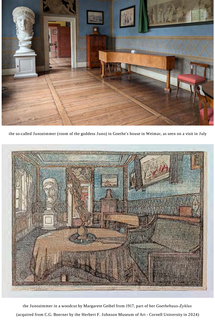
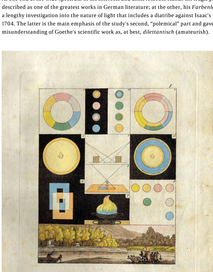
C.G. BOERNER
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
28 August 2025

On this day in 1749, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born, a true *Universalgelehr-ter* and widely considered on of the last individuals who managed to unite the arts and sciences in both his work and his life.



the so-called Junozimmer (room of the goddess Juno) in Goethe's house in Weimar, as seen on a visit in July



the Junozimmer in a woodcut by Margarete Gelbel from 1917, part of her *Goethehaus-Zyklus*
(acquired from C.G. Boerner by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art - Cornell University in 2024)

At one end of the wide spectrum of his interests and achievements stands his tragic play *Faust*, often described as one of the greatest works in German literature; at the other, his *Farbenlehre (Theory of Colors)*, a lengthy investigation into the nature of light that includes a diatribe against Isaac's Newton's *Opticks* of 1704. The latter is the main emphasis of the study's second, "polemical" part and gave rise to a widespread misunderstanding of Goethe's scientific work as, at best, *dilettantish* (amateurish).

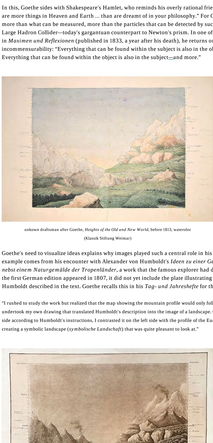


plate from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*, Tübingen: Cotta'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1810

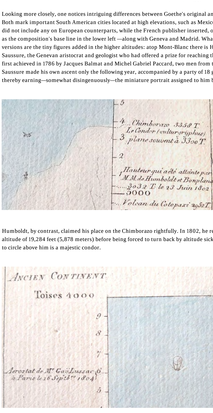
Yet the Newton-defeats-Goethe verdict so often repeated in histories of science misses a far more fundamental point in Goethe's thinking, one imbedded in the first, "didactic" part of the *Farbenlehre* and still relevant today. While Goethe does indeed attack Newton's analysis of light as a composite of colors separable by means of a prism, his true intellectual adversary was not Newton but Immanuel Kant. Kant's epistemology had created what Goethe regarded as an unsurmountable chasm between humanity and nature. Goethe insisted that the world as we perceive it through our senses can never be fully captured by abstract, calculable laws. He considered it "the greatest disaster of modern physics"—*das grösste Uebel der neuern Physik*—"that experiments and human experience had become separated, and that one seeks to recognize nature only in what the instruments show."

In this, Goethe sides with Shakespeare's Hamlet, who reminds his overly rational friend Horatio that "there are more things in Heaven and Earth … than are dreamt of in your philosophy." For Goethe, nature is so much more than what can be measured, more than the particles that can be detected by such contraptions as the Large Hadron Collider—today's gargantuan counterpart to Newton's prism. In one of the aphorisms collected in *Maximen und Reflexionen* (published in 1833, a year after his death), he returns once more to nature's incommensurability: "Everything that can be found within the subject is also in the object—and more. Everything that can be found within the object is also in the subject,—and more."

unknown draftsman after Goethe, *Heights of the Old and New World*, before 1813, watercolor
(Klassik Stiftung Weimar)

Goethe's need to visualize ideas explains why images played such a central role in his thinking. A telling example comes from his encounter with Alexander von Humboldt's *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen nebst einem Naturgemälde der Tropenländer*, a work that the famous explorer had dedicated to him. When the first German edition appeared in 1807, it did not yet include the plate illustrating the *Naturgemälde* that Humboldt described in the text. Goethe recalls this in his *Tag- und Jahreshefte* for that year:

"I rushed to study the work but realized that the map showing the mountain profile would only follow later. Impatiently, I undertook my own drawing that translated Humboldt's description into a visual impression. Once I had finished the right scale according to Humboldt's instructions, I contrasted it on the left side with the profile of the European elevations, thereby creating a symbolic landscape (*symbolische Landschaft*) that was quite pleasant to look at."



unknown printmaker after Goethe, *Höhen der alten und neuen Welt, bildlich vorgleichen*, 1813, aquatinta

The plate was only added in the 1808 publication, published slightly later the same year. It showed an elevation profile (*Profilkarte*) of the South American continent. Goethe, however, had gone further: by juxtaposing Europe (on the left) with South America (on the right), he had essentially created a comparative diagram that was both scientific and symbolic. He sent his drawing to Humboldt (it is now in the collection of the Deutsches Romantik Museum in Frankfurt, located adjacent to the Goethe Haus where the writer was born and had spent his youth) but kept a copy, which later served as the model for an aquatint that accompanied volume 41 of the *Allgemeine Geographische Ephemeriden*, published by Friedrich Justinus Bertuch in 1813.

Goethe proudly recalls that "the Industrie Comptoir published a reproduction of it with some accompanying texts," adding that it "was so popular that it was copied in Paris." **What we can offer here is a pristine impression of the French version of the image:**

unknown printmaker after Goethe and Bertuch, *Esquisse des principales hauteurs des deux continents*, 1813,
hand-colored outline etching on laid paper, 434 x 489 mm (17 1/16 x 19 1/8 inches)

It was published by the Paris "marchand d'estampes" Vilquin whose shop was in the Palais Royal. The dedication on the foreground rock—*Herrn Alexander v. Humboldt* in the Weimar version—now reads "Dédié à M.r de Humboldt par M.r de Gérbe."

Both Humboldt's and Goethe's landscape elevations exemplify what Alexander von Humboldt called *geognostische Landschaft* (geognostic landscape). These schematic yet comprehensive renderings condense the manifold features of a natural landscape into a single image of visual wholeness—an approach that resonates with Goethe's own conviction that a work of art should embody unity and totality.

Looking more closely, one notices intriguing differences between Goethe's original and the French adaptation. Both mark important South American cities located at high elevations, such as Mexico City and Quito. Goethe did not include any on European counterparts, while the French publisher inserted, of course, Paris—literally as the composition's base line in the lower left—along with Geneva and Madrid. What remains the same in all versions are the tiny figures added in the higher altitudes: atop Mont-Blanc there is Horace Bénédict de Saussure, the Genevan aristocrat and geologist who had offered a prize for reaching the summit. The feat was first achieved in 1786 by Jacques Balmat and Michel Gabriel Paccard, two men from the Chamonix valley. De Saussure made his own ascent only the following year, accompanied by a party of 18 guides and servants, thereby earning—somewhat disingenuously—the miniature portrait assigned to him by Goethe.

Humboldt, by contrast, claimed his place on the Chimborazo rightfully. In 1802, he reached the extraordinary altitude of 19,284 feet (5,878 meters) before being forced to turn back by altitude sickness. The only creature to circle above him is a majestic condor.

The only way surpass this in Europe was through the help of technology. High up in the air on the left one can therefore find Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac's hot-air balloon (*Lussacs Luftball*, or *aerostat* in the French version), commemorating Gay-Lussac's ascent of 1804. Driven by scientific curiosity, he collected air samples from more that 23,000 feet (over 7,000 meters) which he would later analyze together with Humboldt to see how the atmosphere's composition changes with altitude.

As my colleague Carlo Schmid remarked when describing the print, this detail could, in keeping with the prevailing discourse of the time, be read as a triumph of European science over nature in both the Old and the New World. The impact that the widespread application of technology would ultimately have on nature as a whole, however, was not something those early explorers could have dreamt of in their quests.