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What is the Humboldt Forum?

An Introduction

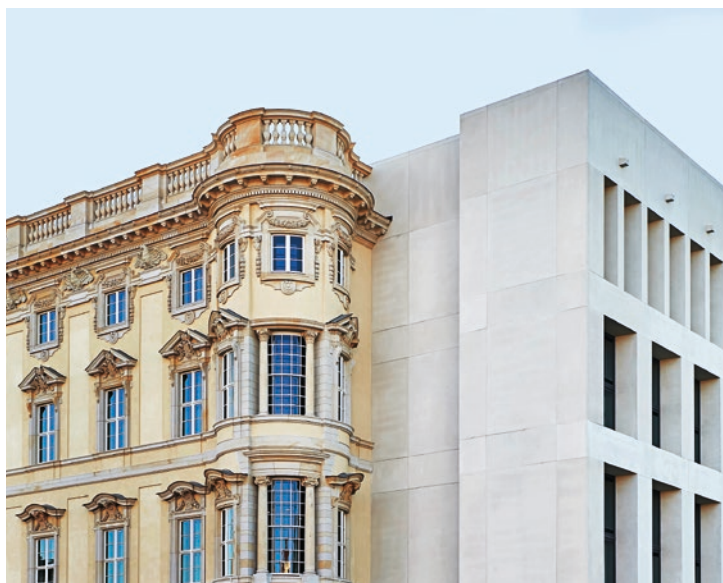
Welcome to the Humboldt Forum, at one of the most prominent and central locations in all of Berlin! You may be asking yourself: What exactly does this name signify? A short answer might be: A great deal!

When walking down the boulevard Unter den Linden from the direction of the Brandenburg Gate or strolling through the Lustgarten, you can hardly miss the reconstructed Berlin Palace, which looks today much as it did beginning in 1853, during the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm IV. Greeting you with an approach from the rear, from the direction of Alexanderplatz, in contrast, is the contemporary, grid-style facade of a modern palace. Here, resurrected Baroque splendour encounters a modern architectural aesthetic of elegant, grey concrete – the Italian architect Franco Stella amalgamated the two in his design of 2008.

This stylistic inconsistency makes one thing quite clear: the Humboldt Forum is no historical palace, but instead a reinvention, a new building, a hybrid. Cohering here is an image that testifies to the ruptures of history, positioning these in relation to the location's contemporary definition. One of the Forum's two namesakes summed it up nicely: 'Only those who know the past have a future' – a sentiment that has become the credo of the Humboldt Forum.

The Humboldt Forum is the direct successor to two iconic predecessors, buildings that shaped German-Prussian history and the history of the capital of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, more commonly known as East Germany) respectively. Both structures met similar fates: the destruction of the heavily war-damaged ruins of the Berlin Palace in 1950 was followed a half-century later by the demolition of the Palace of the Republic, then already gutted to remove dangerous asbestos before being pulled down to create space for the Humboldt Forum. The Palace of the Republic, erected between 1973 and 1976 on the foundations of the old Berlin Palace, was not just the best-known cultural palace of East Germany, but also, as the seat of the Volkskammer (the People's Chamber or legislature), its political headquarters.

In accordance with a resolution adopted by the German Bundestag on 4 July 2002, the Humboldt Forum was constructed between 2012 and the end of 2020. The form of the Palace coincides with its intended use as a venue for culture and events. Recalling the original Berlin Palace are three of the facades, the cupola and the building's overall ground plan and structure. In the Humboldt Forum, however, the Palace's original function as an exclusive residence, as a symbol of monarchic authority and hierarchal distinction, is reversed into its opposite. Conceived and designed in inclusive terms as a forum for culture, it is a unifying centre for the arts and culture, for scholarship and science that brings together divergent realms of experience, continents and regions – an open, inviting place for encounter and interaction on terms of equality, a place



The Humboldt Forum
from the southeast:
Baroque reconstruction

meets the modern facade
designed by the Italian
architect Franco Stella



30160



Wilhelm and Alexander

How Much Humboldt Is Found in the Humboldt Forum?



What does this Forum have to do with Humboldt? And why at all would we need a centre of culture and science bearing that name in the immediate proximity of Humboldt-Universität? Can the brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt – both born in the 1760s – really supply answers to the pressing issues of our time? The name amounts to a programme, but what does it actually represent – is it just a label or does it signify something essential?

First of all: the choice of name is hardly accidental. To begin with, there is the importance of Berlin, then the capital of Prussia, for the Humboldt brothers, and vice versa: both were Berliners, and it was here that Alexander's desire ripened to undertake research trips to North and South America as well as to Central Asia. And it was to Berlin that Wilhelm returned when he entered the civil service; here that he founded the Berlin University and the Altes Museum; here that he provided the impulse for his educational reforms. And it was here – directly across from the site of today's Humboldt Forum – that Alexander delivered his legendary Cosmos lecture series at Berlin

Wilhelm von Humboldt,
lithograph by Franz Krüger

Alexander von Humboldt,
painting by Joseph Karl
Stieler, 1843

University. And it was also here – referring now to the location of the historical Berlin Palace – that the two came and went as members of the inner circle of the court, whether as a chamberlain or as minister and Prussian envoy. And it was here in Berlin that the two cosmopolitan figures died – both were buried in the Schlosspark (Palace Park) in Tegel.

And although the Humboldt Forum is not a Humboldt museum, the achievements and biographies of the two men nonetheless provide numerous points of departure for our programmatic activities. The two Prussian savants followed very different paths, both profoundly shaped by the political and societal upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the one hand, there was the peripatetic, adventurous life of the well-travelled naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859); on the other hand, the biography of the physically sedentary but intellectually wide-ranging scholar, linguist and educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835): the description of nature versus the study of language; research expeditions to the Americas and Central Asia versus Prussian educational reform; contemplation versus spiritual restlessness: 'With us, it was always like that, from childhood onward. Always the marked difference, and at the same time an intimate closeness.'

Reigning at the Humboldt Forum is the spirit of both Humboldt brothers, a fundamental attitude characterized by freedom of thought and cosmopolitanism, by learning, doubt and questioning, by social commitment and above all by a passionate searching – for the connections that link everything together as well as for the values of the individual in particular. Derivable from the tensions as well as the commonalities of these 360-degree movements of thought is something akin to a set of 'Humboldtian

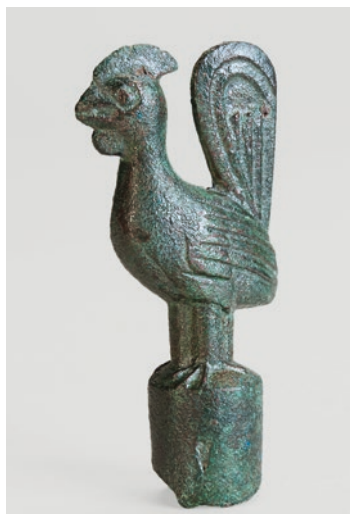
classes and tourist groups as well as for people with special requirements.

At the same time, the Foundation is responsible for all programmatic matters – as an independent agent, but at the same time jointly with the three above-named partner institutions.

The Section ‘The History of the Site’

Of particular relevance to the Foundation are all topics with a bearing on the history and significance of the location and the building. Why did the Humboldt Forum rise at precisely this location? What was the site’s previous appearance? Why do three of its sides resemble a baroque palace with a Neoclassical cupola? Why does a golden cross rise above it? And what does this cross have to do with the inscription that surrounds the tambour of the cupola? What is the significance of the eagle, sceptre and crown, encountered everywhere on the facade ornamentation? What in the Humboldt Forum is old, and what is new? And what makes the Humboldt Forum the nucleus of Berlin’s contemporary museum landscape? There are many answers to these questions – the Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace is collecting them with the intention of doing justice to the multiplicity of perspectives on this location.

The mission is to convey the history, the ruptures and representative and symbolic implications of this historical centre of state power, at the same time providing



Stop-cock. Handle of a bronze spigot from the basement of the Dominican monastery, 14th-15th century

Ventilator from a steam heating system, 1894

a space for diverse perspectives – through the collection inventories, research projects, exhibitions, events, publications and educational offerings.

Dealing with the history of the location are permanent exhibitions found in the basement and ground levels. In the room called **'The History of the Site'**, located on the south side of the ground level, between Portal 1 and Portal 2, a 27-meter-wide panoramic video wall provides a chronological overview of the site's history, its architecture, utilizations and historical significance. The interior design deliberately emphasizes the concrete aesthetic of the shell construction of the Humboldt Forum. Here, it becomes clear: this is a new building.

In the **Palace Cellar**, located in the southwestern basement, the only surviving area of the building that preserves historical architectural substance, the history of the site is just an arm's length away: on an archaeological tour, a walkable footbridge that runs along the remains of the wall of the historical cellar of the Berlin Palace allows visitors to explore the traces of the historical structure on location: spindle whorls from Cölln recall the medieval town quarter; testifying to the former presence of the Dominican monastery are remains of a wall and a fourteenth-century spigot, discovered during archaeological excavations in the monastery cellar. The large fan, a relic of the enormous heating facilities for the Palace, but also the still partially recognizable utility rooms offer astonishing glimpses 'behind the scenes' of this former aristocratic residence,



In the listening room devoted to ethnomusicology, visitors can experience sounds that are 100 years old while learning how other cultures sort their musical instruments. Providing insights are researchers who pose the question of why people make music in all the countries of the world.

Immediately adjacent, the presentation of the Oceanic collections illustrates diverse areas of life with reference to the associated material culture. In open storage here, a large number of display objects provide insights into a region on the other side of the earth, while at the same time shedding light on the collecting activity of Europeans from historical eras.

North America is approached through the stories that lie behind the collections of Johan Adrian Jacobsen. At the same time, a selection of objects in the corresponding open storage explores images of the stereotypical 'Indian' in books and films.

The pre-Hispanic cultures of Central and South America are represented by a variety of artistic objects which date from a time before the region was profoundly - and often violently - transformed by Europeans. Here viewers can learn about pre-Hispanic Central American writing and calendar systems or about the ritual ballgame. On display in the gold chamber are finely worked pieces of jewellery from Columbia, Costa Rica and Peru. The adjacent junior



The Barrigón stone deity figure, Guatemala, 500-300 BC



Forged gold chalk container (*caciique*), Columbia, 500-700 BC

area deals with the Amazon region and was developed jointly with a university in Venezuela. By way of the topic of the transatlantic slave trade, the culture of the Maroons of Guyana, with its Afro-American influence, forms a bridge back to Africa.

The Third Upper Floor

Central in the third upper level are the various artistic styles found in Asia, but also the multitude of lifestyles found on the continent with the largest land surface on earth.

For example, the presentations trace the art of Buddhism from India via Southeast Asia to Tibet and Japan. Elsewhere visitors receive singular perspectives on courtly life in India of the Mughal period. Mirrored in the arts and handicrafts of the Silk Road are more than 1000 years of encounters between diverse cultures, as experienced by visitors in breath-taking large-scale installations. At scheduled times guests can partake in a contemporary form of the traditional tea ceremony in the Japanese tea house.

Then visitors can immerse themselves in the delicate art of Chinese painting and calligraphy, and explore Korea's role as a stylistic bridge between China and Japan. The forms of interdependency that join China and Europe



The processional animal
Nandi, mount of the

Hindu god Shiva, India,
17th century



of the complex living conditions prevailing in the modern age.

The main narrative strand in the great hall develops in relation to the research questions and on the basis of the causal models employed by the excellence clusters SCRIPTS and Matters of Activity as well as the inter-faculty HU research institute IRI THESys. Based on a variety of temporal and thematic perspectives, these projects investigate processes of transformation in human-environment systems during the Anthropocene.

Four keywords linked to the methodology of the excellence cluster SCRIPTS are associated with the concept of the Anthropocene: boundaries, order, visibility and temporality. Inherent to the liberal script is the notion that it is a 'good order', one that claims universal validity. At the same time, however, it produces disparities which are in

Caspar Neumann (1683-1737), professor of chemistry and court apothecary at the Berlin

Palace, portrayed probably by Joachim Martin Falbe, c. 1736. On loan from the Sanitätsakademie der

Bundeswehr (Medical Academy of the German Federal Armed Forces), Munich

contradiction with its fundamental principles. One future promise of the liberal script also rests on the exploitation of natural resources as a source of progress. These unresolved contradictions along with various approaches to tackling them form the central topic of the inaugural exhibition of the Humboldt Lab.

The issues concerning the environment, resource use and systems that are characteristic of the Anthropocene have an enormous impact on the key concerns of the various societies and the relationships between them, among them growing inequality, sustainability, global migration and the crisis of democracy. According to the assessment of the researchers of IRI THESys, the transformation of the ecosystem can no longer be averted. The only option now is to decrease its velocity while alleviating its consequences. But the path from knowledge to action is a long one.

The researchers of the excellence cluster Matters of Activity regard misapprehensions concerning material activity as the fundamental condition of the Anthropocene. The investigation and targeted utilization of active materials ('active matter') makes it possible to overcome a rigid separation between nature and culture. Whether it is a question of wood, clay, glass or nano or biomimetic



Kleiner Langstiel (an apple variety, roughly 'small long-stem'), apple model from Arnoldi's Cabinet of

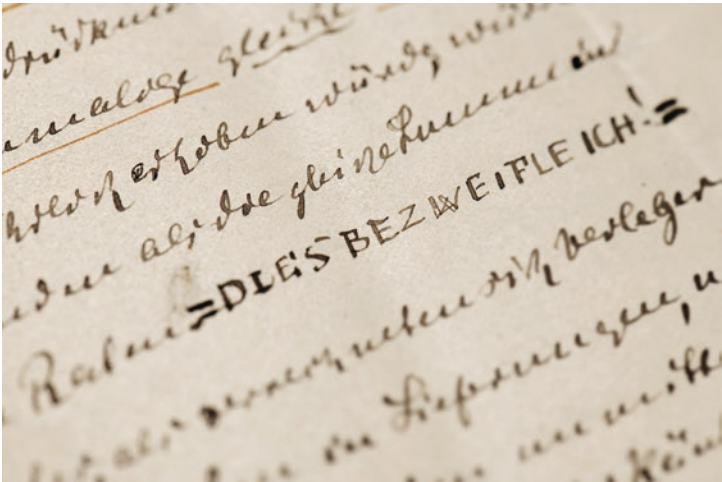
Fruits, porcelain factory of Heinrich Arnoldi (1813-1882). On loan from the Universität Greifswald,

Institut für Botanik und Landschaftsökologie (Department of Botany and Landscape Ecology)

materials, the insight that raw materials themselves are active profoundly transforms our perspective on their potential utilizations.

The research undertaken by Matters of Activity, IRI THESys and SCRIPTS and by further excellence researchers on the topic 'after nature' will be integrated into the exhibition in the form of images projected onto a surface measuring approximately five by twenty-five metres on the long wall of the great hall. The technical apparatus, consisting of twenty-four roller screens, which can be controlled interactively - some independently of one another, others corresponding to one another - was developed specially for the inaugural exhibition of the Humboldt Lab. It immediately conveys a striking impression of the complexity and interdependency of the scientific problems discussed here. But it also provides orientation, encouraging the members of the public to focus on individual thematic complexes or to introduce their own questions or suggestions. Moreover, updates and new perspectives can be integrated into the inaugural exhibition throughout its duration.

Most of the exhibited objects are from the collections of the HU and other university collections. Their imposing presentation in hanging display cases is reminiscent of the



Lecture notes with commentary by Friedrich Blanck (1855-1939), from summer semester

1885. University library, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin



chambers of art and curiosities inasmuch as the principle of wonder and of the associative interconnection between things that do not obviously belong together prevails here too. It soon becomes evident, however, that this is not a museum production that is characterized by material value. The exhibits come from teaching or research contexts, which for the most part determine their significance. And it is the questions to which they give rise and the insights and results they make possible that invests them with value. Moreover, they stand in thematic and formal correspondence with the large wall projection.

On a further narrative level, each object is presented in conjunction with its history. Playing a key role here are questions of provenance. Collections are 'produced'. They are based on knowledge and generate knowledge, which is itself 'produced'. Through material and intellectual appropriation, objects become parts of collections, which themselves - through the interpretation and functionalization of reality - always have a political

Wet preserved
chimpanzee hand, c. 1904.
Zoological teaching

collection, Humboldt-
Universität zu Berlin

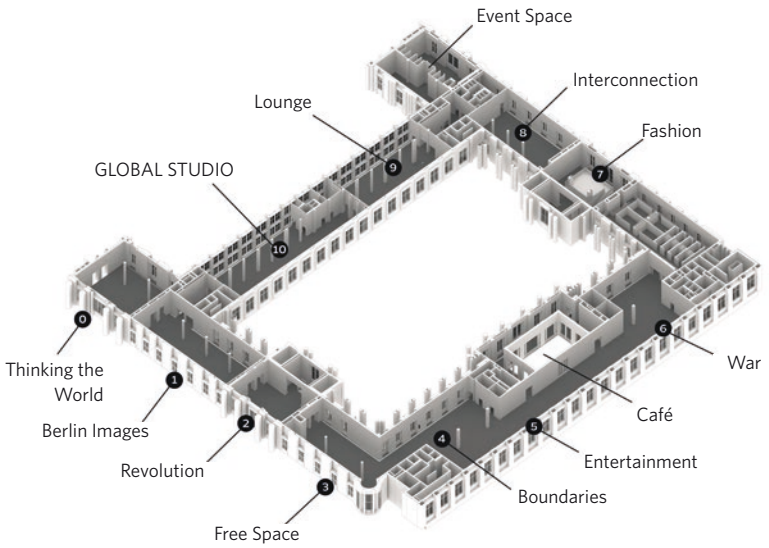
BERLIN GLOBAL

The Berlin Exhibition

For centuries Berlin has engaged in exchange with the wider world. The city, its people and the events that have proceeded from it have transformed the world, while at the same time global events have shaped Berlin and still do. With a point of departure in current questions, developments and challenges, the Berlin Exhibition takes up selected themes and showcases the German capital as a vital part of a world that has long been interlinked by networks in multifarious ways. How has Berlin influenced the wider world? How are people connected worldwide through places and events? And how do we want to shape this world? It is not a question here of classical urban history. Instead, the aim is a contemporary perspective on the city that focuses on diverse aspects: Revolution, Free Space, Boundaries, Entertainment, War, Fashion and Interconnection. Through these aspects we zero in on typical features of Berlin, all of them, meanwhile, present in other metropolises as well, and hence exemplary in character. They serve as a stimulus to weigh in with one's own experiences and references, debating the future of the city and its global networks with a point of departure in past and present.

Thinking the World

Berlin was and remains a part of a cultural, economic and political network, one that spans the entire planet. Accordingly, visitors are greeted by an artwork that encompasses all four walls of the room: upon closer inspection, this gigantic mural displays a multiplicity of interwoven associative details, consisting of nature and culture, of history and the present day. On the one hand, there are the historical relationships between countries and continents, conditioned by the aim of conquering or exploring the wider world. On the other hand, the mural offers contemporary perspectives for conceiving and shaping the world. Pursuing this idea, visitors are invited to adopt a critical standpoint towards the themes of the



BERLIN GLOBAL: On a total surface area of about 4000 square metres, the Berlin Exhibition showcases the complex web of relationships joining Berlin with the wider world.

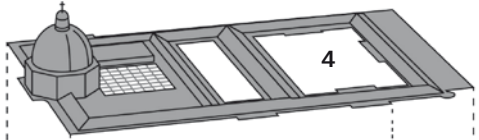
The large-scale mural *Weltdenken (Thinking the World)* by How and Nosm bids the visitors an atmospheric welcome to the Berlin Exhibition.



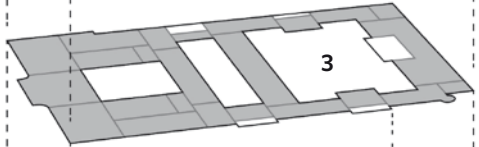


Overview of the Floors

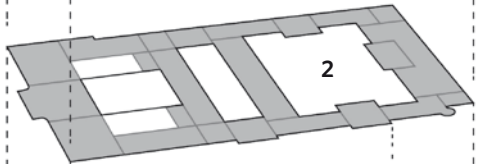
4 Roof restaurant,
panoramic platform



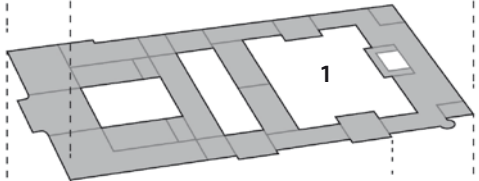
3 Ethnological
collections, Asian Art,
temporary exhibitions



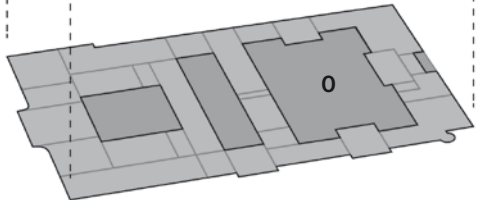
2 Ethnological
collections,
temporary exhibitions



1 Berlin Exhibition,
Humboldt Lab
workshop



0 Foyer, Schlüter
Courtyard, passage,
event halls, special
exhibitions, History
of the Site



The staircase in the western transverse wing along the interior passage extends through the entire height of the building.