

Tropicality and the Humboldtian Gaze: European Exceptionalism in the Works of Johann Moritz Rugendas

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With applications in the fields of geography, literature, botany, climatology, art, and ethnography, the paradigm of Tropicality offers vast insight into the Western perception of the tropics throughout history.¹ Though referring geographically to the region between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, in an art historical context, Tropicality describes a generalized or stereotypical depiction of the flora, fauna, and inhabitants of the tropics, with no distinction made regarding the different climates, regions, and biomes it contains, such as the tropical rainforests or alpine grasslands. Akin to Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, the paradigm stereotypes, conflating and confounding distinct visual and cultural elements to create a blended, uniform world that disregards local specificity.² While Tropicality is manifest throughout the colonial and neocolonial eras, its influence on the visual arts was particularly marked during the nineteenth century, at the peak of European colonization of the Americas and Pacific islands.³ Scholars and artists alike were embarking on scientific and colonial expeditions to observe the New World and record their findings, and publishing travelogues along the way. Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1814–29) recounts his five-year journey throughout South America, describing the tropics in romanticized visual terms. This vision of the tropics, referred to as the Humboldtian gaze by scholars Andrea

Wulf and Miguel Gaete, inspired German artists such as Carl Alexander Simon, Otto Grashof, and Johann Moritz Rugendas.⁴ Rugendas lived in Brazil and Chile between 1831 and 1846, during which time he produced more than five hundred illustrations featuring the tropics.⁵ Rugendas's work lends insight into the duality of the nineteenth-century European conception of the Other, which was rooted in Eurocentric primitivism. At once, South American Indigenous communities were praised by Europeans for their apparent simpler, closer-to-nature way of living, while also being denigrated for living "archaically" and therefore considered an "inferior race" in comparison with Europeans.⁶ Informed by this understanding of Tropicality, this paper examines three key paintings of the tropics made by Rugendas: *La Siesta* (1850) (fig. 1), *Brazilian Virgin Forest* (1830) (fig. 2), and *Brazilian Virgin Forest* (1830) (fig. 3).⁷ The composition of *La Siesta* exemplifies Eurocentric primitivism by imposing European cultural referents onto the tropical setting, while, in the paintings Figure 2 and Figure 3, the artist offers two contrasting perceptions of Indigenous people, demonstrating how Europeans viewed their proximity to nature in a paradoxical way. Overall, the three paintings aim to position Europe as a superior society and impose European culture onto the Brazilian landscape.

Art historian Miguel Gaete has analyzed *La Siesta* by comparing it to Orientalist artworks of the same period.⁸ Orientalism

is one of the foundational theories of post-colonial critical and cultural studies. First posited with the publication of *Orientalism* by philosopher Edward Said in 1978, it was first applied to the field of art history in 1983 by art historian Linda Nochlin, with her essay “The Imaginary Orient.”⁹ In an art historical context, *Orientalism* refers to stereotypical and homogenous depictions of peoples and cultures present throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia by European artists, most commonly in artworks dating to the nineteenth century. Tropicality and *Orientalism* are closely related: they are sub-genres of European Romanticism, they refer to non-European spaces, and they have been used to compare and contrast such cultures, environments, and people with their European counterparts.¹⁰ More importantly, they both depict generic, composite spaces that correspond to European expectations of the environment and its inhabitants, as opposed to identifiable, existing places. However, unlike *Orientalism*, Tropicality is not often studied in an art historical context, with the exception of scholars such as Gaete.¹¹ Therefore, this paper draws upon research from other disciplines, particularly from historians and geographers such as Pierre Gourou, Felix Driver, and David Arnold, who highlight a particular aspect of Tropicality: by defining and regrouping those who were distinctly different, both culturally and environmentally, from Europe, it reveals a bias that assumes European society to be superior.¹²

In Rugendas’s *La Siesta*, this elevation is visible in three different ways. Firstly, the painter includes classical architecture in the background. Even though the scene takes place in an imaginary setting that resembles the Brazilian jungle, monumental, antique, vaguely Greco-Roman buildings are scattered throughout the flora. Nestled among the trees, they appear as if they are a natural part of the landscape. And yet, they do not just exist in nature; they match its imposing stature—they are as prominent in the skyline as the palm trees. Secondly, through the use of Indigenous women as maids for the white baby, Rugendas constructs a visible hierarchy among the women. The colonial mistresses, oppressed by the humid tropical heat, rest in

suspended hammocks in the middle of the scene and are brightly lit, while the *mestizo* maids sit on the ground, partially obscured. Finally, the flora itself is telling: art historical discussions of Tropicality emphasize the vision of nature as striking, abundant, dense, wild, and dominant.¹³ The palm tree held a particular visual significance, occupying the role of mascot of the tropics. The vast, open interior of *La Siesta* is overpowered by rampant vines and invasive foliage, with palm trees adorning the space. Presenting nature as untameable aligns the space with the danger of the unknown, as opposed to the safety of the civilized, suggesting that Native Brazilians, incapable of controlling their environment, are inferior to Europeans. Additionally, the scene is tainted with a biblical connotation: the three foreign entertainers; the lying, naked baby; and the peaceful, vigilant animals resemble a tropical Nativity of Christ, a scene of long-standing Germanic Christian tradition, as seen in, for example, the *Adoration of the Magi* (1504) by Albrecht Dürer. By transposing this Christian tradition onto the South American colonial context and territory, Rugendas establishes a cultural hierarchy that favours Europeans. This cultural hierarchy narrative did not originate with Rugendas. In the nineteenth century, many prominent European figures participating in the scientific documentation of the Americas had a similar discourse. This is the case of naturalist Alexander von Humboldt.

Alexander von Humboldt was a nineteenth-century German naturalist, explorer, and geographer who organized and financed his own scientific expedition through South America from 1799 to 1804. When he first arrived in Cumaná in present-day Venezuela, he was overwhelmed by what stood in front of him. Historian Andrea Wulf writes that “the landscape held a spell on him.”¹⁴ Indeed, the flora and fauna were so diverse and plentiful that the methodical Humboldt did not know where or how to start studying it. The wealth of specimens he encountered are recorded in the naturalist’s personal journal, which contain over four thousand pages written over five years that were eventually published as a seven-volume travelogue titled *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions*



Fig. 1. ↑↑ Johann Moritz Rugendas,
La Siesta, 1850. Oil on canvas, 20.5 x 26.8 in.
São Paulo, Itaú Bank Collection
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of the *New Continent* (1814–1829).¹⁵ Much could be said about the scientific impact this work had on nineteenth-century Europe: it covers geology, ecology, taxonomy, and natural history. It became the foundation for biogeography as a field and posed the first European thesis for human-induced climate change.¹⁶ Despite its contributions to contemporary sciences, the text itself is written in a highly literary, even poetic mode, evidence of Humboldt's induction into the so-called "cult of sensibility" of late-eighteenth-century Romantic literature. In this period, works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) reflected this "cult of sensibility," which arose as a counterculture to the rationality that characterized the Neoclassical period.¹⁷ Such sentimental literature exploits its audience's capacity for sympathy, compassion, or tenderness by presenting an unrealistic or beclouded view of its characters and/or subject matter. The main goal of this literary style was the analysis of emotion, and the portrayal of how feeling gets the better of reason.¹⁸ This infatuation with sensibility not only carried into the nineteenth century but bloomed into the emotional exaltation of Romanticism.¹⁹

The Humboldtian gaze is a vision of the tropics that, while intellectually curious and interested in the accurate representation of its flora and fauna, participates in the paradigm of Tropicality by constructing a fantastical version of this world rooted in Romantic conceptions such as the sublime.

Humboldt's written work reflects this cultural shift. Historian of science Michael Dettelbach characterizes Humboldt as "thoroughly schooled in observing and retelling his own inner states."²⁰ Throughout *Personal Narrative*, there is no shortage of examples of the naturalist's lyrical, flamboyant descriptions of the South American landscape. Through this emotionally tainted language, Humboldt projects his own vision of the territory rather than reflecting it objectively. For example, when describing the Chimborazo volcano in modern-day Ecuador, the naturalist references art: "Like a cloud on the horizon; [Chimborazo] stands out from the

neighbouring peaks; it looms above the entire Andes range just as the majestic dome [of Saint Peter's Basilica], Michelangelo's work of genius, looms above the ancient monuments that surround Capitoline Hill."²¹ This evocative example demonstrates how Humboldt used hyperbole when describing landscapes, such as claiming that a single volcano could loom over a mountain range that spans across an entire continent. Moreover, by comparing the volcano to a space that was constructed and decorated for religious devotion, Humboldt conflates the spiritual with the real, painting a mental image of Christian fantasy. Just like with *La Siesta*, a European cultural referent is overlaid onto a South American landscape, pushing European dominance onto a colonized territory. In the nineteenth century, monumental landscapes such as mountain chains were understood to be God's creations. By directly comparing the Chimborazo to Saint Peter's Basilica, Humboldt suggests that Michelangelo can create works as monumental as divine landscapes, which sends a clear message of European exceptionalism to the reader. Through examples such as this one, art historian Daniela Bleichmar claims that Humboldt mastered "the language of the picturesque and the sublime," contrary to what we would consider the typical, objective mode of scientific writing.²² English naturalist Charles Darwin claimed that Humboldt's talent for combining science and poetry was what made his descriptions unparalleled.²³ Indeed, Humboldt believed that considering aesthetic dimensions was important when investigating nature. Wulf writes that Humboldt realized "memories and emotional responses [...] would always form part of man's experience and understanding of nature."²⁴ At a time when science and art were increasingly contrasted, Humboldt insisted that imagination and subjectivity were essential to the understanding of nature as a whole. He celebrated the continuity between understanding the biome's physiognomy and appreciating its beauty. In sum, this is what characterizes the Humboldtian gaze: it is a vision of the tropics that, while intellectually curious and interested in the accurate representation of its flora and fauna, participates in the paradigm of Tropicality by constructing

a fantastical version of this world rooted in Romantic conceptions such as the sublime. Such a vision deeply resonated with European artists, who in turn travelled to the New World to capture its dramatic and picturesque landscapes.²⁵ One of these artists was Rugendas.

Johann Moritz Rugendas was Humboldt's protégé.²⁶ The German painter initially travelled to South America as an illustrator on a scientific exploration in 1822 before returning to the continent in 1831 for fifteen years, splitting his time between Brazil and Chile.²⁷ Rugendas's work is tainted with the Humboldtian gaze: he strove to provide accurate, scientific depictions of flora elements while indulging in aesthetic trends of Romanticism by creating imaginative compositions.²⁸ This can be seen in paintings such as Figure 2. The work is striking in its strong, linear verticality. The canvas itself is painted in portrait format, an orientation reinforced by the numerous large trees and their hanging creepers creating a sensation of elongation. A single horizontal movement in the foreground cuts across the uniformity: A fallen log rests across a water source, and right next to it stand four human figures. One of them is shooting prey with a bow, presumably a bird hidden within the foliage. The colours of this foliage are vivid, full of lush greens and vibrant yellows sparkling with cream accents. The aerial lighting of the scene is bright, creating an inviting and secure environment, one that teems with life. This vitality is not threatening, as there are almost no shadows in which a predator could lie. At first glance, this artwork might look like an accurate representation of a tropical biome. In fact, many elements of the flora are identifiable, including plants from the genera *Phyllostachys*, *Bignonia*, and *Avicennia*.²⁹ As Gaete has demonstrated, however, this is an illusion. The tropical landscape painting is a "formula that combined a precise depiction of elements taken from direct observation of nature, in a form that one could denominate as scientific, with a degree of artistic imagination and invention."³⁰ In Figure 2, the added degree of artistic license overshadows the attempted recreation of the ecosystem. The image is a composite of many botanical species meant to be visually pleasing to the

viewer and positioned in an orderly fashion rather than accurate in their interaction with one another. Rugendas met a standard that at once satisfied the desire for truth and accuracy that scientists and explorers sought on their journeys, while also delighting the European public's taste for exoticism by capturing light, shapes, and colours in a striking way that encouraged a fantastical viewing and understanding of the tropical world.³¹

By portraying nature as a character, the canvas exhibits Rugendas's competing priorities of scientific accuracy and Romantic, imaginative invention or drama.

Figure 3 appeals to the European viewer in the same Humboldtian way as Figure 2. It pictorializes real elements of the tropical biome—precise plants and native wildlife—without presenting them realistically. The majestic and robust tree that forms the central element of the scene provides a good example of this on different levels. To begin, it is disproportionately large compared to the other trees present in the scene. It dominates, the painting capturing only its trunk and some lower branches, giving the impression that it continues to expand beyond the frame, beyond measurement or comprehension, evoking the sublime.³² Furthermore, it appears anthropomorphic: its trunk twists and contorts in the same movement as the woman below it, as if part of the action itself.³³ This tree reaffirms the imaginative component of Rugendas's landscape depiction. By portraying nature as a character, the canvas exhibits Rugendas's competing priorities of scientific accuracy and Romantic, imaginative invention or drama.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 are both hunting scenes in the Brazilian jungle. However, the scene of Figure 2 is paradisiacal and harmonious, while Figure 3 presents a menacing environment, one we as viewers are now subject to, as we stand at an eye-level perspective as if part of the action. The gigantic, sublime tree engulfs us. The sky is almost absent, as trees spring from the ground as far as one can see, which accentuates the feeling of subjugation and entrapment. The colours of the background



Fig. 2. ←← Johann Moritz Rugendas,
Brazilian Virgin Forest, 1830. Oil on canvas,
24.6 x 19.5 in. Prussian Palaces and Gardens
Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg.
SPSG, GK | 1271 © SPSG / Roland Handrick.

Fig. 3. ↘↘ Johann Moritz Rugendas,
Brazilian Virgin Forest, 1830. Oil on canvas,
18.5 x 13.4 in. Prussian Palaces and Gardens
Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg.
SPSG, GK | 4341 © SPSG / Roland Handrick.



foliage are dark and imprecise, blending into each other, and they give the impression of an air that is thick, humid, and suffocating. This overall murkiness contrasts with the crystal-clear lighting present in Figure 2, where, while the jungle seems full of life, it does not feel threatening and is fully available to our inquiring gaze. In Figure 3, what lurks within the shadows? This concealment has a purpose: the dangerous nature of the jungle reminds us that anything can be hidden within this inescapable, unforgiving land. The sublime—the feeling of wonder and terror that emerges when one is confronted with the quality of vastness—is fully present in this scene in which nature is merciless.³⁴ This inclusion of imminent danger reminds the European viewer that the Native Brazilians portrayed are not able to control their environment, instead becoming victims to it. This narrative reinforces European exceptionalism, which promotes the domination of territories through scientific knowledge.

Throughout the nineteenth century, nature was seen as something to be dominated, and paintings such as *Brazilian Virgin Forest* promoted the narrative of an indomitable biome and a community that did not have the ability to tame it.

Beyond their Humboldtian tendencies, Figure 2 and Figure 3 are tainted strongly with primitivism. European Romantic artists of this period shared a longing for the past and a growing sentiment of rejection of modernity, leading to an idealization of the humans perceived as “primitive,” or less developed than themselves.³⁵ Often, the societies considered to be primitive were understood as living symbiotically with nature.³⁶ Both these perceptions are illustrated in Figure 2, the scene being constructed as a clearing—a metaphorical window to bygone times and wilderness. Gaete writes that the painting conveys “the Romantic conviction of a schism between nature and the supposedly civilized beholder.”³⁷ Rugendas makes this clear in the way the scene lays open and vast in front of the audience, who is removed from the action, elevated as if assisting a hunting spectacle rather than participating

in it. Moreover, the figures’ nudity further suggests their intimacy with nature, or rather, excludes them from civilization. The original audience of this artwork would have been European, meaning that they would have contrasted their appearance and context with the characters of the painting: nude versus dressed according to strict social conventions, in the wilderness versus in a metropole. European fascination with primitivism arises from its appeal as an escape from modernity, but also from a contrasting attitude that condescendingly looks down upon the cultures it considers “primitive.” Rugendas highlights the differences between European viewers and Indigenous figures and effectively reinforces the pejorative construction of the “Other.” Just as in Figure 2, the concept of the alienated other is at the forefront of Figure 3. While it might not have been his or Humboldt’s intention—several authors such as Andrea Wulf have even claimed that the latter was an abolitionist—*Personal Narrative* and the subsequent art it influenced promoted European exceptionalism and racism.³⁸ In a period when progress, materialism, and racial discourse dominated, the association with so-called primitive times was not always a positive one.³⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century, nature was seen as something to be dominated, and paintings such as Figure 3 promoted the narrative of an indomitable biome and a community that did not have the ability to tame it. This narrative flattered the European sense of superiority, which, in turn, contributed to the popular argument that they belonged to an “inferior race.”⁴⁰ In Figure 2 and Figure 3, primitivism became part of Rugendas’s vision and contributed to the widening of the gap between the “the Self” and “the Other.”

Johann Moritz Rugendas was heavily influenced by the sensationalized and poeticized landscapes presented in Humboldt’s travel account. This Humboldtian gaze manifested in his works, which combine scientifically accurate depictions of flora and fauna with romanticized depictions of traditional European tropes, such as the Nativity of Christ or evocations of the sublime. In this way, Tropicity is an appropriate lens through which to view Rugendas’s paintings, which present South American landscapes

and native inhabitants as primitive: a clear reflection of the historical European cultural domination over Indigenous cultures and their territories. In his artworks, Rugendas presents South American landscapes and native inhabitants as primitive, sending an unambiguous message of European cultural domination over Indigenous cultures and their territory. Overall, this cultural narrative promoted European imperial and colonial perspectives. By looking at Rugendas's works through the framework of Tropicality, it becomes evident that despite their subject, landscape paintings are not reliable to accurately depict colonized environments,

and contribute to a harmful, stereotypical understanding of tropical territories. These works, despite their intentions, can further primitivism, as they enable the viewing of the Indigenous communities as being at the mercy rather than at the command of, or living symbiotically with, their environment. In a future essay, it would be pertinent to consider the context of viewership and critical reception of Rugendas's art in Europe. The problematic dynamics examined above proliferated in Europe through the viewing of these artworks, making them important to consider when framing Rugendas's work through the lens of Tropicality.

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NOTES

- 1** Felix Driver and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "Constructing the Tropics: Introduction," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no. 1 (2000): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9493.00059>, 2.
- 2** Miguel A. Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 4, no. 4 (2022): 9-25, <https://doi.org/10.1525/lavc.2022.4.4.9>.
Miguel A. Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy: Orientalism and Tropicality in Eugène Delacroix and Johann Moritz Rugendas," *Culture & History Digital Journal* 11, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2022.022>.
Robert H. Whittaker, *Communities and Ecosystems* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).
Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 3** Denis Cosgrove, "Tropic and Tropicality," in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, ed. Felix Driver and Luciana Martins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 197.
- 4** Daniela Bleichmar, *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 157, 164.
Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited."
Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (New York: Knopf, 2017).
- 5** Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Voyage pittoresque dans le Brésil* (Paris: Engelmann & Cie, 1835).
- 6** My understanding of primitivism is informed by Miguel Gaete and Martha Lucy's essay "Evolution and Desire in Gauguin's Tahitian Eve" in *Gauguin's Challenge: New Perspectives After Postmodernism* (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018).
- 7** Both paintings are titled *Brazilian Virgin Forest* and dated 1830. For clarity's sake, I will hereafter refer to them as Figure 2 and Figure 3.
- 8** Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy," 10.
- 9** Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-century Art and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
- 10** Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy," 2.
- 11** Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy," 2.

- 12** Driver and Yeoh, "Constructing the Tropics: Introduction," 1.
- 13** Cosgrove, "Tropic and Tropicality," 205.
Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy," 9.
- 14** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 57.
- 15** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 57.
- 16** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 159.
- 17** Michael Dettelbach, "The Stimulations of Travel: Humboldt's Physiological Construction of the Tropics," in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, ed. Felix Driver and Luciana Martins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 53.
- 18** "Sentimental Novel," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/sentimental-novel>.
- 19** "Sentimental Novel," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/sentimental-novel>.
- 20** Dettelbach, "The Stimulations of Travel," 53.
- 21** Bleichmar, *Visual Voyages*, 164.
- 22** Bleichmar, *Visual Voyages*, 164.
- 23** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 264.
- 24** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 61.
- 25** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 293.
- 26** Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy," 3.
- 27** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 9.
- 28** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 12.
- 29** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 12.
- 30** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 11.
- 31** Gaete, "Territorial Fantasies, Sexual Nuances, and Savage Energy," 4.
- 32** "Art Term: Sublime" Tate, Accessed October 23, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/sublime>.
- 33** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 13.
- 34** "Glossary Term: Sublime," National Galleries of Scotland, Accessed October 22, 2024. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/sublime>.
- 35** Charles Cramer, Kim Grant, "Primitivism and Modern Art," Smarthistory, March 7, 2020. <https://smarthistory.org/primitivism-and-modern-art/>.
- 36** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 12.
- 37** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 11.
- 38** Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 59.
- 39** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 14.
- 40** Gaete, "The Garden of Eden Revisited," 14.

ESSAY

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Tropicality and the Humboldtian Gaze