Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) was arguably the most important naturalist of the nineteenth century. Born in what is now Germany, he became one of the most widely respected public figures of his generation. He was a pioneer in finding the connections among aspects of the physical world, seeing in the entire planet a “unity of nature”—a point of view we now take for granted. This exhibition explores how Humboldt’s perspective, conveyed initially through his 1804 visit and subsequently through his books and voluminous correspondence, influenced the art and culture of the United States, placing nature at the center of the nation’s cultural identity.

While he traveled to the United States only once—for six weeks in 1804—Humboldt was inspired by American democracy, excited for American expansion, and concerned for all races living within its borders. He came to consider himself “half an American,” believing that this country’s future would be measured by contributions to science and exploration, by the abolition of slavery, and by establishing policies to achieve peaceful co-existence with Native Americans. Humboldt associated nature with an inherent right to individual freedom for all humankind. He described the unique features of the American landscape as monuments equal to the architectural wonders of the ancient world.

Over the next half-century, Humboldt became a voice of authority as a scientist and explorer, encouraging America to implement its founding ideals as the country took its place on the world stage. This exhibition recaptures the immediate, sustained, and profound impact of Humboldt’s ideas and how they shaped the careers and artworks made by some of the most significant American artists working during his lifetime. These artists advocated for the power of the fine arts to create a nature-based aesthetic associated with the Hudson River school and the development of the national parks. Charles Willson Peale, Samuel F. B. Morse, and Frederic Church—among many others—incorporated Humboldt’s insights into some of the strongest aesthetic statements about America’s emergent cultural identity.

Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture is organized by the Smithsonian American Art with generous support from:

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**Introductory Wall**

**Who Is Humboldt?**
The wonderful Humboldt, with his solid centre and expanded wings, marches like an army, gathering all things as he goes. How he reaches from science to science, from law to law, folding away moons and asteroids and solar systems in the clauses and parentheses of his encyclopedic paragraphs!

---Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1845

. . . a naturalist
. . . an explorer
. . . an abolitionist
. . . "half an American"

"More coffee, more sugar!"
Jacob, Humboldt's parrot

**Humboldt's Accomplishments**
Traveled over 40,000 miles through 40 countries over 4 continents
Wrote 36 books and more than 25,000 letters
Found the magnetic equator, mapped climate zones, and believed all nature was interconnected
Slept only 4 hours every night and called coffee "concentrated sunbeams"

"He is the most . . . interesting traveler we have ever met, and is much pleased with America."
---Dolley Madison, 1804

**Humboldt's Contemporaries**
Dolley Madison
Thomas Jefferson
Frederick Douglass
Frederic Edwin Church

"The cosmos is all this is or ever was or ever will be."
---Carl Sagan, 1980

**Humboldt's Legacy**
Carl Sagan
Rachel Carson
Teddy Roosevelt
John Muir

I wish you to know that I am a river . . . I have not many tributaries, nor much timber, but I am full of fish."
---Alexander von Humboldt, ca. 1848

**Humboldt's Namesakes**
Humboldt penguin and 100 other animal species
Humboldt lily and 300 other plant species
Humboldt County, California, and 50 other locations
Mare Humboldtianum on the moon and 2 asteroids

**Who is Humboldt? Captions and Credits**
Humboldt’s Accomplishments

Copy after Alexander von Humboldt, *General Chart of the Kingdom of New Spain between parallels of 16 and 38 degrees latitude N*, 1804. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division


Humboldt’s Contemporaries


Unidentified artist, *Frederick Douglass*, ca. 1844. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution


Humboldt’s Followers


Humboldt’s Namesakes
Humboldt penguin. Photograph by Dori (dori@merr.info)

Humboldt lily. Photo by Steve Berardi

Opening Gallery
Friedrich Georg Weitsch
*Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859)*
1806
oil on canvas

Weitsch painted Humboldt’s portrait shortly after his return to Europe from the United States. He captures the Prussian naturalist’s ease in familiar surroundings, seated outdoors with his plant specimens, travel journals, and his favorite barometer. During a five-year trip across South America and Mexico, Humboldt began gathering the data and specimens that fueled his writing. He brought together his ideas in a multi-volume book he titled Kosmos (in English, *Cosmos*), which became an international best-seller and made Humboldt one of the best known and widely admired public figures in the world.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
Overhead quote
. . . my excellent friend Baron Humboldt, for whom my esteem and respect are Infinite. I view him as one of the greatest ornaments of the age.

---Thomas Jefferson, 1825

Alexander von Humboldt
Baggage entry statement to the U.S. Customs
May 24, 1804
ink on paper

Humboldt stored his twenty-seven trunks of natural history specimens, collected during his five-year trip, on the Philadelphia docks during his visit to the United States. He spent his first two weeks in Philadelphia meeting leading American scientists, all members of the American Philosophical Society.

American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia

Letter from Alexander von Humboldt to Thomas Jefferson
May 24, 1804
ink on paper

Humboldt’s handwriting was notoriously difficult to read, no matter which language he used. He worried that he wasn’t important enough to warrant a meeting with the American president. He wrote to Jefferson in French to introduce himself, touching on their shared belief in American democracy as well as their mutual love of natural history:

As a friend of science, you will excuse the indulgence of my admiration. I would love to talk to you about a subject that you have treated so ingeniously in your work on Virginia, the teeth of mammoth which we discovered in the Andes of the southern hemisphere at 1,700 toises [10,200 feet] above the level of the Pacific Ocean.

He need not have worried: Jefferson was delighted to welcome Humboldt.
Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Thomas Jefferson Papers

Gallery 1

Humboldt in the United States, 1804
Alexander von Humboldt spent six weeks in the United States, from May 23 to July 7, 1804. His interest in the relatively new country reflected his desire to see its democratic style of government flourish, to extend his South American explorations into the newly acquired Louisiana territory, and to harness North American data in his emerging picture of the world’s ecosystems. When he landed in Philadelphia, Humboldt met leading scientists, who were members of the American Philosophical Society (APS). After spending a week among his peers, Humboldt and his traveling companions—French botanist Aimé Bonpland and Ecuadorian nobleman Carlos Montúfar—traveled to Washington, D.C., with artist and APS member Charles Willson Peale to meet President Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson was eager to meet Humboldt. One reason was their shared commitment to American democracy; the other was a map that Humboldt had drawn while he was in Mexico the previous year. It contained detailed information about the interior of North America, territory that had just become part of the United States through the Louisiana Purchase. Humboldt shared this map with Jefferson, strengthening the president’s hand in negotiations with the king of Spain over the new boundary between Mexico and the United States. This gesture of generosity endeared Humboldt to Jefferson and launched friendships with American statesmen, artists, authors, and naturalists that tied the United States close to Humboldt for the next fifty years.

Copy after Alexander von Humboldt
General Chart of the Kingdom of New Spain between Parallels of 16° and 38° N.
1804
pencil and ink on tracing paper

This is a copy of the map of North America Humboldt shared with Jefferson. Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin marveled that it contained more and better information than was available on any known map of the continent. In addition to mountains and rivers, Humboldt included territorial boundaries, major towns, churches, and silver mines. Jefferson queried Humboldt about the people and the industries populating the land newly acquired from France as part of the Louisiana Purchase. The Prussian traveler also provided Jefferson with the results of his research, including population statistics. Humboldt’s generosity set the tone for his positive relationships with
American statesmen for the next fifty years. Humboldt published his version of this map in 1811; that map is on view across the room.

Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

Set of five silhouettes, clockwise from upper left

Rembrandt Peale

*Thomas Jefferson*

1804

paper silhouette

Charles Willson Peale

*Alexander von Humboldt*

Nicholas Collin

*Aimé Jacques Alexandre Bonpland*

Anthony Fothergill

1804

all paper silhouettes

Silhouettes had become fashionable in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century and the trend quickly flourished in the United States. Peale cut silhouettes of Humboldt, his traveling companion Aimé Bonpland, and two members of the American Philosophical Society who accompanied Humboldt to Washington. Peale handed these out to the prominent people Humboldt had met as mementos of his visit. When Peale gave this set to Thomas Jefferson, he requested in exchange a silhouette from the president, which his son Rembrandt copied and distributed to visitors to the Peale Museum.

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello, Charlottesville, VA

American Philosophical Society

*Alexander von Humboldt’s membership certificate*

1804

ink on paper bound in an album

The American Philosophical Society made Humboldt a member following his visit to the United States. He prized his membership in the APS, particularly as his certificate bears Jefferson’s signature as the society’s president. By the end of his life Humboldt had been awarded 181 diplomas, membership certificates, and honorary degrees from professional societies and organizations worldwide. These were bound in three albums after his death in 1859 and owned briefly by American explorer John C. Frémont before their eventual return to Berlin.

Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Archiv

Rembrandt Peale

*Thomas Jefferson*

1805

oil on linen

Humboldt came to Washington to meet the third president of the United States. Jefferson’s warmth and informality charmed his visitor, and the two men became close friends.

New-York Historical Society, Gift of Thomas Jefferson Bryan

Charles Willson Peale

*Portrait of Baron von Humboldt*

1804

oil on canvas

This portrait of Humboldt, painted by Peale just before the Prussian traveler returned to Europe, hung in his museum in the gallery of eminent Americans. You can see rows of similar small portraits at the top left of Peale’s painting *The Artist in His Museum*, on view to the left. In a letter to his father-in-law Peale wrote:

"I have been richly rewarded for the expence and trouble of a journey by the agreeable conversation of Baron Humboldt who is without exception the most extraordinary traveller I ever met with; he is the fountain of knowledge which flows in copious streams—

to drop this metaphor to take another, he is a great luminary defusing light on every branch of science—"
I say defusing, because he is so communicative of his knowledge which he has treasured up by his travels of upwards 19 Years. His company is courted by the learned where ever he goes.

The College of Physicians, Philadelphia

Charles Willson Peale
_The Artist in His Museum_
1822
oil on canvas

Peale was an artist, naturalist, and patriot.

In 1784 he founded a museum designed as “a world in miniature.” He intended its exhibits to teach Americans to see their cultural identity in the nation’s democratic ideals and its natural history. In this painting, he constructed a self-portrait that seamlessly merges his own identity with that of the museum. Charles Willson Peale had served during the American Revolution with George Washington, whose portrait is visible at the upper left. Directly below is the case containing a bald eagle, the national symbol. Peale’s taxidermy tools and his loaded palette and brushes imply an artist still ready and capable. Behind the curtain is the mastodon, the centerpiece of Peale’s Museum. This very skeleton is on view in the rotunda behind you.

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison Jr. Collection)

Charles Willson Peale
_Exhumation of the Mastodon_
ca. 1806–08
oil on canvas

Within a month of Humboldt’s departure, Peale envisioned this ambitious work that would be simultaneously a history painting, a landscape, and a creation myth for a powerful United States. Here he painted the retrieval of the most complete mastodon skeleton found at that time from a waterlogged marl pit near Newburgh, New York, near the site of George Washington’s headquarters during the final months of the American Revolution. Peale’s ingenious pulley system allowed his team of workers to lower the water level to unearth and retrieve individual bones. The crowd of spectators included fifteen members of the artist’s family, making it clear that Peale saw this event, and his entire museum apparatus, as a family affair. The backdrop for this activity is a Hudson River valley landscape near the Catskills, complete with the threat of a coming storm, characteristic elements of many Hudson River school paintings. _Exhumation of the Mastodon_ established the tone and the expectations for the setting, scope, and drama of a genre that would define the nation’s cultural ambitions.

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore City Life Museum Collection, Gift of Bertha White in memory of her husband, Harry White, BCLM-MA.5911

Rembrandt Peale
_Sketch of the Elephant (Mastodon)_
ca. 1801
pencil on paper

Titian Ramsay Peale
_The Gigantic Mastodon_
1821
watercolor wash on paper

How do you put together a mastodon if you’re not sure what it looks like? Understanding the similarities between the mastodon bones and those of an elephant, Rembrandt Peale drew this copy of an engraving of an elephant, published in 1734, to use as a guide.

His brother Titian’s ink wash painting, on view to the left, shows the completed skeleton as it was mounted in Peale’s Museum. He left off the tusks, as it was not clear how they had fit into the behemoth’s skull. The reader rail next to the mastodon skeleton explains this dilemma.

American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia
Alexander von Humboldt

Map of Mexico and the Surrounding Territories, plate 2, from Atlas géographique et physique du royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne Paris
1811
ingraving

Smithsonian Libraries

This is the published version of the map Humboldt had lent to Jefferson in 1804, updating the world’s cartographic knowledge of North America. Explorers Stephen Long and John C. Frémont carried this map and several of Humboldt’s books with them as they explored the interior of North America. Both of these explorers made sure Humboldt had access to the results of their expeditions, which Humboldt incorporated into his lectures and books. The copy of Humboldt’s original map is on view across the room.

Overhead quote, above portraits of Lewis and Clark

This country that stretches to the west of the mountains presents a vast area to conquer for science!
—Alexander von Humboldt, 1804

Charles Willson Peale

Portrait of Meriwether Lewis
1807
oil on wood panel

Portrait of William Clark
1807
oil on paper mounted on canvas

Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark west to explore the new Louisiana Territory in the spring of 1804. Humboldt missed meeting them by a matter of weeks, and peppered Jefferson and the members of the American Philosophical Society with questions about their training and their instruments for measuring longitude, latitude, and altitude. Humboldt wrote about his eagerness to see the maps and journals from the Lewis and Clark Expedition, believing these would make significant contributions to world knowledge about North America. These two portraits hung along with Humboldt’s in Peale’s Museum.

Text panel for the Mastodon

The Mastodon

Charles Willson Peale assembled the first nearly complete skeleton of a mastodon excavated from a pit near Newburgh, New York. The mammoth, as it was then called, was the largest known terrestrial being. On Christmas Eve in 1801, Peale opened the Mammoth Room at his museum to the public, ushering in 1802 as the year of the mammoth in the United States. Newspapers chronicled the creation of a mammoth cheese, followed by a sequence of mammoth-designated foodstuffs concocted to celebrate the discovery. Jefferson himself was deemed “the mammoth chief.” Before Humboldt left the United States, he was honored with a celebratory dinner beneath this skeleton in Peale’s Mammoth Room.

Peale advertised the mammoth skeleton as an “ANTIQUE WONDER of North America.” The behemoth was described as the ninth Wonder of the World.” Aiming to silence Europeans who scorned America as culturally backward, Peale and Jefferson were eager to find New World equivalents to the man-made wonders of the Old World. The mammoth was the closest thing to an architectural wonder the United States could provide. In his book, Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson pointed to its impressive scale as being emblematic of America’s robust prospects for future growth and its significance on the world stage.

After the Peale Museum closed in 1847, this skeleton was packed up and shipped first to Paris and then London in an effort to find a buyer. Johann Jakob Kaup, an agent for the Hessian Prince, acquired the skeleton in 1854 and brought it to Darmstadt, Germany, where it has been ever since. This is the mastodon’s first return to the United States in more than 170 years.

Reader Rail with images next to the Mastodon

Skeleton of the Mastodon
excavated 1801–02 by Charles Willson Peale
Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Germany
When this mastodon was excavated, some of the bones were missing or damaged. Moses Williams, a free man of color working for Peale’s Museum, carved the missing bones along with Peale’s son Rembrandt and Philadelphia sculptor William Rush. Mastodon tusks did not always survive excavation. Though Peale found a five-foot-long tusk, it broke into several pieces and was too fragile to be repaired for display. As a result, the tusks on Peale’s skeleton were made from papier mâché.

Over time there were various theories about the orientation of the tusks. Some scientists thought the massive size of the tusks meant the mammoth had been a carnivore. Rembrandt Peale published this engraving, suggesting that a carnivorous mammoth might have had tusks that swept downward, like a saber-tooth-tiger. Charles Willson Peale questioned the logic behind this orientation.

Despite the elder Peale’s reservations, for more than ten years, Peale’s mastodon was displayed with the tusks oriented down and swept backward, as seen in this engraving.

A third suggestion was that the mastodon’s tusks were affixed to the creature’s brow, facing forward like the horns of a cow. This notion did not gain much traction.

Comparison of multiple mastodon skeletons provided the evidence that determined the tusks faced up and forward, as you see them on this skeleton. By the time Charles Willson Peale painted *The Artist in His Museum*, on view to your left, the tusks on this skeleton were once again oriented correctly, facing up.

**Gallery 3**

**Natural Icons, National Icons**

Humboldt had traveled to Washington specifically to meet Thomas Jefferson, but even that goal had multiple aims. Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* was a case study for American independence, with much of the argument reliant on facts about the physical geography and natural history of his home state. Jefferson had deployed the data he had amassed to argue for the robust prospects for the new nation’s politics as well as its agricultural potential. His evidence included America’s status as a home to the mammoth (later understood to be a mastodon), the largest land animal then known, and his home state’s Natural Bridge, in his words the “most sublime of nature’s works.”

Using the American landscape as an inspiration for the nation, Jefferson took the first steps toward defining the United States’ national goals in metaphorical terms based on natural monuments instead of architectural wonders. Looking beyond Virginia, Jefferson lauded Niagara Falls as the eighth Wonder of the World. The information Humboldt had amassed while traveling in the Americas expanded on Jefferson’s defense of the United States. The two men became influential allies in extolling the natural wonders of the Americas and inspired artists to do the same through painted depictions of these sites. In large part thanks to the popularity of those images, by the 1820s the Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls had replaced the mastodon as emblems of the scale and scope of America’s ambitions.

*Henry S. Tanner
A Map of North America, from A New American Atlas Containing Maps of the Several States of the North American Union
1825
photo reproduction of hand-colored engraving*

Tanner’s map was the most detailed of its kind. The cartouche in the bottom left corner presented emblems associated with America’s cultural identity—in this case, Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls with the bald eagle—as the symbols of natural dominance. Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls appear together, elided into a single landscape. Animals native to the United States populate the vista and carry the metaphor further. The *National Intelligencer* characterized Tanner’s map as “patriotic as well as literary.”

*Frederic Edwin Church
The Natural Bridge, Virginia
1852
oil on canvas*

Jefferson owned the Natural Bridge and the land surrounding it. In 1791 he urged American artist John Trumbull to travel there, in order to “take to yourself and your country the honor of presenting to the world this singular landscape, which otherwise some bungling European will misrepresent.” Frederic Church, the leading landscape
painter of his day, painted the landmark after visiting Natural Bridge with his friend and patron Cyrus Field, who would also accompany the artist on his seven-month trip to South America. By this time, Church was steeped in Humboldt’s writings, notably *Views of the Cordilleras*, on view to the right, which compared Virginia’s Natural Bridge with similar South American landmarks.

The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, Gift of Thomas Fortune Ryan

Alexander von Humboldt

*Natural Bridge of the Icononzo*, plate 4, from *Researches, Concerning the Institutions & Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America*, London

1814

engraving

In his book *Views of the Cordilleras*, Humboldt compared this South American natural bridge with the one Jefferson had described in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, noting: “A phenomenon, similar to the upper bridge, of which we have just given the description, exists in the mountains of Virginia, in the county of Rockbridge. This Mr. Jefferson has examined with an attention, that distinguishes all the observations of that excellent naturalist.”

Smithsonian Libraries, Gift of the Burndy Library

Frederic Edwin Church

*Niagara*

1857

oil on canvas

Church’s *Niagara* was considered the finest landscape painting of its day. Church experimented with the scale and proportions of his canvas and adjusted his focal point to absorb a wide range of terrestrial and atmospheric phenomena that would convey the range of his travels, observations, and insights. Humboldt saw the panorama format as ideal for “increas[ing] . . . the force of these impressions” from nature. What Humboldt accomplished in writing served as inspiration for what Church would create in paint. One critic termed Church’s *Niagara* the eighth Wonder of the World. Like the mastodon, Niagara Falls represented an impressive feature often interpreted as a national and cultural icon.

The National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund)

Gallery 4

**Frederic Church, the “American Humboldt”**

Frederic Church was considered the leading American landscape painter during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. He was familiar with Humboldt’s writings from the beginning of his career. Every work of art Church produced, every voyage he undertook, was inflected by Humboldt’s ideas. He embraced Humboldt’s advice to artists to make extensive sketches from nature, and to rely on a combination of direct scientific observation and aesthetic appreciation in composing a landscape painting. Though Church and Humboldt never met or corresponded directly, Church used Humboldt’s books as inspiration and fashioned Humboldt as an absent mentor.

In 1853 and again in 1857, Church traveled to South America, following parts of Humboldt’s itinerary and using his book, *Views of the Cordilleras*, as a guide. At the peak of Church’s career, one critic called him “the very painter Humboldt so longs for in his writings.” Humboldt’s ideas permeated the painter’s way of envisioning the world, which was based on an intensive study of the physical properties of nature, from clouds and water to rocks and trees. Church absorbed Humboldt’s ethos: observe the world, collect impressions, and connect the dots among nature’s various aspects. The American painter invested each of his paintings with a scientist’s eye for accuracy and an artist’s eye for emotional impact. In doing so, Church pushed landscape painting to even greater prominence as the genre most capable of conveying America’s cultural ambitions.

Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland

*Géographie des plantes Équinoxiales: Tableau physique des Andes et Pays voisins*, from *Essai sur le géographie des plantes*

1805

hand-colored print

In 1805 Humboldt and Bonpland published this plant geography map—which Humboldt referred to as his *Naturgemälde*, or his “picture of nature.” It combines illusionistic watercolor with a cutaway diagram labeled with the Latin names of the plants he and Bonpland observed in South America, shown at the altitude where they found
them. The columns on either side provided data on their observations climbing the Andean volcanoes Chimborazo and Cotopaxi, alongside comparative data from more familiar locales including Mont Blanc in the Alps. This map established Humboldt’s concept of the unity of nature and affirmed his belief that the distribution of plants around the globe could be correlated with the altitude where they were found and the rock strata underneath. By amassing and comparing this data, Humboldt refined his theory that everything on the planet was interrelated. This idea—that plants, animals, and climate are related in ecosystems—is widely accepted today, but was a radical concept when Humboldt first began writing about it.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Frederic Edwin Church

Cotopaxi
1855
oel on canvas

Church’s first trip outside the United States was an ambitious seven-month journey through South America with his friend and patron, Cyrus Field, in 1853. The two men used Humboldt’s book Views of the Cordilleras as a guidebook, following parts of the explorer’s itinerary and staying in some of the same places. Church painted this work for Field as a memento of their trip. He included a hacienda where Humboldt had stayed in 1802, and in which they had also stayed. Church used Humboldt’s engraving of Cotopaxi from the title page of Views of the Cordilleras, on view to the right, to compose this painting. He also consulted Humboldt’s Picturesque Atlas, on view to the left, with its large-format color engravings from Humboldt’s travels through South America.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Frank R. McCoy, 1965.12

Alexander von Humboldt

Chimborazo from the Plains of Tapia, plate 25, from Vues des Cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique (Picturesque Atlas), Paris
1810
Color engraving

Church was familiar with the color engravings from Humboldt’s trip to South America. The composition of this view of Chimborazo provided a template for Church’s Cotopaxi, on view at the right.

Smithsonian Libraries, Gift of the Burndy Library

Alexander von Humboldt

View of Cayambe in the Region of Quito, Ecuador, plate 42 from Vues des Cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique (Picturesque Atlas), Paris
1810
Color engraving

Church was familiar with the color engravings from Humboldt’s trip to South America. The composition of this view of Cayambe provided inspiration for Church’s painting, Cayambe, on view at the left.

Smithsonian Libraries, Gift of the Burndy Library

Alexander von Humboldt

Frontispiece to Researches, Concerning the Institutions & Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America (Views of the Cordilleras), London
1814
Engraving

Frederic Church and his traveling companion and patron, Cyrus Field, used Humboldt’s book as their travel guide. The two Americans followed parts of Humboldt’s itinerary, making sure to stop at the same sites and sketch the important landmarks, including Cotopaxi and Tequendama Falls. Church was looking for similar experiences and sketched from the same vantage points Humboldt had chosen for his engravings.

Smithsonian Libraries
Frederic Edwin Church

**Cayambe**

1858

oil on canvas

Humboldt called Cayambe the “perfect mountain” for its appealing profile and picturesque setting. Church had studied Humboldt’s *Picturesque Atlas* (on view to the right) in his patron Robert L. Stuart’s library before embarking on his seven-month trip to South America in 1853. Church composed several of his own South American paintings based on Humboldt’s written descriptions and engraved drawings of the prominent volcanoes. The line of clouds and rising moon derive from an oil sketch of another volcano, Chimborazo, on view to the left (bottom row). However, the pre-Columbian stele Church painted in the left foreground is not from South America, but more likely from Mexico, as it is reminiscent of Mayan images Humboldt wrote about.

New-York Historical Society, The Robert L. Stuart Collection, the gift of his widow Mrs. Mary Stuart

**Overhead quote, above Church’s Falls of Tequendama**

Nature and art are clearly united in my work.

--- Alexander von Humboldt, 1810

Frederic Edwin Church

**The Falls of Tequendama, near Bogotá, New Grenada**

1854

oil on canvas

Church returned from his seven months in South America determined to paint pictures that encapsulated all he had learned from Humboldt’s writings and engravings. Humboldt had described Tequendama Falls in comparison to Niagara Falls and Church based his composition on Humboldt’s engraving of the cataract. Church made a suite of drawings on site to include as much detailed information as possible. Each of the pencil sketches from 1853, on view to the left, contains plants that the artist included in this painting. Church also made several compositional drawings of the cascade, two of which are also on view to the left. This was Church’s largest painting to date and he envisioned it as an homage to Humboldt, a demonstration of how fully he had absorbed the Prussian naturalist’s teachings about how to study nature.

Cincinnati Art Museum, The Edwin and Virginia Irwin Memorial

Frederic Edwin Church

**Mount Chimborazo, Ecuador**

1857

**Mount Chimborazo, Ecuador**

1857

**Mount Chimborazo through Rising Mists and Clouds**

1857

all oil and pencil on paperboard

These three studies of Chimborazo date from Church’s second trip to South America in 1857. The artist spent four months studying what by that time was known as “Humboldt’s mountain.” When Humboldt climbed it in 1802 it was believed to be the world’s tallest peak. Humboldt had ascended to 19,413 feet, a mountaineering record that stood for thirty years. Church, too, attempted to climb the mountain’s lower slopes. He used these sketches to determine how to situate the snow-capped peak in another major homage to Humboldt, *Heart of the Andes*, which he completed in 1859. Church eventually used the sketch at lower left, with the low bank of clouds and rising moon, to compose his painting of *Cayambe*, on view to the right.

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Gift of Louis P. Church, 1917-4-1296b, -824, -1296a
Frederic Edwin Church

**Tequendama Falls near Bogotá, Colombia**
1853

**Tequendama Falls near Bogotá, Colombia**
July 1853
both pencil and gouache on paper

When Church visited Tequendama Falls, he relied on Humboldt’s description of his approach from the bottom of the Bogotá River up to a vantage point where he could take in the thundering cascade. The work on the left closely adheres to the vantage point used by Humboldt for his engraving. Church adjusted his view and the drawing on his right served as the basis for his finished painting, on view to the right. Humboldt admired the falls, proclaiming, “The solitude of the place, the richness of the vegetation, and the dreadful roar that strikes upon the ear, contribute to render the foot of the cataract of Tequendama one of the wildest scenes, that can be found in the Cordilleras.” Church used a numerical key in his pencil sketches to remind himself of the colors, sound, and other sensory experiences he wanted to capture in his finished painting, which he painted in his New York studio.

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Gift of Louis P. Church, 1917-4-260,-265

Frederic Edwin Church

**Studies of Trees and Plants seen from the Río Magdalena, Colombia**
1853
pencil on paper

**Studies from Guacamaya, Bogotá, Colombia**
June–July 1853
pencil and watercolor on paper

Church made an impressive suite of pencil drawings of specific plants, birds, and animals during his two trips to South America. Like Humboldt, he believed that by amassing large quantities of information he could better understand the landscapes he painted. The artist used these to compose many of the details in his South American paintings. For *The Falls of Tequendama*, Church consulted his sketches from 1853, several of which are seen here. The parrot featured in the sketch to the left appears in the lower left of the painting.

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Gift of Louis P. Church, 1917-4-135, -877

Frederic Edwin Church

**Mount Chimborazo at Sunset**
1857
oil on paper mounted to canvas

Church completed this view of Chimborazo in New York, after returning from his second trip to South America. He framed this painting and eventually hung it at his home, Olana, in Hudson, New York.

Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, OL.1980.1884

Frederic Edwin Church

**Horseshoe Falls**
1856–1857
oil on paper mounted to canvas

In this compositional study for *Niagara* (on view in the adjacent room), Church demonstrates his mastery of the depiction of rapidly flowing water. Critics had earlier admired Church’s ambition but criticized his handling of water. This prompted the artist to make a trip to Niagara Falls in 1856 to study of movement of water in preparation for painting *Niagara*, which in the end, proved his mastery. Church used his oil sketches to learn the natural world; this study is an exercise in virtuosity upon which the artist would rely as he embarked on his Great Pictures. Church hung this sketch at Olana, his home in Hudson, New York.

Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, OL.1981.15.a
Frederic Edwin Church
Study for "The Heart of the Andes"
1858
oil on canvas

Church’s final compositional study for *Heart of the Andes* suggests the vast range of information Humboldt had included in his *Naturgemälde* map. Church’s painting, like Humboldt’s map, includes five distinct biomes, from the tropical Amazon River basin to the glaciated summit of the Andean Cordillera. Church kept this study and hung it at Olana. In the adjacent room a video allows you to explore Church’s most elaborate tribute to Humboldt up close.

Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, OL.1981.47.a, b

Video tour of Church’s Great Picture, *Heart of the Andes*
Church painted his most ambitious picture, *Heart of the Andes*, after his second trip to South America. He intended this six-by ten-foot painting as an homage to Humboldt. The artist had made plans to send this painting to Berlin for Humboldt to see as a testimonial to the Prussian’s sustained influence on the artist’s career, when he learned of Humboldt’s death in 1859. Church incorporated as much specific information as possible, drawn from his own observations and from Humboldt’s writings. Humboldt’s plant geography map, commonly called his *Naturgemälde*, served as the template for this painting, distilling Humboldt’s concept of the “unity of nature.”

In this room a video (4 min. 30 sec.) takes you deep into the details of this painting.

Images courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Rafael Salas
*Portrait of Humboldt*
1857
oil on canvas

On his second trip to South America in 1857, Church stayed in one of the haciendas near Cotopaxi in Ecuador where Humboldt had stayed in 1802. While Humboldt was there, the owner of the hacienda had his portrait painted by the leading Ecuadorian artist, José Cortés de Alcocer. Fifty-five years later, Church arranged for Rafael Salas, a renowned Ecuadorian artist, to make him a copy. He brought this painting back to New York, where it hung in Church’s New York studio and eventually at his home, Olana, in Hudson, New York.

Private Collection

Alexander von Humboldt
*Cosmos, A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*
1849
ink on paper

Frederic Church owned and read a number of Humboldt’s books. *Cosmos* was Humboldt's most comprehensive work—his attempt to make sense of the entire planet. What began as one volume turned into four volumes published during the last decade of his life. *Cosmos* is the book that made Humboldt an international celebrity. In this volume, Church marked this passage:

|The azure of the sky, the form of the clouds, the vapoury mist resting in the distance, the luxuriant development of plants, the beauty of the foliage, and the outline of the mountains, are the elements which determine the total impression produced by the aspect of any particular region. To apprehend these characteristics, and to reproduce them visibly, is the province of landscape painting; while it is permitted to the artist, by analysing the various groups, to resolve beneath his touch the great enchantment of nature—if I may venture on so metaphorical an expression—as the written words of men are resolved into a few simple characters.|

Humboldt envisioned the artist as a scientist and a poet, capable of distilling the essence of nature while retaining the specific character of the local landscape. Humboldt also encouraged scientists to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of nature.

Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, OL.1984.376.2
Frederic Edwin Church  
*Clouds Over Olana*  
August 1872  
oil on paper

In 1872 Church built his home and studio on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River. He called it Olana, which he interpreted to mean the “center of the universe.” In it the artist hung artworks that represented high points in his career. Outdoors, Church sculpted the terrain, creating a pond and five miles of carriage roads and planting hundreds of trees to achieve the optimal view from each vantage point. Like Humboldt’s *Cosmos*, Olana was Church’s summation of his life’s work and interests.

Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, OL.1976.1

**Inside Heart of the Andes Theater**  
Frederic Edwin Church  
*Botanical Sketches*  
May 1857

*Botanical Sketches from Colombia: Bamboo Trees, Trunks and details*  
July 1853

*A Group of Thirteen Botanical Studies from Colombia or Ecuador*  
1853  
all pencil on paper

Church used his drawings from both trips to South America when he composed *Heart of the Andes* (1859), his greatest painted homage to Humboldt. Many of the specific plants in Church’s sketches also appear in the painting, and several are also mentioned in Humboldt’s *Naturgemälde*, on view to the left. Humboldt advised landscape painters that colored sketches, taken directly from nature, are the only means by which the artist, on his return, may reproduce the character of distant regions in the more elaborately finished pictures; and this object will be the more fully attained where the painter has, at the same time, drawn or painted directly from nature a large number of separate studies of the foliage of trees; of leafy, flowering, or fruit-bearing stems; of prostrate trunks, overgrown with Pothos and Orchideae.

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Gift of Louis P. Church, 1917-4-85, -879, -835a

Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland  
*Geographie der pflanzen in den Tropen-Ländern: ein Naturgemälde der Anden*  
1811  
black-and-white print

Humboldt’s *Essay on the Geography of Plants* was published first in French and then in German. Both editions included the *Naturgemälde*, or Plant Geography Map, and buyers had the option of a black-and-white or a hand-colored version of this map. Both versions are on view in this exhibition. As you watch the video presentation on Church’s *Heart of the Andes*, consider how Church’s painting incorporates the vast amount of data found in Humboldt’s *Naturgemälde* into a fitting homage to the Prussian naturalist and his ideas.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

**Gallery 5**

**Abolition**

Alexander von Humboldt believed in the equality of all races and would advocate for the abolition of slavery throughout his life. His views were shaped by his training in ethnography and his experiences among the indigenous peoples of South America. He despised colonial rule and enslavement equally. In his letters and books he wrote eloquently that what he admired about America was, that in a democracy, “the people really can breathe with more freedom.”

In 1845 Humboldt declared that “nature is the domain of liberty”—one of his key precepts. Just five years later, California entered the Union as a free state—widely seen as a victory for abolitionists. Explorer John C. Frémont became one of California’s first senators. He had come to Humboldt’s attention for his daring exploits and for naming landmarks for the
Prussian baron. Humboldt subsequently arranged for Frémont to receive the Prussian Medal of Science; in the letter accompanying the honor, Humboldt extolled California as a place that had "so nobly resisted the introduction of Slavery" and Frémont as "a friend of liberty and of the progress of intelligence."

Humboldt's support for Frémont's presidential campaign in 1856 reinforced the growing belief that the California landscape and, more specifically, Yosemite, were visual metaphors for freedom. Both John C. Frémont and his wife Jessie Benton Fremont, whose portraits are on view in this gallery, collected sculptures by John Quincy Adams Ward and John Rogers, along with Albert Bierstadt's paintings and Carleton Watkins's photographs of California as emblems of American liberty. By 1864 President Abraham Lincoln had signed legislation designating Yosemite as a sanctuary for all Americans, reaffirming the power of natural icons to serve as emblems of American values.

E. Haines
Alexander von Humboldt
1858
albumen silver print

John G. Methua, a prominent theatrical producer and abolitionist, inscribed this portrait of Humboldt to William Cullen Bryant on the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 1864. Bryant, who was a leading transcendentalist poet and editor of the *New York Evening Post*, had been an advocate for abolition and used his newspaper to disseminate Humboldt's views. Methua's gift was part of a larger celebration of Bryant for his political views as well as his influence on the visual and literary arts in the United States.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, S/NPG.77.28

Martin M. Lawrence
John Brown
ca. 1858
salted paper print

Humboldt was championed by the New England abolitionist community, including John Brown's supporters. In 1858, the year before Brown's famous raid on Harper's Ferry and the year after the town of Humboldt, Kansas, was established on Brown's home turf in Allen County, Humboldt was honored for his humanitarian concerns by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in a speech delivered by Theodore Parker and printed in William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. Though there is no proof that John Brown read Humboldt's books, it would be hard for him to have been unaware of Humboldt's views.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.74.76

Unidentified photographer
John C. Frémont with "Freedom and Fremont" banner
1856
ambrotype housed in half of original leatherette case

Frémont used the new medium of photography as part of his 1856 presidential campaign. His support for the abolition of slavery earned Humboldt's praise.

Collection of Alan V. Weinberg

John Matthews
Alexander von Humboldt on the Fugitive Slave Law, Oct. 12, 1858
1864
ink on paper

Matthews was a New York businessman who made this photographic reproduction of a letter he received from Humboldt dated October 12, 1858, decrying Daniel Webster's support for the Fugitive Slave Law. That law mandated that escaped slaves were to be returned to their masters. Matthews distributed these two-sided cards at the 1864 Metropolitan Fair to benefit the Union cause during the Civil War. Matthews sent a card to President Abraham Lincoln on February 26, 1864, expressing his hope that the president would take comfort from Humboldt's words.

Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Abraham Lincoln Papers
John Quincy Adams Ward
The Freedman
1863
bronze

Ward’s sculpture of an enslaved man about to rise up, his shackles broken, is the most powerful abolitionist sculpture made during the Civil War. Jessie Benton Frémont commissioned a copy from the artist in 1864. She sent Ward a fragment of one of the guns from Fort Wagner, South Carolina, where Robert Gould Shaw and his black troops were massacred. The Frémonts admired Shaw, a white Bostonian who volunteered to command the all-black Massachusetts 54th Regiment, and mourned the loss of him and his soldiers. The fragment of the cannon, incorporated into the Frémonts’ cast, served as an emblem of the regiment’s sacrifice as well as a sober reminder of the war’s toll on the country.

Boston Athenæum, gift of Elizabeth Frothingham (Mrs. William L.) Parker, 1922

John Rogers
The Slave Auction
1859

The Wounded Scout, a Friend in the Swamp
1864
both painted plaster

Rogers created plaster sculptures designed for a wide audience; however, his hard-hitting subjects confronting slavery were most popular within the abolitionist community. The Frémonts owned versions of both sculptures seen here as part of a small art collection devoted to the abolition of slavery and the promotion of California as a free state. The Slave Auction proved to be too difficult a subject for most people and, of the thirty casts sold, only five are known today. The Wounded Scout shows a fugitive slave assisting a wounded soldier. The copperhead snake coiled at his feet is a symbol of anti–Civil War Democrats who advocated an immediate settlement with the Confederacy and, in some cases, undermined the Union. This was among the artist’s most popular Civil War subjects; Rogers sent a copy of The Wounded Scout to President Abraham Lincoln.

Albany Institute of History & Art, Gift of Mrs. Ledyard Cogswell Jr., from the Benjamin Walworth Arnold Collection; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of John Rogers and Son, 1882.1.5

Eastman Johnson
The Old Mount Vernon
1857
oil on board

Humboldt visited Mount Vernon during his trip to Washington, D.C., in 1804. There he confronted the conundrum at the core of American democracy—the nation’s admiration for George Washington as a revolutionary war hero and first president, and its adherence to the perpetuation of slavery. Johnson’s painting, made in 1857, grapples with the same issues. Instead of presenting the portico of the mansion facing the Potomac River, the artist shows the slave quarters attached to the rear of the house. Humboldt never gave up hope that the United States would abolish slavery and make the benefits of American democracy available to all who lived there.

Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Purchased with funds courtesy of an anonymous donor and the Mount Vernon Licensing Fund, 2009

William James Stillman
The Philosophers’ Camp in the Adirondacks
1858
oil on canvas

Boston became an epicenter for Humboldtian thinkers, among them transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson and scientist Louis Agassiz. They were among the Boston intellectuals who spent August 1858 in the Adirondacks at a gathering organized by the artist William James Stillman. Emerson, whose essay Nature was deeply influenced by Humboldt and who shared his abolitionist views, stands at the center of the painting, rapt in the experience of nature. On the left Louis Agassiz dissects a fish, having brought his classroom into the woods. Agassiz was among Humboldt’s protégés, yet his research on human anatomy led him to conclude that the white race was superior to all others, a position that dismayed Humboldt. The tension between their views is similar to a question found in Eastman Johnson’s painting of Mount Vernon: how can people hold ideals of equality and yet sanction slavery? How can two men with opposing views remain respectful of each other despite the gulf dividing their beliefs?
Overhead quote
I intended to enjoy the spectacle of a free people worthy of a great destiny
--Alexander von Humboldt to Secretary of State James Madison, 1804

Thomas Buchanan Read
*Portrait of John C. Frémont*
1856
oil on canvas

John C. Frémont was an American explorer who idolized Humboldt. Known to many as “the Pathfinder,” he cherished his other nickname, “the American Humboldt.” Frémont came to Humboldt’s attention during the 1840s when he named multiple landmarks for him in Nevada and California, including the Humboldt River and the Humboldt mountain range. In 1856 Frémont ran for president as the first candidate of the new Republican Party, on an anti-slavery platform endorsed by Humboldt. Despite Humboldt’s vocal support, Frémont lost to James Buchanan, but his strong showing paved the way for the ascent of the Republican Party in 1860, when Abraham Lincoln was elected president.

Sons of the Revolution in the State of California

Albert Bierstadt
*Cho-Looke, The Yosemite Fall*
1864
oil on canvas

Bierstadt was inspired to paint Yosemite after seeing Carleton Watkins’s photographs in a New York gallery in 1862. He based his composition on Watkins’s view of *Yosemite Falls*, on view to the left. Both artists captured the magnificent topography of Yosemite, which became associated with California’s entry into the Union as a free state in 1850. In 1864, the year Bierstadt painted this view, President Abraham Lincoln set aside Yosemite as a protected reserve, in recognition of the enduring power of American landscapes to serve as symbols of the nation’s cultural aspirations.

Timken Museum of Art, Putnam Foundation

Albert Bierstadt
*Valley of the Yosemite*
1864
oil on paperboard

Jessie Benton Frémont arranged to have this painting of Yosemite included in the New York Metropolitan Fair of 1864, an event staged to benefit the Union cause during the Civil War. She championed Bierstadt’s work and was particularly fond of this California landscape, the first of Bierstadt’s views of Yosemite to go on display in New York. Despite its small size, this painting attracted considerable attention, the lyrical sunset interpreted as an emblem of hope for the country’s future during the Civil War.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 47.1236

Thomas Buchanan Read
*Portrait of Mrs. Jessie Benton Frémont, Wife of Gen. John Frémont*
1856
oil on canvas

Jessie Benton Frémont was the daughter of powerful Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton. Bright, witty, and ambitious, she orchestrated her husband’s political career and wrote most of his exploration narratives. In 1856 she was, in effect, her husband’s campaign manager when he ran for president. Her work behind the scenes in California and New York was a significant factor in her husband’s successes.

Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum of the American West, Gift of Elizabeth Benton Frémont, 81.G.2
Overhead quote
Nature is the domain of liberty.
---Alexander von Humboldt, 1845

Carleton E. Watkins
Cascade, Nevada Falls, Yosemite, California
ca. 1861

The Grizzly Giant, Mariposa Grove, Yosemite, California
1861, printed after 1875

Carleton E. Watkins and Isaiah West Taber
Yosemite Falls
ca. 1865–66, printed after 1875

Carleton E. Watkins
El Capitan
ca. 1860s
all albumen silver prints

Watkins established the canonical views of Yosemite, introducing this unique landscape to eastern audiences when his “mammoth-plate” photographs went on view in New York in 1862. The images of El Capitan and Cascade Falls are examples of those large-format photographs, made with a camera of Watkins’s design. John C. and Jessie Benton Frémont were major patrons of Watkins’s photographs, which they saw as symbolic of America’s commitment to freedom. Abraham Lincoln signed the legislation setting aside Yosemite as a federally protected landscape in March of 1864, in part in response to the power of these photographs. Watkins’s photographs were among the artworks that helped define this California landscape as a national icon associated with the cause of liberty during the American Civil War.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1994.91.276, .278, .282
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Isaac Lagnado, 1992.78

Gallery 6
Native America
Humboldt believed that a just society demonstrated to respect for all cultures. Five years in the Americas had taught him that local inhabitants often knew more about an environment than government officials. As a result, when Humboldt sought to understand the landscapes through which he traveled, he often relied on indigenous guides. These relationships provided him with greater access to different cultures. Trained at Göttingen by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach to believe that all races were essentially equal, Humboldt used his clout to urge American politicians and explorers to follow his lead. In his view, the information exchanged during encounters with native people enhanced global knowledge of the earth and encouraged mutual respect among its peoples.

He had hoped the United States would adopt a similar approach to is relationships with native communities. He was horrified by President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830, which broke existing treaties and forced the relocation of entire communities to make way for white settlements. Two people who became close to Humboldt responded to concern for the survival of native communities along the Missouri River.

One was self-taught artist and amateur ethnographer George Catlin; the other was professionally trained Prussian naturalist and cultural anthropologist Prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied. In 1832 Catlin made his first extended trip upriver from St. Louis to study native communities. He returned with more than one hundred paintings: portraits, genre scenes, and landscapes that would form the foundation of his artistic career. Inspired by Humboldt, in 1833 “Prince Max,” accompanied by Swiss artist Karl Bodmer, traveled much the same route to study the same tribes with the assistance of many of the same people, notably Territorial Governor William Clark and the Mandan (Nūmāȟȟúŋwáŋ) chief Matō-Tōpe.

Overhead quote
[Humboldt] takes the side of the Indian in North and South America, against his conqueror.
---Theodore Parker, Massachusetts abolitionist, 1856
Prince Maximilian knew and admired Humboldt. He intended his trip to the United States to help compensate for Humboldt’s unfulfilled desire to return to the North American continent. As a trained ethnographer, Price Max made some of the most astute and detailed accounts of the Native communities he encountered. His notes on North American natural history and native customs and artist Karl Bodmer’s watercolors became the basis of a book illustrating their travels.

The American Fur Company built Fort Clark in modern North Dakota, just south of the Mandan village. It served as a trading post for numerous native communities and the international fur trade along the Missouri River. Prince Maximilian in his green coat and Karl Bodmer in his tall hat extend greetings to the Minnetaree people. A painted pony occupies the center of the composition, its posture receptive to the European visitors.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.542.74

The painting on this page of Prince Maximilian’s journal shows the explorer’s representation of the painted horses present when he met the Minnetaree. A side-by-side comparison with Bodmer’s finished print makes it abundantly clear why Humboldt had insisted that Prince Max pay a trained artist to accompany him to the United States. Max’s drawing has the charm of an amateur, more concerned with recording the painted markings than the correct anatomy of the horses, while Bodmer’s finished print stages the encounter as a complex, detailed narrative.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 511.NNG

Maximilian was a gifted ethnographer and naturalist. His artistic abilities were more limited, prompting Humboldt to convince him to hire a trained artist to accompany him to the United States. A comparison of Prince Max’s watercolor of Pehriska-Ruhpa with Bodmer’s engraving of the same man illuminates Humboldt’s concern and reaffirms the importance of Bodmer’s contributions. The prince focuses on the headdress rather than the man’s features, evidence of Max’s focus on tribal customs.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.490.a
After Karl Bodmer, Alexandre Damien Manceau, engraver  
*Bison Dance of the Mandan Indians in front of Their Medicine Lodge in Mih-Tutta-Hankush*  
1842  
hand-colored aquatint  

The Bison Dance was part of the O-Kee-Pa ceremony, sacred to the Mandan. Although Prince Maximilian and Bodmer did not witness this rite themselves, the Mandan chief Matő-Tópe authorized a tribal elder named Dipäuch to explain and describe each element of the ceremony. Based on this account, Bodmer composed this dramatic scene after he returned to Paris in 1834.  

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.542.18

After Karl Bodmer,  
Johann Hürlimann, engraver  
*Sih-Chida and Mahchsi-Karehde, Mandan Indians*  
1841  
hand-colored aquatint  

Fully a quarter of the watercolors Bodmer painted during the winter of 1833–34 were portraits of individual Mandan. Sih-Chida asked Bodmer to paint his portrait and then to teach him to use watercolor. Prince Maximilian described him as a close friend, who “came almost every evening, when his favourite employment was drawing, for which he had some talent.” Bodmer ended up teaching several of the Mandan how to paint in watercolor.  

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.517.20

After Karl Bodmer  
Charles Beyer, engraver, Friedrich Salathé, engraver  
*View of the Stone Walls on the Upper Missouri River*  
1840  
hand-colored aquatint  

The eroded limestone cliffs along the upper Missouri River, called hoodoos, impressed Bodmer, though Prince Maximilian found them austere and forbidding. Bodmer’s accomplished landscapes form a significant part of the record of his travels with Prince Max. Max described his confusion when he first saw the rock formations, thinking that they were “two white mountain castles . . . [that] when seen from a distance, so perfectly resembled buildings raised by art, that we were deceived by them, till we were assured of our error.” Bodmer made sure the bighorn sheep they saw on the slopes were a prominent part of his composition.  

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.542.41

Benjamin O’Fallon, after William Clark  
*Lewis and Clark’s Special Map of the Missouri River, pages 20 and 27*  
1832  
watercolor and ink on paper  

William Clark served as the mapmaker for the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804–06, during which he made a series of route maps of each turn of the Missouri River. Later, he became the territorial governor of the northern part of the Louisiana Territory, with his headquarters in St. Louis. Clark had taken a liking to Prince Maximilian and he asked his nephew, Benjamin O’Fallon, to make copies of his original maps. His gift of this album of route maps was a singular show of respect for Maximilian and Bodmer, reminiscent of Humboldt’s generosity in sharing his map of North America with Jefferson in 1804. Prince Max used these maps as he traveled up the Missouri River, annotating several pages with his own observations.  

Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of the Enron Foundation, Omaha, Nebraska, 513.NNG

Karl Bodmer and Prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied  
*Map to Illustrate the Route of Prince Maximilian of Wied in the Interior of North America, from Reise in das innere Nord-America in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834, Coblenz*  
1839–41  
hand-colored engraving on paper  

This volume contains the travel narrative from Maximilian and Bodmer’s trip across the United States, and a complete set of prints after Bodmer’s watercolors; eight of these are displayed in this gallery. Humboldt praised the book: “There is no other travel-book written in our language, which might be compared with this publication that..."
is so perfect in all its details.” And he commended Bodmer as “a great artist, who is able to perceive nature as something alive.” Prince Max and Bodmer drew a detailed map based on their travels, including landmarks contained in the atlas of route maps also on view in this case. The route they took is indicated in pale red watercolor. The cartouche engraved in the upper right corner, like that found on Henry Tanner’s map (on view elsewhere in this exhibition), brings together memorable and emblematic features of the United States, including Niagara Falls, a native village, a buffalo hunt, and a bald eagle soaring overhead.

Smithsonian Libraries, Gift of Charlotte and Lloyd Wineland

George Catlin
Máh-to-tóh-pa, Four Bears, Second Chief, in Full Dress
1832
oil on canvas
Mandan chief Mató-Tópe, also called Four Bears, determined who had access to his village and the ceremonies and rites of the Mandan. As was the custom, Catlin arrived bearing gifts to exchange for the opportunity to meet him and to negotiate painting his portrait. Mató-Tópe chose how he intended to be portrayed, his stance and his regalia asserting his authority. He granted Catlin extensive access to the community and permitted the artist to witness their sacred O-Kee-Pa ceremony.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.128

After Karl Bodmer, Johann Hürlimann, engraver
Mató-Tópe, a Mandan Chief
1839
hand-colored aquatint
Mató-Tópe took a liking to Prince Maximilian and Bodmer. When Bodmer painted him, he chose to be depicted in full dress regalia. Mató-Tópe knew how he wished to be seen and negotiated the terms of his depiction. The similarities between the formal, full-length portraits by Bodmer and Catlin, on view to the right, suggest that the chief exerted a high degree of control, making sure his pose and his appearance conveyed his importance to the artists and within his tribe.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.517.13

After Karl Bodmer, Alexandre Zschokke, engraver
Indian Utensils and Arms
1840
hand-colored aquatint
Prince Maximilian purchased three painted bison robes from Mató-Tópe. Warriors painted their exploits on these robes and learned that white traders eagerly sought to purchase these items. Mató-Tópe showed Prince Max some of his prized possessions, which Bodmer included in this print: “feather-caps and ornaments, drums, everything painted and decorated in a beautiful manner, objects of great value in the eyes of these people.”

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.542.21

Mató-Tópe
Battle with a Cheyenne Chief
1834
watercolor and pencil on paper
Mató-Tópe borrowed Bodmer’s brushes and watercolors to paint a picture of one of his prized accomplishments, the defeat of a Cheyenne chief. Prince Maximilian described the Mandan chief’s story:

In a fight against the Cheyennes, he had marched off with the Manitaries [Minnetarees]. When they were riding against the enemy, a Cheyenne-chief came and shouted: “Is Mató-tope among you?” The latter rode fastly ahead, they fired at each other and fought, but the powder-horn of the Mandan was shot into pieces and he could not load any more. Now they sprang from their horses and went one against the other, The Cheyenne pulled his knife and wanted to stab Mató-tope, but the latter caught the knife, whereby he was severely wounded and stabbed the Cheyenne.

Mató-Tópe gave this watercolor to Prince Max.
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.384
After Karl Bodmer, Narciso Edmundo Jose Desmadryl, engraver

*Interior of a Hut of a Mandan Chief*

1841
hand-colored aquatint

In a sign of respect, the Mandan tribal elder Dipäuch invited Prince Maximilian and Bodmer into his lodge. Over the winter of 1833–34 he described Mandan ceremonies and lifeways. Prince Max recorded a history of the tribe, including a vocabulary, which is still among the most detailed written records of the Mandan. In 1837 a smallpox epidemic nearly wiped out the Mandan, making Prince Max and Catlin’s notes and paintings important firsthand accounts of Mandan culture.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.542.19

**George Catlin and his Indian Gallery in Europe**

George Catlin eventually painted more than five hundred portraits and genre scenes to create his Indian Gallery, an installation of paintings and artifacts now largely in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. He initially intended his Indian Gallery to encourage opposition to Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act by demonstrating native lifeways for a white, eastern audience. Despite its initial popularity Catlin’s enterprise lost money, and in 1841 he shipped the entire collection to London. There he eventually hired a group of Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) Indians to perform for British audiences. In 1844 Catlin contracted with one of P. T. Barnum’s managers to replace them with a group of thirteen Iowa (Báxoǰe) Indians to who performed their traditional dances and demonstrated feats of horsemanship. In 1845 the entire entourage traveled to Paris where the Iowa danced for the French king, Louis-Philippe, who gave each of them a gold or silver medal stamped with his likeness. At this time Humboldt met Catlin and toured the Louvre Museum with the Iowa—the only time the Prussian naturalist encountered indigenous people from the United States.

George Catlin

*Ru-ton-wee-me, Pigeon on the Wing*

1844
oil on canvas

Catlin’s portraits of the Iowa women focused on their garments. Ru-ton-wee-me faces the viewer but does not make eye contact. Her thoughtful gaze is distant. She wears her hair in two braids, which can suggest that she was unmarried, as many married women wore their hair in a single braid.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.526

George Catlin

*No-ho-mun-ya, One Who Gives No Attention*

1844
oil on canvas

Known by his nickname, Roman Nose, No-ho-mun-ya had won Catlin’s admiration as well as a medal from President Tyler for his bravery in defending his village from hostile attackers. His appearance is that of a warrior, his face painted and his scalp shaved to create a central scalp lock typical of the Iowa.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.522

George Catlin

*Neu-mon-ya, Walking Rain, War Chief*

1844–45
oil on canvas

Neu-mon-ya was fifty-six years old when he arrived in Paris; he towered over everyone, standing well over six feet tall. In this likeness he wears a concave shell gorget at his throat and two medals around his neck—a gold medal from the French king and a larger silver medal bearing the likeness of President Tyler.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.518
George Catlin
_See-non-ty-a, an Iowa Medicine Man_
1844–45
oil on canvas

Known as The Doctor, See-non-ty-a struck Catlin as a powerful and slightly terrifying member of the group, prone to disappearing in order to ascend to the roof and observe his surroundings. The hooded gaze captured in this full-frontal portrayal challenges the viewer in a manner unlike the rest of Catlin’s portraits of the Iowa.

National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Collection

George Catlin
_Shon-ta-yi-ga, Little Wolf, a Famous Warrior_
1844–45
oil on canvas

Shon-ta-yi-ga wears two medals—a large silver medal awarded him by the Tyler administration for his bravery in defending his tribe and a gold medal from the French king. His ears are repeatedly pierced and threaded with wampum from top to bottom, adding to the density of ornament that would have moved and made noise with his every step. King Louis-Philippe admired this portrait enough to ask Catlin to make a copy of it as one of the fifteen paintings he commissioned from the artist.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.521

George Catlin
_Ru-ton-ye-kee-ma, Strutting Pigeon, Wife of White Cloud_
1844
oil on canvas

The White Cloud, the chief of this group of Iowa, chose the others who traveled with him to Europe. Catlin painted his wife, Ru-ton-ye-kee-ma with their daughter, Ta-pa-ta-me (Wisdom). The young girl looks straight at the viewer, while her mother’s gaze is deliberately oblique. Ta-pa-ta-me reaches for the strands of hair-pipe beads around her mother’s neck, which are interwoven with multiple glass bead necklaces. A thin silver chain, from which dangles a delicate silver cross, encircles her mother’s throat.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.525

George Catlin
_Wash-ka-mon-yaa, Fast Dancer, a Warrior_
1844–45
oil on canvas

Known by his nickname, Jim, Wash-ka-mon-yaa turned out to be among the most curious about his European hosts. He could communicate in English and kept a diary of his European trip. Catlin presents him as a warrior: the blue handprint indicates he had killed an enemy in hand-to-hand combat, while the red zig-zag on his forehead denotes speed and agility. He also wears medals from the American president and the French king.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.520

George Catlin
_Koon-za-yaa-me, Female War Eagle_
1844
oil on canvas

Koon-za-yaa-me’s gaze is direct, her features a mask to her emotions. She wears red paint that was typically applied to the sides of the women’s faces and along the center part of their hair.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.528
Karl Girardet
Danse d'indiens Iowas devant le roi Louis-Philippe aux Tuileries (Dance of the Iowa Indians before the King Louis-Philippe at the Tuileries)
1845
oil on canvas

The Iowa were invited to perform traditional dances for the French king, Louis-Philippe, who had traveled in New York among the Oneida and Seneca during his three years of exile in the United States. Catlin described the performance:

The Doctor led off first in the character (as he called it) of a soaring eagle, sounding his eagle whistle, which he carried in his left hand, with his fan of the eagle's tail, while he was brandishing his lance in the other.

. . . The Little Wolf, and Wash-ka-mon-ya and others, then sprang upon their feet, and sounding their chattering whistles, and brandishing their polished weapons, gave an indescribable wildness and spirit to the scene. When the dance was finished, the Indians had the pleasure of receiving their Majesties . . . admiration, conveyed to them through the interpreter.

French court painter Girardet painted this scene on commission for the king. Catlin appears on the right, explaining the dances to Queen Maria Amalia, at her request.

Établissement public du château, du musée, et du domaine national de Versailles

George Catlin
Catlin’s Notes of Eight Years’ Travel and Residence in Europe, With his North American Indian Collection (vols. 1 and 2)
1848
embossed and gilt cloth covers, engraving and letterpress printing

After their meeting in Paris, Humboldt and Catlin forged a strong friendship that lasted the rest of Humboldt’s life. When the artist published his memoirs of the years he spent in Europe, he used his drawing of the Prussian naturalist, doffing his hat and extending a hand in friendship with one of the Iowa Indians, as the frontispiece of this two-volume book. Catlin took the same vignette and embossed it in gold leaf on the covers of the two volumes, pointing to his friendship with Humboldt as a seal of approval for his enterprise. For Catlin, Humboldt's imprimatur validated his efforts to depict American Indian ways of life and educate the public.

National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

George Catlin
Bull Dance, Mandan O-kee-pa Ceremony
1832
oil on canvas

Buffalo-Hunt under the Wolf-Skin Mask
1832–33
oil on canvas

In 1855 Catlin returned to Berlin and met again with Humboldt. Humboldt arranged for King Friedrich Wilhelm IV to see the American artist’s work and for Catlin to paint replicas of ten of his paintings for the Prussian king’s art collection. The selection of paintings Humboldt commissioned for the royal collection were either vignettes of tribal groups or genre scenes copied from works Catlin had made during and after his trips among the native communities during the 1830s. Two of the originals copied for the Prussian king are on view here, including Buffalo Hunt under the Wolf-Skin Mask, a demonstration of a clever hunting practice designed to use the wolf scent to mask that of human hunters.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison Jr., 1985.66.505, .414

Gallery 7

Humboldt and the Smithsonian

Humboldt envisioned the United States as an instruction manual for democracy, modeling its founding ideals for the rest of the world. His encouragement extended beyond the sciences to the broader liberal arts and into American politics. Jefferson had introduced Humboldt to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1804 and the two men had become close friends, allied in their support of American democracy over Napoleon’s imperial rule. Proclaiming himself as “half an American,” Humboldt soon became a magnet for American travelers in Europe. Among his close friends in Paris were American authors James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, and painter/inventor Samuel F. B. Morse.
Humboldt also had a direct connection to the founder of the Smithsonian Institution, the British chemist James Smithson. The two men met first in London in 1790 and again in Paris in 1814, and Smithson’s decision to bequeath his entire fortune to establish the Smithsonian appears to have been encouraged by Humboldt’s advocacy for the United States. American statesman John Quincy Adams saw Smithson’s bequest as an opportunity to create an institution worthy of Humboldt’s praise. The Smithsonian’s first secretary, Joseph Henry, had his own ties to Humboldt, stemming from their shared interests in terrestrial magnetism and galvanic theory. During the first decade of the Smithsonian’s existence, Henry further cemented the institution’s ties with Humboldt, appointing Alexander Dallas Bache and Lorin Blodget to the inaugural executive committee.

The conscious desire to link the Smithsonian to Humboldt’s stature comes as no surprise; certainly the institution’s credo, “the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” echoes Humboldt’s own words and reflects his lifelong interest in developing networks of information linking art, nature, and culture. Through its collections, research, and publications, the Smithsonian has evolved into the institutional equivalent of Humboldt’s brain.

Overhead quote
I am practically an American, myself.
—Alexander von Humboldt, 1837

After Eduard Hildebrandt
Humboldt in His Library
1856
chromolithograph on paper

In 1855, Smithsonian Regent and art collector William Wilson Corcoran traveled to Europe with former president Millard Fillmore. Carrying a letter on Smithsonian letterhead, they met Humboldt in Berlin, where the aging naturalist welcomed them, showing them around the city and arranging for a dinner with the Prussian king. Corcoran commissioned a marble bust of Humboldt; Fillmore returned with this color print showing Humboldt in his library, surrounded by his books, travel diaries, maps, specimens, and artworks. His rooms had come to resemble Peale’s museum. The globe is positioned to show the regions he visited in South and North America.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert F. Norfleet Jr.

Eduard Hildebrandt
Humboldt in His Study
1856
chromolithograph

Alexander Dallas Bache, head of the U.S. Coastal Survey and grandson of Benjamin Franklin, first met Humboldt in 1837. Humboldt wrote a letter of support for Bache when the government threatened to cut survey funding; he also inscribed this print for the American scientist. Bache was involved in the founding of the Smithsonian, the lone scientist on the first Board of Regents. Fellow oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury summed up their mutual respect for Humboldt, stating, “Baron Humboldt was among scientists what our own Washington was among statesmen, upright and just, with attributes grand and lofty in their intellectual proportions.” Humboldt, he said, “used the power they gave him among men, not for self, but for the advancement of knowledge.”

George Glazer Gallery, NY

Charles Willson Peale and Titian Ramsay Peale
The Long Room, Interior of Front Room in Peale’s Museum
1822
watercolor over pencil on paper

Titian Peale made this watercolor for his father in preparation for Charles Willson Peale’s painting The Artist in His Museum. It presents the Long Room, filled with natural history specimens, portraits of great men (Humboldt among them), and works of art. Though Peale had hoped in vain his museum would become a national institute, the early plans for a Smithsonian building envisioned a room similar in proportion and function to Peale’s Long Room.

Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Director’s Discretionary Fund
Henry Berger  
*Bust of Humboldt*  
1860  
painted plaster

When Humboldt died in 1859, sculptor Henry Berger modeled a commemorative bust of Humboldt; this cast came to the Smithsonian, where it was installed in the Castle. It currently resides in the Botany Department library, a fitting place for the man whose vision of the “unity of nature” was based on his global study of plants and their environments.

The National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

Charles Willson Peale  
*Self-Portrait with Mastodon Bone*  
1824  
oil on canvas

In this late self-portrait, the elder Peale gestures to the femur of a mastodon. The discovery of the mastodon had been Peale’s inspiration to expand his museum and the complete skeleton was his prize attraction. The femur held special meaning: it was the index bone that allowed one to estimate the overall size of the animal. Like Humboldt’s barometer, it represented what Peale cherished most: the ability to use parts of nature to take the measure of the whole. Here it suggests the summation of Peale’s life as an artist, scientist, and museum founder. Peale had hoped that his museum might become a national institute; however, it would be James Smithson’s bequest that enabled the country to establish the kind of museum complex Peale envisioned.

New-York Historical Society, Purchase, James B. Wilbur Fund

Rembrandt Peale  
*Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt*  
1809–12  
oil and encaustic on canvas

When Peale’s son Rembrandt visited Paris in 1809 he met and befriended Humboldt, spending as much time with the energetic naturalist as he could. Humboldt’s close friends included a large circle of pro-American Europeans, among them the Marquis de Lafayette, who shared Humboldt’s intense dislike for Napoleon and his equally strong admiration for the United States. As Peale was preparing to return to the United States, Humboldt wrote him a note in which he declared, “I will come finish my life in your country, where I like the inhabitants, the land, and especially your wise constitution.” Humboldt’s description of himself as “half an American” endeared him to many of the men who would establish the Smithsonian Institution.

Collection of Robert W. Hoge and Immaculada Socias Hoge

*Overhead quote*

. . . for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.  
---James Smithson, 1825

Samuel F. B. Morse  
*Gallery of the Louvre*  
1831–33  
oil on canvas

Humboldt and Morse met in Paris in 1831, while the artist was hard at work painting the studies for this massive painting. “Sometimes the great explorer would seat himself beside Morse as he painted at the Louvre, and discourse with the utmost charm from his vast store of observation and thought.” Other times, Humboldt would walk the hallways of the museum and the subject would turn to Morse’s idea for a telegraph. Both men were deeply interested in interconnected networks of knowledge. Morse intended this painting to be its own network of information, a compression of a history of European painting designed to inspire the arts in the United States. Like Humboldt’s book, *Cosmos*, and Church’s painting, *Heart of the Andes*, Morse’s painting aspires to serve as a compendium of cultural knowledge.

Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1992.51
Telegraph to Transatlantic Cable case
Samuel F. B. Morse’s Passport,
signed by Washington Irving,
issued December 19, 1829
ink on paper
Morse’s passport is signed by American author and diplomat Washington Irving, who was then stationed in London as a secretary to the American legation. Morse and Irving were two of Humboldt’s closest friends from the United States along with fellow author James Fenimore Cooper, the trio forming the core of a group of Americans who made their way to meet Humboldt in Paris. These friendships helped cement Humboldt’s affection for the United States and influenced the direction of Cooper and Irving’s writings. Irving in particular shared Humboldt’s interest in American exploration, which encouraged the author to begin writing tales of adventure set in the American west.

Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History
Samuel F. B. Morse and Alfred Vail
Telegraph Register
1848
wood, brass, iron, and copper
Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History

Telegraph Key
ca. 1845
wood, brass, and ivory
Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History

Samuel F. B. Morse
“What hath GOD wrought”
Telegraph Message (facsimile)
May 25, 1844
photoreproduction of the original ink on paper
Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History
Humboldt took an intense interest in Morse’s telegraph. He envisioned rapid, reliable communication across great distances without the problems of shipwrecks, lost letters, or the censorship of monarchs. The two men became lifelong friends and, when Morse patented his invention, Humboldt’s congratulatory note acclaimed him as “master of two worlds”—science and art. This is a copy of Morse’s record of the first telegraphic message, which he sent on May 24, 1844, from Washington, D.C., to his partner, Alfred Vail, in Baltimore—proof of his invention’s success. In 1888 the Smithsonian began to acquire Samuel F. B. Morse’s photographic equipment, multiple versions of his telegraphic equipment, and the original paper tape.

Tiffany and Co.
Tiffany’s Transatlantic Cable Souvenir
1858
steel, brass, copper, and gutta-percha
Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History

After Cyrus West Field
Facsimile letter accompanying the Cable Souvenir
1858
ink on paper
Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History
Morse’s overland telegraph led to the dream of a transatlantic cable, capable of carrying a message across the ocean. Morse partnered with Frederic Church’s patron, Cyrus Field, to develop the cable. In 1858 they sent the first successful message, between President James Buchanan and Queen Victoria. Transmission was slow and the cable failed after three weeks, leading to a number of frustrating attempts to reestablish contact. The next successful cable connection across the Atlantic was completed in 1866. Beginning in 1858, Field arranged with Tiffany and Co. to produce souvenir segments of the actual cable, sold with a letter of authenticity signed by Field. Humboldt owned one of these segments, which he presented to the Berlin Academy of Science.
Daniel Huntington  
_The Atlantic Cable Projectors_  
1895  
oil on canvas  
Cyrus Field, who appears at far right, presides over the group of investors known as the Cable Cabinet. An elderly Samuel F. B. Morse, one of Field’s partners in the enterprise, stands behind the group. A segment of the cable rests on the table at the far left, near the globe from Field’s study used to map the route of the underwater “telegraphic plateau.” The Smithsonian played its own role in this project, as Joseph Henry, the first Smithsonian secretary, was also involved in this ambitious venture.  

New York State Museum, Albany, NY  

Newton & Son  
_Newton’s New and Improved Terrestrial Globe_  
1852  
wood, paper, brass, and glass  
This is the globe Cyrus Field used to determine the optimal route for the transatlantic cable. Field spun this globe in his study, realizing his fingers were tracing the shortest route between North America and Ireland. Afterward, Field was often photographed standing next to a globe as a symbol of this achievement. In 1890, Field’s daughter donated her father’s memorabilia from the Transatlantic Cable project to the Smithsonian, including segments of the cable, his globes, and his associated papers.  

Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History  

George Francis Schreiber  
_Baron von Humboldt_  
1858  
salted paper print  
Lorin Blodget was a Smithsonian climate scientist. Humboldt so admired his published work that he wrote a glowing letter commending his research. Blodget was proud of that letter, and even more of this photograph, sent to him by Humboldt. The eighty-eight-year-old Humboldt, still alert and at work, sits with his head cocked, his expression curious.  

American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia  

Henri-Joseph Johns  
_James Smithson_  
May 11, 1816  
gouache on ivory  
James Smithson had just spent close to a year in Paris, socializing with Humboldt and his fellow scientists, when he had this portrait made. A talented chemist, Smithson had caught Humboldt’s attention in 1790 when the two men first met in London. With his bequest, Smithson founded what Humboldt called “the admirable Smithsonian institution.” The Smithsonian, in turn, made sure Humboldt received all of the institution’s publications, communicating with him through Humboldt’s hand-picked ambassador to the United States, Johann Gottfried Flügel, who was also the Smithsonian’s agent in Europe.  
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; transfer from the National Museum of American History, Conserved with funds from the Smithsonian Women’s Committee, NPG.85.44  

_Letter from Balduin Möllhausen to William Wilson Corcoran_  
June 1, 1859  
ink on paper  
When Humboldt died in May 1859, he left behind a voluminous estate: more than 10,000 books, his travel diaries, maps, specimens, art collection, and personal effects. His valet Johann Seifert inherited everything and sought to place Humboldt’s legacy with the Smithsonian. Seifert’s son-in-law, explorer Balduin Möllhausen, wrote letters to the Smithsonian secretary Joseph Henry and Smithsonian regent William Wilson Corcoran. Corcoran’s letter is on view here, and reads in part:  

_As it is our warmest wish, that the inheritance of Alexander von Humboldt shall not become scattered all over the world by auction; as we wish to see it placed in a way worthy of his memory, and that every member of human society may have a chance of looking with veneration upon things that have surrounded one of the greatest and best men of past and coming centuries, during lifetime and as further I hold proofs in

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my hands, that the illustrious deceased himself would consent with all his heart to: “His inheritance becoming the property of the United States of America.”

Although this did not come to pass, the diversity of ideas and disciplines pursued at the Smithsonian is a reflection of Humboldt’s interests and pursuits—his endless curiosity and enduring pursuit of connections.

Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, W. W. Corcoran Papers

Frederic Edwin Church
*Aurora Borealis*
1865
oil on canvas

Frederic Church saw himself as an American Humboldt, steeped in science as well as art. He chose challenging subjects: falling water, erupting volcanoes, ancient icebergs, and the electromagnetic impulses of the aurora borealis. Church often infused his paintings with layers of metaphorical meaning. Here an explorer’s ship is trapped in the ice. The Canadian coast rises above the stranded ship; to the west lies Ireland, the terminus of the transatlantic cable. Overhead the auroras snake across the sky, their colorful arcs suggesting the snapped cables that plagued his friend and patron Cyrus Field for years as he strove to make trans-oceanic electronic communication a reality. Ships might be trapped in solid ice, but electricity promised the possibility of global communication if it could only be harnessed. The beauty of the auroras and Church’s appreciation of the science that explains them remind us of Humboldt’s declaration that “nature and art are clearly united in my work”—words that were equally true for Church. In the end, we understand that both are essential to our appreciation of the interconnectedness of all aspects of nature.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Eleanor Blodgett, 1911.4.1