

**HUMBOLDT, ALEXANDER  
FREIHERR VON  
(1769–1859)**

German scientist and explorer.

The brother of Wilhelm von Humboldt, he studied engineering and natural history at Frankfurt an der Oder, Berlin, and Göttingen. He traveled through western Europe, and in 1792–97 held an official position in the mining enterprises of the Franconian principalities. From 1799 to 1804, together with the French botanist A. Bompard, he conducted studies in exact geography in several countries of Latin America, determining the course of the Casiquiare River and climbing Mount Chimborazo to a height of 5,400 meters. He also measured the temperature of the Humboldt Current (on the Pacific Coast of South America), as it was later named after him. From 1807 to 1827 he lived with brief interruptions in Paris. Here he conducted experimental studies on gases with J.-L. Gay-Lussac, and also evaluated the findings of his voyages in America in collaboration with other scientists. His major contribution to science is the 30-volume work *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent* (1805–34).

Returning to Berlin in 1827, he delivered his renowned lectures on physical geography. Accompanied by G. Rose and C. G. Ehrenberg, in 1829 he undertook an expedition into Asiatic Russia (the Urals, the Altai, Dzungaria, the Caspian Sea) at the behest of Tsar Nicholas I, whose main outcome was a worldwide chain of magnetic observatories initiated by Humboldt and realized by the mathematician C. F. Gauss. He also published a two-volume "mineralogical-geognostic" account of his travels and a work entitled *Central-Asien* (1843–44). Settled once again in Berlin after 1830, he compiled a five-volume work that summarized all that was then known about the earth, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physikalischen Weltbeschreibung* (Cosmos: Outline of a Physical Description of the World, 1845–62). It was the last attempt by a single individual to collect

within the pages of a work of his own the totality of human knowledge of the universe; after his time the increasing specialization of the sciences and the sheer accumulation of data made such a venture impossible.

During his scientific expeditions Humboldt assembled enormous quantities of botanical specimens (some 60,000 plants) and geological ones as well. He recorded the fall in the strength of the magnetic fields from the Pole to the Equator and observed swarms of meteors. He prophetically foresaw the advantage of a canal through the Isthmus of Panama. He recorded isotherms and collected data on the languages and cultures of the South American Indians. Through the accounts of his findings—models for all subsequent undertakings—he made significant contributions to oceanography, meteorology, climatology, and geography, and furthered virtually all the natural sciences of his time; but above all else he was responsible for major advances in the geographical and geological sciences.

Magnus Hirschfeld preserved in his volume of 1914 the lingering reminiscences of Humboldt in the homosexual subculture of Berlin, where persons who had known him intimately were living as late as the first decade of the twentieth century, among them the homosexual dendrologist Karl Bolle. Humboldt is reputed never to have sexual relations with a woman. To a servant who was also his lover, Johann Seifert (1800–1877), he bequeathed his entire estate. He had many feminine traits of mind and body, and his homosexual personality revealed itself in a certain restlessness that led him to travel in remote areas of the globe and also to explore a whole range of scientific disciplines. He was the last universal intellect in Western civilization, who in the tradition of the Renaissance man took the entire world as his object of study. Humboldt is still remembered in Germany as one of the greatest scientists his nation has ever produced.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Helmut De Terra, *Humboldt: The Life and Times of Alexander von Humboldt, 1769-1859*, New York: Knopf, 1955; Wolfgang Hagen-Hein, *Alexander von Humboldt: Leben und Werk*, Frankfurt am Main: Weisbecker, 1985.

Warren Johansson

## HUMOR

Humor is that which gives rise to mirth or amusement, though the notion often eludes precise definition. The psychology of humor has elicited much theorizing, the common denominator of which is that the element of surprise, of shock, or of unexpectedness is a necessary (even if not sufficient) condition for the humorous experience. Humor interrupts the routine, familiar course of thought and action; it activates the element of play which (as Johan Huizinga stressed) is a component of culture. Acting as the personality's safety valve, humor seems to effect a release from constraint or excess tension. Floating nervous energy in search of an outlet activates the organs of speech and muscles of respiration in such a way as to produce laughter. At the same time humor can afford a sudden insight into the ridiculousness of a situation, or an opportunity to vent anger and aggression, as in the case of a joke or witticism directed at a personal foe or at an enemy in wartime that places him in a ridiculous light.

*Erotic Aspects.* Sexuality has been the subject of humor since the dawn of recorded history. This is in no small part because of the incongruity between the attraction or the pleasure felt by the actor in an erotic situation but invisible to the observer, who can only note the objectively graceless or even repellent behavior by which third parties procure sexual gratification. The sexual act in itself has nothing aesthetic, even if the pleasure obtained from the physical contact of two human bodies borders on the ecstatic. From this fundamental incongruity derives the piquancy of the countless jokes, anecdotes,

tales, cartoons, and pictures in which sexuality is the central theme. At the same time sexual tensions in the subject—and fears of sexual aggression—can also be alleviated by the mechanism of humor.

### *Homosexuality and Humor.*

Homosexuality occupies a special place within the domain of sexual humor, both because of the intense taboo with which the very mention of it was once invested, but also because of the perceived incongruity of erotic attraction between two members of the same sex—its departure from the cultural expectation of heterosexuality. The individual who departs too markedly from the gender role norms of the culture is bound to be a target of disapproval, expressed at least in the form of humor. Moreover, homosexual activity itself, aimless and pleasureless as it is to the heterosexual observer, can be the object of rage and contempt but also of a humor that incorporates symbolic aggression. Humor in regard to homosexual activity can be an escape route or symbolic excuse for the inconsistent behavior, or can express absolution from the cultural taboo in the form of an expressive laugh or indirect approval of what cannot be explicitly acknowledged. As homosexuals have come to be recognized as a socially discrete element of Western society, "fag jokes" have taken their place beside ethnic jokes as facets of intergroup tension.

Humor in sexual matters may also reflect the tensions between the official norm of society, which condemns all sexual expression outside of marriage, and the unofficial admiration and envy accorded the individual who successfully violates the taboo and obtains the forbidden pleasure. There is also the implicit denigration of the passive partner, who is seen as being used for the pleasure of the active one while obtaining nothing in return. These dichotomies are intensified in the case of the doubly tabooed and intensely paradoxical homosexual experience, which demands an explanation and justification that Western society has thus far been