

Alexander von Humboldt

From the Americas to the Cosmos

Coordinated by:
Raymond Erickson
Mauricio A. Font
Brian Schwartz

Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies
The Graduate Center, The City University of New York

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Published by Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies
The Graduate Center, The City University of New York
365 Fifth Avenue Suite #5209,
New York, New York, 10016

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Acknowledgments

The Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies is grateful to the many individuals and organizations who were involved in this online publication as well as in the international symposium on which it is based – “Alexander von Humboldt: From the Americas to the Cosmos,” held at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York on Oct. 14-16, 2004. We thank all contributors and participants for their papers and comments, as well as for their patience in the effort to convert the conference proceedings to publishable form. Neither the conference nor the publication would have been possible without the generous support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Mr. Albert Bildner, the German Consulate in New York, the Consulate General of Mexico, the General Consulate of Venezuela in New York, the Festo Corporation, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, the Goethe Institute and Dr. Sylvia Kahan. Many within the City University of New York system also played important roles in the success of the endeavor, especially the Office of the Dean of Arts and Humanities at Queens College, the Office of the President at Queens College, the Aaron Copeland School of Music at Queens College and the Ph.D./D.M.A. Program in Music at The Graduate Center. Special thanks goes to Dr. Brian Schwartz and the CUNY Office of Sponsored Programs for their gracious assistance.

The staff at the Bildner Center also played an enormous role in the successful execution of the conference and publication. Danielle Xuereb coordinated the conference with a steadfast hand, and she artfully performed the tasks of layout and design. Scott Larson put in countless hours organizing the conference and editing these texts. Interns Michael Landis, Steve Perez and Carlene Buchanan helped insure the smooth running of the conference, and Sandra Black was instrumental in the early stages of putting it on track.

This online publication and the conference on which it was based advance the Bildner Center’s mission of bringing together scholars, policy makers, civil society leaders and others to further understanding and policy-oriented research concerning the governance, security and economic well-being of peoples in the Americas. In that spirit, the authors are responsible for their own views; their positions do not necessarily represent those of the Bildner Center. Our hope is that by offering different views, by confronting theory with evidence, the Bildner Center can help shed light on key issues of our times. We look forward to organizing more groundbreaking events in the near future.

Mauricio A. Font

Director, Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies

Preface

In 1804, Alexander von Humboldt concluded a five-year journey of exploration and discovery through South America, New Spain (Mexico) and Cuba with a visit to the United States at the invitation of President Thomas Jefferson. This extraordinary expedition thrust Latin America into the Old World's imagination and established Humboldt as the most famous explorer of modern times. From Oct. 14-16, 2004, 127 scholars and Humboldt enthusiasts from 14 countries gathered at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York to commemorate the bicentennial of this momentous journey and to celebrate the remarkable legacy of an extraordinary human being.

Hosted by the Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, the three-day celebration featured a multidisciplinary conference at which 89 scholarly papers were presented; the American premiere of "Begrüssung" ("Greeting"), a cantata commissioned by Humboldt and written by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartoldy for the opening of a scientific conference in Berlin in 1828; a series of films on exploration and discovery in the Americas; and the first performance of 'Wide World,' a play written by Lauren Gunderson and commissioned specifically for the event. Among the distinguished Humboldt scholars to participate were Ottmar Ette, chair of the Romance Literature Department at the University of Potsdam; Manfred Osten, retired Secretary General of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation; Jaime Labastida, author of *Humboldt: Ciudadano Universal*; Laura Dassow Walls, professor of English at the University of South Carolina and Frank Baron, of the Humboldt Digital Library project and the University of Kansas.

This volume is a compilation of the proceedings from this truly remarkable event. The papers which appear here, and which represent a portion of those presented at the conference, are a testament to Humboldt's vision, his achievements and the lasting legacy of his work in various fields of human inquiry and creative activity. Organized into four thematic sections, they critically explore his personal and professional relationships, as well as his influence on literature and the arts, on culture and society in the New World and, ultimately, on the creation of knowledge.

The last of the great European polymaths, Humboldt was important to the development of many intellectual disciplines. His interests ranged from geographic and scientific exploration to engineering, ancient and modern languages, painting and the advocacy of human rights. His uniquely holistic view of the natural world – which recognized the interdependence of all things on the planet – led to his designation as the first ecologist, and he shared with Goethe the belief that "true knowledge depend[s] on an intense collaboration between art and science."

Humboldt's American explorations started in what is now Venezuela and proceeded across the Andean Highlands to Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. He also made trips to Cuba and Mexico. Papers in this volume examine many aspects of these journeys, including Humboldt's observations on emerging society in colonial regions, his views on the mining of the New World's mineral riches, and his observations regarding the many geographic and natural wonders he encountered. Others analyze the written records he kept of his experiences, exploring in detail the words and stylistic approaches he took in crafting works such as *Ansichten der Natur* (Aspects of Nature), *Vues de Cordillères en monumens des peuples indigenes de l'Amérique*, *Personal Narrative* and the seminal *Kosmos*.

The fame and influence that followed from Humboldt's voyages and writings were truly enormous; in the early nineteenth century he was quite literally one of the most famous people in the world. His celebrity, both at home in Europe and in the Americas, is the focus of several essays. Still others explore his literary legacy and the influence of his ideas on major artistic figures, from Henry David Thoreau and Cuban writer Alejandro Carpentier to landscape painters Frederick Edwin Church and Wolfgang Paalen. Humboldt is still revered for his science as well as his empathy with the sufferings of exploited peoples. A number of essays touch on the monumental impact Humboldt's writings had on important debates of his day, including slavery and early autonomist movements. His views, as expressed in works such as *Essai Politique sur l'île de Cuba*, made him an icon to the oppressed, prompting Simon Bolívar to declare, "The real discoverer of South America was Humboldt, since his work was more useful for our people than the work of all conquerors." That many of these ideas still resonate, only confirms Humboldt's lasting relevance.

Within the scientific world, Humboldt is equally revered. Still today, his name is appears not only on the Humboldt Current that runs along South America's Pacific coast, but also on mountains, streets, schools, research centers, glaciers, plants and animals throughout the Americas. Contributions celebrate Humboldt's "deep appreciation of magnificent, abundant nature," and argue the case for including him among the earliest environmental scientists. Humboldt's influence on a range of scientific figures – from Charles Darwin to British geophysicist John Herschel and explorer J.N. Reynolds – is a major component of this collection.

Just as Humboldt inspired the writers, artists, scientists and thinkers of his time, he continues to motivate scholars and "enthusiasts of extreme experience" today. The works included here are a fitting tribute to this singular figure, this scientist, writer, naturalist and humanitarian who stood at the crossroad between two worlds and shared the view with the rest of us.

