

# MUSEUM LUDWIG

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## PRESS RELEASE

October 13, 2018 – January 27, 2019

### **Alexander von Humboldt, Photography and Legacy**

Photography room, 2nd floor

Press conference: Friday, October 12, 2018, 11 a.m., preview starts at 10 a.m.

The year 2019 will mark the 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). The Museum Ludwig is taking this anniversary as an occasion to trace Humboldt's connection to photography. "People want to see," wrote the naturalist and world traveler Alexander von Humboldt. Pictures, whether drawn, printed, or painted, played a significant role in his life and research. For instance, he spoke of "artistically physiognomic" depictions of nature and spent enormous sums on illustrations for his five-volume work *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*. He was one of the first to encounter photography, at the age of seventy as a member of the three-person commission that was charged with evaluating the early daguerreotype process in 1839. It went on to become the first photographic process practiced world-wide. Humboldt was on a diplomatic mission in Paris and wrote euphoric letters about these first photographs: "It is certainly one of the most delightful and admirable discoveries of our time," and: "The pictures have a very inimitable natural character that only nature itself could impress upon them." He no longer traveled himself, but in the following twenty years until his death in 1859, Humboldt surrounded himself with photographs and supported photography on expeditions.

As a result, he received albums of photographs as gifts. Two spectacular gift albums with early photographs are part of the photography collection of the Museum Ludwig. These include an album from 1844 that the inventor of photography on paper, W. H. F. Talbot, dedicated to Humboldt—one of the first photo books ever. Humboldt and Talbot first met in 1827 in Berlin. They shared a common interest in the natural sciences. The gift album from 1844 was compiled in the same year as the first parts of his famous photo book *Pencil of Nature*. It contains twenty-two photographs, including a plant photogram, like those that Humboldt might have made himself if photography had been invented earlier.

The second large-format album contains forty-seven photos from South America from 1857 and 1858. The Hungarian-born photographer Paul de Rosti personally presented Humboldt with this album in 1858 in gratitude for the latter's support of his travels. Some of the photographs are the earliest known pictures from Mexico, Venezuela, and Cuba.

These albums entered the collection of the Museum Ludwig due to Erich Stenger (1878–1957), an early researcher on Humboldt's role in the history of photography. Their history and their

journey to the collection of the Museum Ludwig will now be reconstructed, offering a look back at the early days of photography.

*Alexander von Humboldt: Photography and Legacy* is the fifth presentation in the photography room, which since 2017 has featured changing selections of the approximately 70,000 works from the Museum Ludwig photography collection. The photography room is located in the permanent collection on the second floor.

### **FOTO LAB**

In addition to the exhibition space, the FOTO LAB will be open as a place for children and adults to get involved and experiment. Visitors can learn how a camera obscura—the original model for the camera—works, take pictures of themselves in front of photographic wallpaper, and even create a small photo exhibition with fifty reproductions from the photography collection. These reproductions are made possible by Pixum, the Cologne-based online photo service, one of the industry's pioneers, which was founded in 2000. This will enliven and open up the photography collection at the Museum Ludwig in a variety of ways. In addition, for the first time in cooperation with the Museumsdienst Köln, Photoszene Festival Cologne will offer a special program for children every first Thursday of the month: FOTO LAB – Photoszene KIDS. At 3:30 p.m. there will be a class for schoolchildren ages six and up, and at 4:30 p.m. there will be a class for preschoolers ages three and up. Museum admission is free for Cologne residents on this day. Participation in the class costs 3.50 euros.

### **Digitizing the Photography Collection**

Another important part of working with the Museum Ludwig's photography collection is its digitization in a scholarly database for research purposes. Thanks to generous support from Pixum, since 2014 the Museum Ludwig has been able to digitize some 5,000 photographs from the collection for the first time. The photography collection will gradually be made available to the public at <http://www.kulturelles-erbe-koeln.de>, allowing anyone interested to access it.

### **Web and Social Media**

During the exhibition, the Museum Ludwig will be posting on its social media channels with hashtags #AvH and #museumludwig.

Facebook/Instagram/Twitter/Vimeo: @Museum Ludwig – [www.museum-ludwig.de](http://www.museum-ludwig.de)