S. in 1804, Jefferson sent with him a letter of introduction to the Marquis de Lafayette, and the two men became close friends. Their orbit included the young revolutionary Simón Bolívar, who credited Humboldt with inspiring him to lead the revolts that overturned race-based slavery in his native South America. Together they were the four leading anti-monarchy, pro-U.S. revolutionaries of the era, united in their intense dislike of Napoleon—the feeling was mutual—but that's another lecture, too.

In 1811 Humboldt had written a chapter in his *Personal Narrative* destroying the premise of race-based slavery. In 1826 he published his *Essay on the Island of Cuba* in Spanish and French that repeated this chapter. The English translation was made by a man who was no abolitionist—who omitted this chapter entirely. When Humboldt found out, he was livid, and he wrote irate letters to newspaper editors in America to convey his outrage. These letters were published in the *New York Evening Post*, whose editor was William Cullen Bryant, the leading transcendentalist poet, and close friend to many landscape painters. John S. Thrasher's attempts to censor Humboldt had the reverse effect, and as a result, Humboldt was as well known in the U.S. for his views on racial equality as for his scientific discoveries. In 1858 Humboldt was declared the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's man of the year. We know that John C. Frémont based his Presidential campaign in 1856 on Humboldt's abolitionist principles and that Humboldt's ideas also underpin George Perkins Marsh's epic *Man and Nature, or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, published in 1865, the first book to draw well-defined relationships between American society and land management practices, making a connection between the use of enslaved labor and the South's monoculture agricultural collapse.

In 1903, an aging John Muir invited President Theodore Roosevelt to join him on a camping trip in Yosemite. Both men were Humboldt devotees. In 1865 Muir had declared, "How intensely I desire to become a Humboldt!" and was inspired to walk from the East Coast to Panama.[20] Decades later, they found common cause in Humboldt's ideals as they discussed preserving Yosemite and by extension their concept of American wilderness as a defining idiom for American art and culture. Muir urged Roosevelt to consider protecting Yosemite by invoking Humboldt's vision of learning everything from nature. Roosevelt's reply is a telling comment on how much was changing, as Humboldt's Natural Philosophy was now splitting into myriad individual and separate scientific disciplines. Roosevelt groused that "the average unfortunate student who has taken up scientific work in the colleges [has] carefully trained *not* to do the field work which in the past has aided in producing men like Humboldt."[21]

In an era of increasing emphasis on specialization, Roosevelt articulated what made Humboldt so appealing—the breadth and depth of his knowledge, the deep well of his curiosity, the generosity of spirit that informed the sharing of his ideas and support for rival scholars—precisely the attributes that epitomize the Smithsonian as a whole—that dedication to the increase AND diffusion of knowledge. The exhibition I developed dusted for Humboldt's fingerprints on nearly every aspect of American culture, and what emerged was a vision of the Smithsonian as the bricks and mortar manifestation of Humboldt's brain. Certainly, the echoes of his ideas, theories, observations, and discoveries are as relevant now as they were two centuries ago.

All of this found its way into the eight chapters in my book, but the greater challenge was how to get these ideas across in the exhibition. The installation was designed around Peale's mastodon**,** the

artifact that drew Humboldt and Jefferson and Peale together, under which Humboldt had dinner in 1804 right before leaving to return to Paris (Figure 11). It served as an avatar for the exhibition, and a head-turner—what is a mastodon skeleton doing in an American art museum?

Figure 11. Eleanor Harvey, installation photo of *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture* showing Peale's mastodon. Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2020.

We used SketchUp to plan the installation, and designed cut-throughs to allow visitors to see connections forward and back across time. These connections chart the path from Peale and Jefferson to Lewis & Clark, to Frederic Church and Niagara into abolitionist politics, the national parks, American Indian policy, geopolitics in Paris, and the founding of the Smithsonian (Figures 12 and 13). To help make that point, we developed a program featuring nine ongoing Smithsonian research projects that trace back to Humboldt's key concerns regarding topics including climate change and networks of communication—and ultimately posing the question about what each of us owes to each other and to this planet by way of compassionate stewardship.


Figure 12. Stefan Gibson, Smithsonian American Art Museum exhibition designer, SketchUp model of exhibition installation, March 2020.


Figure 13. Eleanor Harvey, installation photo of *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture* showing cut through to Frederic Church's *Niagara*. Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2020.

We were all set to open the exhibition—on March 20, 2020--and on Friday the 13th, as we put the finishing touches on the installation, my director arrived in the galleries dressed in what looked like a

hazmat suit—and I thought, that can't be good. She had come to let us know the Smithsonian would be closing on Monday. So, what do you do when a project you've worked on for seven years closes before it even opens? The exhibition was intended to be on view for five months, until mid-August. Within a few weeks we stopped talking about pushing back the opening date and began to absorb that we might never be able to open the galleries on that schedule. For the first year of the pandemic, I had written permission to visit the galleries once a week to make sure the covers were still on the artworks and the mastodon hadn't fallen over—which was my 3 am stress dream.

So, what else can do you do? Channel your inner Humboldt—in this case, Alex's equally talented brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt—and I reminded myself that it took Alexander ten years before a European monarch would give him permission to travel in their domain; after being rebuffed by France, Russia, and England, he finally bribed the Spanish King for a passport to the Colonial territories in South America. I did my best to channel Humboldtian resilience and creativity in the face of obstacles.

We filmed a video tour of the exhibition, in case we never opened. It was three days after we closed, and my videographer and I were allotted two hours to finish the project, so we shot a one-take rolling video that is still up on our website.[22] We pivoted to this new thing called "Zoom" for programs, including a "Double Take" with Kirk Johnson, Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. We substituted a zoom happy hour for an in-person gathering; we reconceptualized our day-long Symposium into six standalone lectures with moderated Q &A; we participated in numerous Webinars; we had time to 3D scan the mastodon, although I never got the line of digital printed mastodons I envisioned marching across my desk; and we created an interactive ArcGIS StoryMap with ESRI to allow the project to live into the future.[23] We also bribed our colleagues (not literally) to extend the loans and keep the exhibition intact—not just once, but twice—eventually keeping the exhibition installed for 18 months, during time which we were able to open for two months in the fall of 2020, and for another two months in the spring of 2021.

My light reading in 2020 was John Barry's book *The Great Influenza*, about the 1918 pandemic, and although they never discovered that the pathogen was a virus, and there were no vaccines, medical science encouraged the wearing of masks, promoted airflow and outdoor education, and the pandemic spurred the growth of the field of epidemiology.[24] Millions of people died. But those four years were followed by the Roaring '20s, epitomized by bathtub gin, flappers, and the jazz age. What I discovered over the last 4 years has been a renewed appreciation for the power of stubborn positivity and a good sense of humor. At the Smithsonian this experience has driven me to focus on bringing empathy and collegiality to every aspect of my job, and to extend that to my colleagues, promising reciprocal loans, advocating for their projects, and emphasizing the collaborative aspects of our competitive field. Somehow knowing that there could be a future for those of us who survived added to my determination to

extract as much from this experience as I could, and use it to reset my priorities in every aspect of my life, and to understand better the question poet Mary Oliver poses, in her poem "The Summer Day":

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?"[25]

If I've learned one thing from this experience, it is the importance of knowing what you care about, doing the best you can to make a difference, and to never lose sight of the joy you experience, or bring to others.

NOTES

1. Eleanor Harvey, *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2020).
2. All images are provided courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.
3. Eleanor Harvey, *The Painted Sketch: American Impressions from Nature, 1830-1880* (New York: Harry W. Abrams, 1998)]; Alexander von Humboldt to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Paris 3 January 1810 in Goethe Humboldt Letters 1909, p.305., quoted in Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015) p. 42, n12.
4. Eleanor Harvey, *The Civil War and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2012).
5. Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).
6. Quoted in Laura Dassow Walls, "Introducing Humboldt's Cosmos," *Minding Nature*, 2, no. 2 (August 2009): 5.
7. A. von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, trans. E.C. Otté (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 24.
8. Darwin's diary entry for February 28, 1832, Bahia. See Charles Darwin's *Beagle* Diary 1831-1836, p. 42, Darwin-online.org.uk.
9. Quoted in Gerard Helferich, *Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander Von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We See the World* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004), xxi.
10. Albert Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, 6 June 1804, in Albert Gallatin Papers, 1794-1952, New-York Historical Society.
11. Humboldt to Madison, Philadelphia, 24 May 1804, in Madison, *The Papers of James Madison*, Secretary of State Series, 7:247-48.
12. James Smithson's Will, dated October 23, 1826, Smithsonian Archives, https://siarchives.si.edu/history/featured-topics/stories/james-smithson-founder-smithsonian-institution.
13. Charles Blagden diary, vol 6 (1810-1814), entry for 2 October 1814, Charles Blagden Papers, Royal Society Archives, London.
14. Humboldt to John Vaughan, Rome, 10 June 1805, American Philosophical Society Archive, Philadelphia. Schwarz, *Alexander von Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika: Briefwechsel* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004): 1056, letter 19.
15. Humboldt to William Thornton, Philadelphia 20 June 1804, in Ingo Schwarz, ed., *Alexander von Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika: Briefwechsel* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004): 96-96, letter 9.

16. von Humboldt, *Cosmos*, 2: 95.
17. Alexander von Humboldt, *Views of Nature* (1806), eds. Stephen T. Jackson and Laura Dassow Walls, trans. Mark Person (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 192.
18. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Humboldt," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies*, vol. 11 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), 457.
19. von Humboldt, *Cosmos*, 1: 358.
20. John Muir to Mrs. Carr, Trout's Mills near Meaford, 13 September 1865, in William Frederic Badè, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1924), 1:140.
21. Roosevelt to Hugo Münsterberg, 7 May 1901; quoted in Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006), 237.
22. A video tour of the exhibition can be accessed at https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/humboldt.
23. The ArcGIS storymap and virtual exhibition can be accessed at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b1145a02f54043a281407418c836fdb7.
24. John Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004, revised 2018 edition).
25. Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-133/the-summer-day/.