
Maler, Legacy and Mexico

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Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), the “brilliant adventurer,” and “the most prominent citizen of the world,” as a recent *Spiegel* magazine article dubbed him,¹ left an important mark on subsequent German travelers in Latin America. His determination, endurance, rigor, and thoroughness were a yardstick for all explorers who headed to the New World after him. In this paper, I will compare the work of Humboldt and Teobert Maler (1842-1917), who, like his famous predecessor, re-discovered parts of the Americas and made them more tangible for a European audience through his travel narratives and illustrations. By comparing their Mexico expeditions, their methodologies, their views of this country, especially their ethnological remarks on the native people, and the role of nature description and illustration in their oeuvres, I will demonstrate how Maler’s observations on Mexico fit into the Humboldtian tradition established by *Vues des cordillères des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique*, his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, his travel diaries, published as *Reise auf dem Río Magdalena, durch die Anden und Mexico*, and to a lesser degree, *Kosmos*. Even in areas where Maler’s approach differed most from Humboldt’s, notably in his archaeological observations, which reflect advancements made in archaeology during Maler’s time, as well as his close interest in this field and better preparation for conducting fieldwork, certain comments prove surprisingly similar. Despite the decades of important scientific developments that followed Humboldt’s publications and a change towards more specialized knowledge, his legacy lived on in the work of Teobert Maler.

Alexander von Humboldt’s ninety years of life coincided with a very active and fascinating time in German cultural history, a cultural flowering which produced intellectual giants like Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and Kant.

1. Matthias Matussek, “Der geniale Abenteurer,” *Der Spiegel*, September 13, 2004.

His epoch was also an agitated period in European history, witnessing the French revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the 1848 revolutions, and the conservative reactions to these. During his lifetime, French, English, and Spanish captains (Bougainville, Cook, Malaspina) were exploring many parts of the world not yet known to Europeans. And such illustrious people as Goethe and Frederick the Great frequented his home when he was still a boy. Alexander was born in Berlin on September 14, 1769, into an educated, noble Prussian family. His father was a decorated officer of Frederick II of Prussia, while his mother came from a bourgeois family of Huguenot descent. He was schooled according to the enlightened ideas of the time, which stressed tolerance, universality of knowledge, and humanism. Humboldt indeed was a product of his time; his later achievements reflect this universal education and position him within the tradition of the eighteenth-century cultivated traveler.²

Even though Humboldt's mother had planned a career as public servant for her younger son, Alexander managed to pursue his own interest – the study of travel literature, geography, botany, geology, and eventually mining.³ While pursuing a higher education, Humboldt traveled to many different places and learnt under many renowned people of the time. He studied botany, for example, with the young but already famous botanist Karl Ludwig Willdenow in Berlin in the late 1780s. Willdenow was in part responsible for awakening Humboldt's fascination for the foreign. After seeing his collection of exotic plants, Humboldt was seized by the desire to travel to the places from where they originated. Later, Humboldt enrolled in the University of Göttingen, which had a highly vibrant and innovative academic culture, and studied with influential scholars like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, one of the founders of the discipline of anthropology. At Göttingen he also became acquainted with Georg Foster's work, which was based on his function as scientific observer of James Cook's second Pacific voyage, and he saw the ethnological objects and specimens of the fauna and flora Foster brought back to enrich Blumenbach's ethnological collection.⁴ Humboldt developed a real friendship with Foster and accompanied him on a journey to Holland, England, and France.⁵

In 1796 Humboldt announced his interest in a voyage to the West Indies, meaning not only the Caribbean islands but also the adjoining mainland countries.⁶ Yet, this trip required several more years of preparation. In the

2. See Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 1:1-8; O. de Bopp, "Alemania en la época de Humboldt," 13-28.

3. Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 1:36-37.

4. Gascoigne, "Blumenbach, Banks, and the Beginnings," 86-88.

5. Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 1:25.

6. *Ibid.*, 1:86.

meantime he aborted a planned journey to Egypt, French captain Thomas Nicolas Baudin requested his company on a tour around the world, which didn't materialize either, and he met his future companion Aimé Bonpland, with whom he traveled to Marseille and eventually Spain. In Spain, he realized his dream of a longer expedition, managing to get an audience with the royal family, who eventually gave him the permission to travel to the Spanish-American colonies. Finally, in June of 1799, he left Europe aboard the ship *Pizarro*, en route to Havana and the West Indies via Tenerife.⁷ His great travel and exploration plans had materialized, and he was about to conduct the largest inland exploration of the Spanish-American colonies Vague — seems disconnected from the list of things you mentioned earlier in the paragraph (getting married, traveling elsewhere, etc.), which started in Cuba, led him to present-day Venezuela and Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and eventually Mexico and the United States.

The time of Humboldt's America exploration coincided with the last years of Spanish rule in Latin America. Already the first decade of the 19th century witnessed independence movements in present-day Argentina and Venezuela. And in the 1820s most Latin American countries had achieved their independence. When Humboldt visited Mexico, it was still known as Viceroyalty of New Spain, and Viceroy Iturrigaray, was the King of Spain's representative. After 1821, most of the Viceroyalty of New Spain became Mexico, an independent country that was shaken by many civil wars and lost big parts of its territory before reaching the 20th century.

Teobert Maler was born roughly 70 years after Humboldt on January 12, 1842, in Rome. He came from a well-established, educated bourgeois family, and his father, Friedrich Maler, was a major in the army and the grand duke of Baden's *chargé d'affaires* at the Vatican. During his stay as diplomat in Rome, Friedrich Maler acquired art and antiquities for the Grand Duke of Baden's collection.⁸ After he was relieved from office in July 1843, the Malers returned to the Grand Duchy of Baden, and on their way to Germany, Teobert's mother suddenly fell ill and died.⁹ According to his autobiographical manuscript, *Leben meiner Jugend*, Maler had a very unhappy childhood, since his "father was a gloomy, distrustful, and miserly man, whose mean attributes even grew into a certain degree of insanity."¹⁰ Unlike Humboldt, whose primary schooling was done at home and fostered by his parents, Maler grew up in a less propitious environment; according to his memoirs,

7. Ibid., 1:132; 137.

8. Schneider, "Die Erwerbung der antiken Sammlung."

9. See Noack, "Friedrich Maler zum Gedächtnis," 36; Graham, "III. Teobert Maler: Eine Lebensskizze," XVII-XIX; Kutscher, "Teobert Maler (1842-1917)," 9-10.

10. Teobert Maler, *Leben meiner Jugend* [ca. 1868], TS, Band A73 Teobert Maler, Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde, 1.

his father didn't give him enough money to buy the necessary books to study, and thus his advancement in school was mostly due to his own effort.¹¹ After completing his general schooling in Baden-Baden, Maler studied engineering and architecture at the Polytechnic school of Karlsruhe.¹²

Maler's studies and youth were not as driven by a yearning for foreign countries, but he nonetheless traveled to Munich and Vienna in 1862 and decided to go to Mexico when he was only twenty-two years, suggesting at least some fancy for adventures. In November 1864, he enlisted as a cadet in the pioneer company of the Austro-Belgian volunteer corps, created by Maximilian of Habsburg, whom the French had recently installed as emperor of Mexico. This episode in Mexican history, known as the Second Empire, is worth a brief parenthesis. The Second Empire was created by French Emperor Napoleon III and supported by Mexican conservatives, after the French had won a military intervention in Mexico. This intervention had started as a punitive expedition by France, Britain, and Spain, who sent their gunboats to Mexico to force the government of the republican president Benito Juárez to service the debt payments, which it had ceased to pay. But once Britain and Spain realized that the French had ulterior motives, that, in fact, they wanted to colonize Mexico in order to start creating a Latin League that would include the Mediterranean countries and the former Iberian possessions in the New World, they quickly withdrew from this joint venture. The French expeditionary force defeated the Mexican republican army, and Napoleon III placed a pair of puppets on the Mexican throne, Maximilian of Habsburg and his wife, Charlotte, the daughter of the King of Belgium. Initially, Maximilian and Charlotte enjoyed French military backing and British economic support, but Emperor Maximilian quickly understood that he had to become more independent. Thus, he created a corps of Belgian and Austrian volunteers to help him pacify the country, which was torn by guerrilla warfare that pitted the remnants of the republican army against Maximilian's army.

Teobert Maler joined this volunteer corps in November 1864, and he disembarked with his company about a month later in the port of Veracruz, Mexico. From January 1865 to June 1867 he fought many battles for Emperor Maximilian in today's states of Veracruz and Puebla against the republican insurgents. But he nevertheless had time to start appreciating the country he was in. According to his memoirs, he soon developed a fascination for the ancient Mexican civilizations. After having seen the ruins of El Tajín, near Papantla, Veracruz, he asked General Thun, who was in charge of the volunteer corps, if he could get a leave of absence to buy books in Mexico

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

City to study Náhuatl, an ancient Mexican language. He wasn't granted this leave, but instead he was transferred to a quieter company on duty at the castle of Chapultepec in Mexico City, where he took advantage of peaceful hours to learn this language.¹³

The Second Empire, this bizarre interlude in Mexican history, ended quickly after domestic and international pressure forced Napoleon III to withdraw troops and financial support in 1867. Maximilian decided not to abdicate, even though the republican forces had reconquered much of Mexico. But his army of relatively untrained Mexican draftees and a few remaining Austrian troops could not withstand the increasing pressure by the republican forces. In the end, Maximilian and his two leading generals were executed by a republican firing squad on June 19, 1867. Unlike most of his peers from the volunteer corps, Maler decided to remain in Mexico after the fall of the Second Empire. He initially went into hiding, but once things were a bit calmer, he started exploring the country – first the center-north and then the south. The reports of these trips, some of which were published in European journals, constitute the first travel writings Maler produced.

Humboldt's and Maler's Mexico expeditions were of a very different nature, but both developed a keen interest in Mexico in a somewhat fortuitous way. Humboldt planned to cross Mexico from Acapulco to Veracruz fairly quickly in order to reach Europe as soon as possible, because his collections and instruments couldn't bear much more time on the road, as he mentioned in his *Political Essay*, but the *vómito negro* that raged in the coastal regions of Veracruz prevented him from reaching that city.¹⁴ He ended up staying almost a full year in the viceroyalty of New Spain, visiting mines, spending time in Mexico City archives, accompanying the viceroy Iturrigaray on his yearly visit to the *desagüe* (drain) of Huehuetoca, climbing several volcanoes, establishing the height of these volcanoes, constructing a profile of the Mexican landscape from Acapulco to Veracruz, and more generally inquiring into the reasons why there was such a difference in cultural advancement between the viceroyalty of New Spain and the regions of South America he had just visited.¹⁵ So, despite his initial plans, in the end he spent enough time in Mexico to gather information for an influential treatise on New Spain.

Maler's fascination with Mexico also seems a bit accidental in the sense that initially he attempted to pursue a military career, and it led him to Mexico as a soldier of Maximilian's volunteer corps. Before enlisting in this corps, he wanted to join the franc-tireurs who formed up in Altona, near Ham-

13. Maler, *Leben meiner Jugend*, 22.

14. Humboldt, *Aus A. Humboldts Versuch*, 9:IX.

15. Humboldt, *Aus A. Humboldts Versuch*; Humboldt, *Reise auf dem Río Magdalena*; Beck, *Alexander Humboldts Amerikanische Reise*.

burg, during the Danish-German war that ensued over the Schleswig-Holstein question. But he arrived too late and soon afterwards decided to join the volunteer corps to go to Mexico.¹⁶ His initial interest in this country may have been fortuitous, but when Maler, aged forty-three, returned to Mexico to conduct his extensive Yucatan explorations after a seven-year sojourn in Europe, he had a clear idea of what he wanted to accomplish. Indeed, he had a very ambitious project in mind: he wished to survey the Maya region, dedicating the following thirty-two years of his life to the discovery, description, and photographic depiction of Maya ruins. He displayed a narrower interest in the country than Humboldt, for he was mainly fascinated by the ancient pre-Hispanic civilizations. Even though he included more general political or cultural observations in his writings, the mainstays of his oeuvre were archaeology, anthropology, and the study of ancient Mexican history.

Whereas Humboldt's visit to the viceroyalty of New Spain constituted only the last (long) leg of these expeditions, Mexico played a much more central role in Maler's life and work. But their writings seem to suggest a different story. Humboldt's *Political Essay* comprised six volumes, and it covered everything from a physical description of the viceroyalty, to an account of the inhabitants and the different races, a statistical report on the different intendancies, a sketch on the state of farming and mining, and his views on the state revenue as well as the military defense of the kingdom. In addition, he also prepared an illustrated volume on New World landscapes and ancient monuments, the *Vues des cordilleras*. Maler on the other hand, encountered greater difficulties in getting his work published. Although a considerable amount of his archaeological writings and photographs were published during his lifetime, his posthumous publications are more copious. And his publications were less diverse than Humboldt's, all pertaining to a greater or lesser degree to the description of ancient ruins. Only his earliest texts contain a more general travel narrative, with discussions of Mexican politics, ethnological observations on indigenous women's customs, and many personal anecdotes.

Having compared the histories, purposes, scopes and outcomes of their expeditions in Mexico, I would like to turn to Humboldt's legacy in Maler's work. The most obvious elements are the scientific rigor and method both used. Humboldt explained in *Kosmos* that the basis of all knowledge was observation and experimentation. He proposed to then use this data as foundation to establish empirical laws through analogy and induction.¹⁷ Much like his predecessor, Maler too used a very methodic approach in his observations and depictions of the different ruins he explored. His many accounts reveal

16. Maler, *Leben meiner Jugend*, 2.

17. Humboldt, *Kosmos*, 1:66.

an astute observer who paid attention to every little detail. This meticulous way of studying the ancient ruins made him a real expert and careful observation often led to intuitive conclusions: frequently he discovered new buildings in an archaeological site out of a hunch and located new sites because of his painstaking way of searching for them. He used to establish a base at one of the ruins and then look for further archaeological remains by advancing into the surrounding territory in a star-like manner. He was aware that thanks to such a thorough system, his “excursions turned out truly grandiose.”¹⁸

Similarly to Humboldt, Maler displayed much endurance. He didn't shrink from moving stelae to take the best possible photograph of them, and once he was done, he returned the stone slabs, so that everything was where it belonged. Thanks to his determination to conduct a thorough expedition in a very inhospitable climate and to defy the dangers of getting infected with malaria or other tropical maladies, he helped advance the research in Maya questions a great deal. His many hundreds of photographs, descriptions, and maps of Maya ruins were of greatest importance for the development of Maya archaeology, and his photographs were particularly useful in supporting the efforts to decipher the Maya glyphs.¹⁹ However, although Maler gave his own readings of the purpose of ancient sites and of the people depicted on stelae, he mostly refrained from offering general interpretations of the Maya civilization. He often wrote that specialists would have to interpret the phenomena he observed. In this sense, he didn't fully follow through Humboldt's scientific approach.

Both Humboldt and Maler made critical remarks concerning social inequality and the position of the indigenous people. In his diaries, Humboldt commented that the misery and destitution in the streets of Mexico exceeded any he had seen before, and he decried the inequality of fortunes between those of European and those of indigenous descent.²⁰ Maler, too, pointed out the poverty and marginalization of the indigenous people, but unlike Humboldt, who identified several causes for the neediness of Mexican Indians, among them one that located the roots in the despotic nature of the Aztec government,²¹ Maler blamed a somewhat more recent cause: the repressive rule of the Spaniards. In fact, he was very much influenced by the “black legend” that explained the conquest as a struggle between barbarous Spaniards – the cruel conquistadors – against the good savages.

18. Teobert Maler to Consul Otto Rosenkranz, 15 November 1893, Rosenkranz Collection, Lippisches Landesmuseum, Detmold.

19. See the articles of two important archaeologists who praise Maler's work. Graham, “III. Teobert Maler”; Kutscher, “Teobert Maler (1842-1917).”

20. Humboldt, *Reise auf dem Río Magdalena*, 323.

21. *Ibid.*

Humboldt and Maler both approved of the indigenous people as workforce. In fact, Humboldt was an early defender of the Indians against claims made by anti-American writers like “[Abbé] Raynal, [De] Pauw and so many other incidentally respectable men, who have complained about the degeneration of our species in the hot zones.”²² When describing the work performed by the *tenateros* – the laborers in the silver mines, who transported 112 to 125 kg of ore on their backs, carrying them up a staircase of over 1,800 steps, eight to ten times a day, thus climbing around 32,000 steps – Humboldt made it clear that he considered these people very industrious and that he didn’t agree with others who “accused the Indian race of weakness.”²³ On the contrary, he actually viewed the Indians as much stronger and strenuous than the Europeans: “What a contrast! Daily it is spoken of the energy of the white race and the weakness of the *indios*. The latter make 8 to 10 trips with weight, and we, we crawl when we climb up once from the shafts of the Valenciana mine, without weight and well-fed.”²⁴ When making these observations about the Mexican mine workers, Humboldt also connected the Indians’ plight to the outcome of the conquest: “Unlucky descendants of a race that was deprived of its property. Where are examples of an entire nation that has lost all of its property?”²⁵ Likewise, Maler saw the indigenous people as Mexico’s major workforce and the main producers of food; he argued that the only reason the indigenous people survived is because they “feed the Spaniards, and it is not the Spaniards who feed the Indians.”²⁶ He blamed the Spaniards for the Indians’ ignorance, considering that they should have made available to them an education in their native languages.²⁷

To better situate Humboldt’s and Maler’s remarks on Mexico’s Indians, a quick summary of the history of European accounts on indigenous people is useful here. Ever since Europeans met natives of the New World, the topic of the otherness of the inhabitants of the Americas has been of interest. Europeans positioned themselves as civilized and described the indigenous people of the recently discovered continents as barbarous. Enlightenment thinkers, however, proposed new ways of looking at indigenous people: they began to consider the relativity of their own cultural standpoints and did no longer judge the other from the accustomed Eurocentric stance. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s seminal work *Discours sur l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, written in 1754, emphasized the dialectics between nature and culture rather than divine providence in the history of mankind. There, he described the “natural man,”

22. Humboldt, *Aus A. Humboldts Versuch*, 9:45.

23. Humboldt, *Reise auf dem Río Magdalena*, 368.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 312.

27. *Ibid.*, 306.

his vision of mankind before living in society and before being corrupted by jealousy and greed. He thought that the natural man was beyond good and evil, full of benevolence and mercy. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the image of the noble savage, which resembles Rousseau's natural man, became popular among European romantics. Savage was no longer equal to barbarous, and native people from far-away places in the New World, who had not been corrupted by an interaction with the Europeans, were increasingly seen as authentic and noble rather than degenerated and barbarous.²⁸

Humboldt and Maler's remarks on the indigenous people fit into this Enlightenment tradition. Humboldt viewed the Indians as "primitive people" or savages who had not achieved the same level of culture as the conquistadors. But this comment was meant as an explanation for the outcome of the conquest. He argued that the ancient Mexicans were "on the first step of civilization," while the Spaniards were already "very advanced in the arts" and thus considered their encounter as an "unequal dispute."²⁹ In addition, Humboldt did not represent all Americans as equal. On the contrary, he highlighted the multiplicity of traits and characteristics among the natives of the American race.³⁰ In fact, he corrected the wrong conviction prevailing among Europeans that people of brown skin all look alike.³¹ He emphasized the variety of languages spoken by the American people and the diversity of geographical locations, in which they settled, ranging from tropical forests to mountain ranges. These comments reveal a greater consciousness of the multiplicity of humankind, and thus echo the relativist stance of Enlightenment thinkers.

Maler also made distinctions between natives, but these were based on the degree of purity of the indigenous people. The less corrupted they had been by the Spanish, both in blood and culture, the more highly he thought of them. When referring to his porters and workers, he often used negative words:

When my work in Yaxchilan was finished, my men were completely discouraged with regard to undertaking further explorations and ardently longed to return to Tenosique. Such is the character of these people that even for the highest wages and with the best treatment, they cannot be induced to continue at one pursuit for any length of time. My success in having secured their services for seven months may be regarded as the utmost that can be accomplished.³²

28. See also Bitterli's synthetic work, *Die 'Wilden' und die 'Zivilisierten'*, 232-7.

29. Humboldt, *Aus A. Humboldts Versuch*, 9:54.

30. Humboldt, *Sites des cordilleras*, 6.

31. *Ibid.*, 56.

32. Maler, "Researches in the Central Portion," 1903:198.

He also described these same workers as “the three vagabonds [he] had brought from Tenosique, who were many degrees inferior to the Indians in every respect,”³³ which suggests that he did not consider them as pure Indians but viewed them as “half-breed,” which he despised for having been corrupted by the Spaniards. Only the indigenous people who were pure and maintained their traditional lifestyles awakened his passion. This distinction becomes clearest when he writes about indigenous women. While he praised pureblood, traditional Indians for their natural, authentic beauty and thought them “friendly and modest,” he described the *mestizas* as fake and affected – women who hid behind make-up and fashion novelties.³⁴ Thus, Maler’s vision of the indigenous people differs from Humboldt’s in that he equals savagery to goodness and despises those who have adapted their lifestyles to that of the Spanish. His view echoes the image of the noble savage that prevailed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Moreover, Maler admired the ancient Indians most, those who had achieved a great civilization and built all the ruins he surveyed with such assiduity. But he did not show the same esteem for the descendants of these civilizations, especially the semi-nomadic Indians who populated the regions around the Usumacinta river. In the following quote, Maler wonders why this beautiful landscape no longer fosters great civilizations:

In all my journeyings on the treacherous waters of the Usumatsintla between El Cayo and Saiyaxché, I have been forcibly struck by the extraordinary contrast between the lavish beauty of nature and the extreme degradation of the remnants of humanity existing there. Luxuriant vegetation of emerald hue bends in flower-laden branches to the water’s edge, overarched by a sky of purest azure; brilliant-hued butterflies and humming birds with metallic sheen fly from flower to flower; gorgeous birds build their nests in every tree; even the snakes and iguanodons are graceful and beautiful; but humankind produces no such splendid forms as are to be seen in the Caucasus or in Asiatic Turkey. It is long since a respectable, stationary population inhabited these fruitful shores, and the dubious elements sunk in sloth, filth, and every possible vice, whose miserable habitations are met with here and there, are constantly shifting since they acquire no fixed property rights.³⁵

Much like Humboldt, who saw part of the reason for the Indians’ hard labor in their having lost all their property, Maler considered the Indians’ lost property as cause for their destitution – a both in terms of intellectual and material culture. This quote also reveals an understanding that the surrounding environment plays a key role in fostering cultural development. Maler

33. Maler, “Explorations of the Upper Usumacinta,” 1908, 2:61.

34. Teobert Maler, “Reise des Hauptmann Maler von México nach Tehuantepec 1876,” TS, Band A73 Teobert Maler, Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde.

35. Maler, “Explorations of the Upper Usumacinta,” 1908, 1:4.

thus saw the connectedness of nature and culture that had already been referred to by Rousseau. A beautiful landscape, according to the above quote by Maler, should positively influence the inhabitants of the region and foster their cultural achievements.

Humboldt, too, saw the close relationship between nature and culture. In *Sites des cordilleras*, he argues that in Equatorial America the mountain people, or *peuples montagnards*, achieved the greatest civilization since they had to struggle to survive in a hostile environment, and they prevailed.³⁶ Throughout his writings, Humboldt emphasized nature's influence on culture. Richard Konetzke argues that for Humboldt "nature" included "human life and thus history." History was embedded in and connected to nature, and the historian's task was "to recognize the natural conditions of human cultural life and show 'the influence of the physical world on the moral.'"³⁷ Humboldt's understanding of the connection between nature and history is perhaps clearest in his introduction to *Vues des cordilleras* that "there is no doubt that the climate, the shape of the soil, the facet of a smiling or savage nature influence the progress of the arts and the style that distinguishes their productions. [...] In order to understand the origin of the arts, one has to study the nature of the site that saw them arise."³⁸

Humboldt and Maler used drawings or photographs of the monuments they described to make the objects more palpable and to accentuate their connection to the beautiful landscapes in which they were situated. The drawings Humboldt commissioned based on his sketches for the *Vues des cordilleras* gave Europeans a glimpse of things most would never have had a chance to see in reality. Humboldt also encouraged contemporary German landscape painters to travel to the tropics, which according to Humboldt offered ideal subjects. Johann Moritz Rugendas, whom Humboldt had met in Paris, followed the German scientist's advice and traveled to South America, painting many of the sites Humboldt mentioned in his oeuvre.³⁹ In *Kosmos*, Humboldt reveals why he considered landscape painting such an important genre: "Like a lively description of nature, landscape painting too is appropriate to increase the love of the study of nature. Both show us the outside world in all its rich diversity; both are able [...] to tie the sensual to the non-sensual."⁴⁰ Thus, for Humboldt, landscape painting was a way of connecting to nature, perceiving and understanding it, and it taught one about the different physiognomies of nature. Similarly, the representations of ancient monuments helped viewers to understand more fully the civilizations that built them and,

36. Humboldt, *Sites des cordilleras*, 12.

37. Konetzke, "Alexander Humboldt," 537; Humboldt qtd. in Konetzke.

38. Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères*, 3.

39. Diener, "Humboldt und die Kunst," 147.

40. Humboldt, *Kosmos*, 2:76.

for that reason, the New World as well. This juxtaposition of nature and monuments helped viewers to see “the origin of the arts,”⁴¹ as Humboldt put it.

Maler went one step further with the photographs that accompanied his archaeological texts. They no longer served only as illustrations of the text, but became a fully integrated element, crucial for the interpretation of the ancient monument. If the details of a façade were clearly visible in a photograph, then Maler refrained from giving an exhaustive account of the monument—he would just refer to the photograph. In his oeuvre, text and image went hand in hand, and since his images were photographs of extremely good quality and sharpness, they were indeed useful for the study of ancient Mexican cultures. In his texts he hints at how he spared no pains to obtain the perfect picture, which included building a scaffolding in order to take a picture from a better angle, splashing the frescoes with water or moving stone slabs into the sun to obtain a starker contrast, as well as cutting down trees and shrubs to get a better view. Maler’s photographs accomplished what Humboldt encouraged landscape painters to pursue: a realistic picture of exotic landscapes and monuments for a European audience. And the recently discovered photographic method was much more apt to produce a realistic portrait of nature than landscape painting, but this was, of course, a kind of staged realism too.

Despite similarities in style, method, and attitude, Humboldt and Maler differed, most obviously in their archaeological work. Of course, archaeology was Maler’s pet subject, while it played a less central role in Humboldt’s oeuvre, although he dedicated the greatest amount of space to renderings of archaeological monuments in his *Vues des cordilleras*. Yet surveying Mexico’s ancient monuments was definitely not a priority for Humboldt while in Mexico. In fact, he only visited Cholula, a pyramid in the proximity of the city of Puebla, but thanks to the research he conducted while in Europe, he also wrote about several more he hadn’t seen. Notwithstanding it is intriguing to compare Humboldt’s perception of ancient buildings with Maler’s much later work, given how much advancement had been made in the field of archaeology in the interim.

It is surprising that a traveler of the importance and erudition of Alexander von Humboldt only visited Cholula and not even Teotihuacán, Xochicalco or Mitla – all three well-known ruins at the time. Ignacio Bernal attributes this to the fortuity of his Mexico expedition; Humboldt did not plan to stay in Mexico for long, and consequently he had not prepared himself sufficiently to explore Mexico’s cultural remains more thoroughly. In fact, most of his erudition on things Mexican was due to the post-voyage study of the sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers, conquistadors, and subsequent schol-

41. Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères*, 3.

ars.⁴² Humboldt openly acknowledged in his *Vues des cordilleras* that he did not visit Xochicalco because “he was unaware of the existence of the hill of Xochicalco” and thus relied on Mr. Alzate’s account of these monuments.⁴³ Since so many of his accounts of ancient monuments were based on descriptions made by earlier travelers and scholars, they reflect the state of archaeology of the time in which his sources were written, rather than proposing novel observations and theories. Not surprisingly, Humboldt copied mistakes. In the case of Xochicalco, for example, he described crocodiles spitting out water represented on the walls of the pyramids,⁴⁴ when in fact, these bas-reliefs depicted the feathered serpent, Quetzalcóatl or Kukulcán, a mythological being of great importance all over Mesoamerica.

Maler, on the other hand, not only benefited from the greater amount of scholarship done in Mexican archaeology since Humboldt’s publications, but he also read the relevant books *before* starting his in-depth explorations in Mexico. Of course, Maler also focused more narrowly on the study of pre-Hispanic culture. Moreover, his professional training as architect helped him a great deal in the specifications of the ruins, in which he included information on the layout, construction, size, shape, and decoration. Often he also ventured an interpretation or explanation of the objects he portrayed, and thus did not just simply repeat what archaeologists before him had already observed, but added both greater detail and original theories.

The description of Mitla nicely illustrates the different traditions to which Humboldt and Maler belong – more universal vs. more specified knowledge, respectively, which also positions Humboldt more fully in the Enlightenment and Maler in the nineteenth century. Humboldt based his account on the Mexican architect Don Luis Martin’s plan and account of these Zapotec ruins, thus further exposing his lack of dedication to the exploration of ruins. Maler’s narrative, in contrast, reveals his personal impressions and analysis, making his presence there very realistic. He is also more careful with his portrayal of the ruins. While describing what he called the main palace, he noted that it was not clear whether this building really functioned as such, or whether, since all other buildings were “so terribly destroyed, it appeared to us as the most important.”⁴⁵ Humboldt, on the other hand, simply referred to it as the main palace, as if its central role were unquestionable.

Humboldt also exposes himself as Enlightenment thinker in that he classified ancient Mexican buildings comparing them to other ancient civilizations,

42. Bernal, “Humboldt y la arqueología mexicana,” 124-5.

43. Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères*, 41.

44. Ibid., 39. In his notes on Humboldt’s *Vues des cordillères*, Maler makes a mocking comment on Humboldt’s drawing of Xochicalco. He calls it a “ridiculously bad drawing.” Notizbücher, Nachlass Maler, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, Berlin.

45. Maler, “Reise des Hauptmann Maler,” 21.

most often those of Greece and Egypt. He considered Mitla, for example “of a very remarkable elegance,” unlike all “the [other] barbarous monuments that only offered a purely historical interest,”⁴⁶ and compared the decorative mosaics of the main palace to the “vases of Great-Greece and [to] other ornaments that can be found spread over almost the entire ancient continent.”⁴⁷ However, he didn’t consider these ruins an indicator of a “very advanced civilization.”⁴⁸ On the contrary, he saw this archaeological site, like others he described, as evidence of the “dawn of art,” citing the columns found in Mitla as corroboration of this, since they lacked capitals and were thus of a brutish style.⁴⁹

Maler also mentioned the columns of Mitla, but his analysis of them was of a less comparative nature. He looked at them within their own Mexican context, without drawing comparisons to other civilizations. He observed that columns were all sculpted out of one stone, that “they [had] neither foot nor head, but [that] they [swelled] lightly and [tapered] at the top.”⁵⁰ Unlike Humboldt, who described this Zapotec site rather dryly, Maler’s narrative description led the reader through Mitla’s buildings, which produced a very vivid effect, while giving details on the thickness of the stucco, the mosaics, and his reflections on the manner of construction.⁵¹

Humboldt’s comparative approach to examining New World civilizations was also driven by the desire to point out antecedents and maybe direct links between Old World and New World cultures. He was very much aware of the different theories that tried to explain the origins of the civilizations of the New World. In his *Political Essay* he came closest to seeing a link between the Mongols and the ancient Toltecs, which he regarded as the first civilized culture of central Mexico, the ones who had invented the art of hieroglyphic writing, the calendar, and the pyramids.⁵² According to Humboldt, the ancient Toltecs shared common ancestors with the Hiongu – a Mongol tribe that had migrated towards northern Siberia and from there to the New World.⁵³ Here Humboldt was far ahead of contemporary and even later scholars, who advanced all kinds of theories arguing that only more recent descendants of the lost tribes of Israel or the Greeks could have constructed the pyramids of the New World, since its current inhabitants were all savages.⁵⁴

46. Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères*, 270.

47. Humboldt, *Sites des Cordillères*, 267.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 265.

50. Maler, “Reise des Hauptmann Maler,” 21.

51. *Ibid.*, 21-4.

52. Humboldt, *Pittoreske Ansichten*, 32-33.

53. Humboldt, *Aus A. Humboldts Versuch*, 51.

54. Bonor Villarejo, “Introducción,” en Stephens, *Viaje a Yucatán*, 1:15.

Maler too proposed an endogenous explanation to the puzzle of the pyramids in the New World: he thought that the Aztecs, Mayas, Zapotecs, and other nations had built the pyramids themselves. And he proposed a comparative linguistic study of the Aztec and the Mongol language in order to figure out whether they shared a common antecedent. Much like Humboldt, he speculated that the Aztec people might have descended from an ancient ancestor of the Mongol tribes. Thus, both located early ancestors of New World Indians in Asia, and both viewed New World Natives as having reached a sufficiently developed stage that allowed them to have constructed the pyramids themselves. Yet, Humboldt and Maler differed in their appreciation of these monuments. While Humboldt judged them as barbarous and as of purely historical interest (always comparing them to ancient Greek buildings), Maler always admired the beauty and architectural perfection of these buildings.

Maler's writing was in keeping with the Humboldtian tradition of theoretical speculation deduced from careful empirical observation. Despite the differences in their backgrounds, how they got involved in Mexico, their attitudes toward it, and the political, cultural, and scientific changes that came between them, one can map many similarities in observation and attitudes between the two. This serves as testimony to Humboldt's progressive, innovative, and detailed ways of looking at the New World. And this is even more stunning since they belonged to two different types of explorers. Whereas Humboldt still largely represents the traditional Enlightenment traveler with universal interests and broad education, who tried to paint a global picture and emphasized the unity of what he observed, Maler belongs to the category of explorers who devoted his time to the pursuit of a more narrow and specific field of knowledge. Humboldt and Maler thus stand for two different stages in the history of explorations. In addition, Maler proposed new approaches to Mexico by exclusively focusing on pre-Hispanic vestiges. Not only did he help shift the center of European attention in Mexico from a natural and geological interest to a more cultural one—a trend that has lasted to this day – but he also introduced a narrower focus that is typical of more specialized knowledge – another process that would not be reversed. Yet, it speaks to Humboldt's depth of knowledge and his keen ability of observation that there are so many parallels between an early and a late nineteenth-century traveler.

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