

# Travelling Back: revisiting 19th-century transfers between Munich and Brazil

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*Travelling Back* was an exhibition presented at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte between February and April 2024, offering a critical perspective on the narratives and collections brought from Brazil to Munich by Bavarian scientists Johann Baptist von Spix (1781–1826) and Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794–1868) in the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> My research on this topic was made possible through a fellowship at the Käthe Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect.

<sup>1</sup> I thank Ann-Katrin Fischer and Sophia Fischer for their invaluable support as curatorial assistants.

Fig. 1  
Felix Ehlers, *Travelling Back* (2024),  
Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte,  
Munich

The exhibition follows the scientists' extensive three-year journey across the Brazilian hinterland, including the Amazonian region, and raises crucial questions about the colonial underpinnings of the scientific pursuits of the natural-history project between Munich and Brazil in the 19th century. It examines the various displays and interpretations of Spix and Martius's collections from their arrival in Germany to the present, shedding light on the dis:connections in the production of knowledge behind these scientific endeavours. The aim is not only to explore the public reception of these experiences through a historical lens but also to engage in a critical examination through the perspectives of present-day dialogues and initiatives.

Here, we feature various chapters of the exhibition along with the documents, images, publications and artworks presented at the show.

## 1



In the 18th and 19th centuries, scientific expeditions were part of a global natural history project guided by a knowledge-making mission that was seemingly nobler than that of the colonial conquest. In pursuit of science and universal knowledge, the exploration of new territories, the naming of new species and the act of collecting became part of a classificatory rationale rooted in Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735).

In this context, the expedition of Johann Baptist von Spix and Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius to Brazil – commissioned by King Maximilian I Joseph of Bavaria (1756–1825) in association with the Austrian Empire – stands out as a key undertaking in European scientific exploration of South America. The desire to explore the biodiversity of the tropics was facilitated by the opening of

Fig. 2  
**Carl Friedrich Heinzmann. 'Vögel-Teich am Rio de S. Francisco'.** In *Atlas zur Reise in Brasilien*, Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, Munich: Lidauer, et al., 1823.



Brazilian ports in 1808, following the transfer of the Portuguese royal court to Rio de Janeiro. This pivotal event marked the end of Portugal's policy of limiting foreign scientists' access to its colony – a restriction that had notably hindered Alexander von Humboldt's plans to explore this region.

## 2



Spix and Martius arrived in Brazil through the port of Rio de Janeiro in July 1817. They spent about six months there, acclimatising and preparing for the subsequent stages of their expedition. In the first half of 1818, they embarked on a journey on foot and by mule, accompanied by a varying entourage, through the interior of Brazil from the southeast to the northwest. In later years, they reached and explored the vast Amazonian regions, where they encountered numerous indigenous groups, including the Juri,

Fig. 3  
Felix Ehlers, *Travelling Back* (2024)  
Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte,  
Munich.

Fig. 4  
'Map of Brazil showing 1817-20 route  
followed by Martius and Spix'. In  
*Flora Brasiliensis On-Line*, São Paulo:  
Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do  
Estado de São Paulo, 1820.



Fig. 5  
**E. Meyer, 'Trinkfest der Coroados',**  
 facsimile. In *Atlas zur Reise in Brasilien*  
 (1823-1831), by Carl Friedrich Philipp  
 von Martius, Munich: Bayerische  
 Staatsbibliothek

Fig. 6  
**Van der Velden. 'Tanz der Puris'. In**  
*Atlas zur Reise in Brasilien* (1823-1831),  
 by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius,  
 Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

Miranha and Tikuna peoples. From these communities, they collected artifacts and conducted detailed descriptions related to their physical characteristics, habits and languages.

### 3

During their years in Brazil, Spix and Martius periodically sent reports and various items to Munich to account for the Kingdom of Bavaria's investment in their expedition. Upon returning to Europe



in 1820, they focused on analysing and cataloguing their findings, which included numerous ethnographic objects, minerals, plants and animal species. These items are now part of the Bavarian state collections.

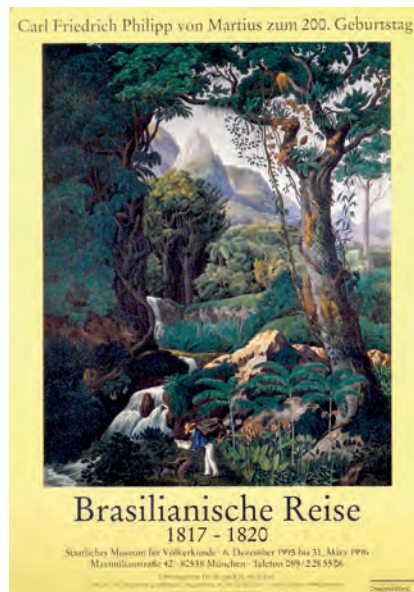
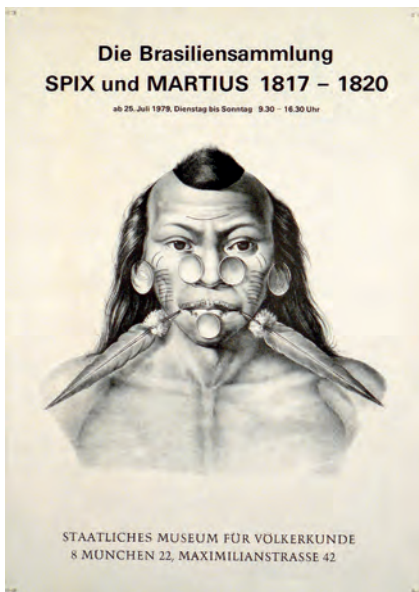


Fig. 7  
'Spix und Martius Ausstellung, Masken und Federschmuck'. In *Sammlung Fotografie & Schriften*, Munich: Museum Fünf Kontinente München, 1928.

Fig. 8  
'Unter Indianern Brasiliens', *Ausstellungsplakat*. In *Sammlung Fotografie & Schriften*, Munich: Museum Fünf Kontinente München, 1979.

Fig. 9  
'Brasilianische Reise, 1817-1820', *Ausstellungsplakat*. In *Sammlung Fotografie & Schriften*, Munich: Museum Fünf Kontinente München, 1995.

Publishing was a significant aspect of their work. One of their most renowned publications is the multi-volume series *Reise in Brasilien* (1823–1831). Historian Karen Macknow Lisboa notes that this work interweaves scientific discourse with a romantic perspective of nature, which was popular among German naturalists in the 19th century.<sup>2</sup> The book portrays an idealised vision of tropical nature,

2 Karen Macknow Lisboa, 'Da Expedição Científica à Ficcionalização da Viagem: Martius e seu romance indianista sobre o Brasil', *Acervo* 21, no. 1 (2011), <https://revista.arquivonacional.gov.br/index.php/revistacervo/article/view/91>.

which contrasts with a hierarchical perception of human societies. The text contains numerous passages in which indigenous people are described as inferior to Europeans. ‘The temperament of the Indian is almost wholly underdeveloped, and appears as phlegm’, they wrote in the first volume of *Reise in Brasilien*.<sup>3</sup>

Their work also resulted in several illustrated scientific publications. *Flora Brasiliensis* (1840–1906) is an example where Martius aimed to describe all known Brazilian flora up to that time. The first issue was published in 1840, and it took more than half a century to complete. Martius did not live to see the work’s completion and, after his passing, other botanists undertook the project. It is still used as a reference in contemporary botany.

#### 4



Fig. 10  
‘Ueber Brasilien’. *Eos. Zeitschrift zur Erheiterung und Belehrung* (Munich), 20 March 1821, 93.

3 Johann Baptist von Spix and Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, *Reise in Brasilien: auf Befehl Sr. Maj. Maximilian Joseph I. Königs von Baiern in d. J. 1817-20 gemacht*, vol. 1,1 (Munich: Lindauer, et al., 1823), 241. <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/details/bsb11212343>.



Following Spix and Martius's return to Munich in 1820, a significant aspect drew the attention of the local press: the presence of two indigenous children who had crossed the Atlantic with them. These children, named Isabella Miranha and Johann Juri, after their Christian baptism, were survivors from a group of six indigenes taken from Amazonia by the Bavarian scientists.

Early articles from 1820 generally depicted the children as wild and unresponsive. Descriptions of Miranha often emphasised her hair, likening it to a horse's to underscore her 'wild' origin. In contrast, Juri was described more positively, as a 'not unattractive boy with friendly eyes'. These physical depictions often influenced the interpretations of their behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Juri was characterised as

4 Maria de Fátima Costa, 'Os 'meninos índios' que Spix e Martius levaram a Munique', *Artelogie. Recherche sur les arts, le patrimoine et la littérature de l'Amérique latine* 14 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/artelogie.3774>. <https://doi.org/10.4000/artelogie.3774>.

Fig. 11  
**Johann Baptist Stiglmaier. Grabrelief der Kinder Juri und Miranha. c. 1824. Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Angewandte Kunst. Photo by Sabrina Moura.**

good and calm, while Miranha was considered unkind and cold. As time passed, these accounts began to change. For example, when the girl started playing with dolls or sewing, the press noted these as adaptations to European education and habits. However, this didn't last long. Shortly after arriving in Munich, Miranha and Juri passed away. The boy succumbed to a long and painful pulmonary illness in 1821, and the girl followed a year later. Newspapers report that even after his passing, Juri remained of interest for scientific research, as evidenced by the creation of a wax impression of his head.<sup>5</sup>

A posthumous tribute to the children was undertaken by the Queen Karoline of Bavaria, who commissioned the Bavarian artist Johann Baptist Stiglmaier (1791–1844) to create a bronze mortuary stele to adorn their tomb at Munich's Old South Cemetery. The stele was removed from the cemetery and is now possessed by the Münchner Stadtmuseum.

The practice of bringing indigenous individuals to Europe for scientific scrutiny dates back to the 16th century. Ethnographer Christian Feest notes that in the 1820s, at least seven Indigenous individuals from Brazil were living in Europe, either in imperial or noble households or displayed to the public, with only one returning to Brazil.<sup>6</sup> The remains of at least three became part of museum collections.

## 5



The images in Spix and Martius's books were created before the invention of photography in 1826 and, like many illustrations in travel accounts, went through several layers of interpretation before being made available to the public. Their initial sketches,

Fig. 12  
Felix Ehlers, *Travelling Back* (2024)  
Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte,  
Munich.

5 Klaus Schönitzer, 'From the New World to the Old World', *Journal Fünf Kontinente: Forum für ethnologische Forschung* 1 (2014).

6 Christian Feest, 'Botocudos in Europe in the 1820s', (2022), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29215.43686>.



whether created on-site or later, were subject to successive re-readings as they were prepared for publication by 19th-century engravers.

In the following centuries, these images entered the public domain and gained wide circulation, appearing in exhibitions and on the internet. To better understand them, it is essential to acknowledge the multiple lives and contexts that these images traversed. Portraits, such as those of Miranha, Juri and other indigenous people featured in *Reise in Brasilien*, shed light on the pictorial conventions that guided ethnographic representations in travel accounts. These portraits also highlight the frequently stereotyped perceptions of indigenous peoples prevailing in European society.

The disparities between the drawings contained in the Martusiana archives at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, created in 1821, and the final versions subsequently published in the *Reise in Brasilien* atlas serve as a poignant reminder that images, much like texts, are discursive constructs heavily influenced by perception, interpretation, language and the techniques available at the time of their creation.

## 6



The encounter with the portraits of Isabella Miranha and Johann Juri at an exhibition in São Paulo is a pivotal moment in the novel *O Som do Rugido da Onça* (2021), authored by Brazilian writer Micheline Verunsch. This scene depicts a significant instance when one of the book's main characters, Josefa, enters an exhibition room and is met with the gaze of the two indigenous children represented in the portraits. They appear to be looking at her with an eerie sense of life.

Verunsch's narrative skilfully intertwines Josefa's contemporary experiences with the historical past of Juri and Miranha, particularly imagining the inner life of Isabella Miranha, referred to

Fig. 13  
'Miranha'. In *Atlas zur Reise in Brasilien* (1823-1831), by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

Fig. 14  
'Juri'. In *Atlas zur Reise in Brasilien* (1823-1831), by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

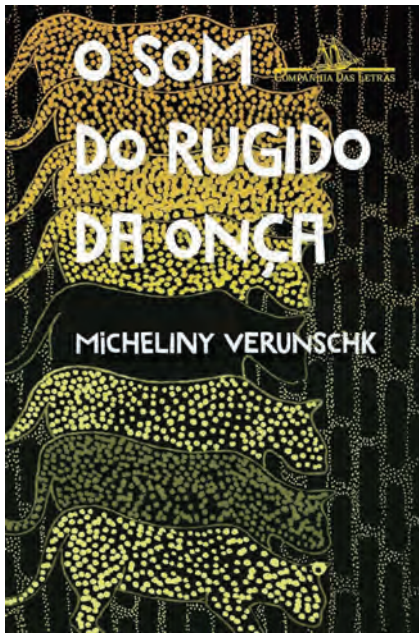


Fig. 15  
Cover of Verunschik, Micheliny. *O Som do Rurgido da Onça* São Paulo: Cia das Letras 2021.

Fig. 16  
Gê Viana. *Isabel Miranha*. 2020.  
digital collage,

as lñe-ê in the novel. Through her fiction, the author offers readers a unique perspective, allowing them to explore how imagination and speculation – or ‘critical fabulation’ in the words of Saidiya Hartman – can breathe life into a story that, despite being the subject of discussions and numerous publications, remains noticeably absent from public spaces of memory.

Fiction has also been a means for other authors to grapple with these experiences, as evidenced by the work of writer Henrike Leonhardt *Unerbittlich des Nordens rauher Winter* (1987) and by Carl Friedrich von Martius himself, who, in 1831, wrote *Frey Apollonio: Roman aus Brasilien* (1992). Published more than a century later, this novel blends first-person and third-person narration to recount the story of the young scientist Hartoman, who serves as Martius’s alter ego.<sup>7</sup>

## 7

Verunschik’s writing engages in a dialogue with two significant works in this exhibition: *Isabela People* (2020) by Gê Viana and *Urban Bodies*, Munich (2023) by Yolanda Gutierrez. These pieces employ visual intervention and performance as powerful tools to reveal new presences of Juri and Miranha in the contemporary landscape of Munich. Their artistic approaches delve deep into the possibilities of reimagining the existence of these figures in the present, allowing for the emergence of alternative memories and rewriting their histories.

The artist Frauke Zabel’s practice revolves around the counter-narratives that emerge through the mapping of various locations in the city, where she traces collections, historical sites and tributes dedicated to Spix and Martius in Munich’s public spaces. In her piece for this exhibition, entitled *the palm trees grouping themselves as follows:* (2023), she investigates Martius’s studies on palm trees, forming her own collection of evidence to narrate the history of these plants as research subjects. Zabel’s collection examines the symbolism, exoticisation, profitability and knowledge production related to palm trees in colonial and neo-colonial contexts.

Elaine Pessoa, through her work *Exploratorius* (2023), questions the future of images in what she terms the ‘colonialism of data’. Pessoa interacts with the drawings, diaries and visual documents that constitute the scientific accounts of Spix and Martius’s travels. Through a series of experiments with artificial intelligence and manual artistic interventions, including staining, painting and scarring, she reinterprets representations of Brazilian tropical landscapes, jungles, forests and biomes.

<sup>7</sup> Lisboa, ‘Da Expedição Científica’.



Fig. 17  
**Frauke Zabel. *die Palmen sich wie folgt gruppieren:* . 2023. mixed media.**

Fig. 18  
**Elaine Pessoa. *Exploratorius.* 2023. mixed media.**

Fig. 19  
**Igor Vidor. *Travels in Brazil: Spix, Martius and Blanka, #1.* 2022. digital collage.**

Furthermore, artist Igor Vidor adds a unique dimension to this artistic dialogue by digitally intervening in the images of the *Reise in Brasilien* atlas. He integrates the character Blanka from

the video game *Street Fighter* into the landscapes originally documented by Spix and Martius. Blanka, a green-skinned mutant boy who finds himself in the Amazon after a plane crash, undergoes a significant transformation due to contact with plant chlorophyll, which explains his appearance and abilities. In Vidor's work, Blanka becomes an unexpected visitor, disrupting the narrative of the Bavarian explorers by adding elements of fantasy and surrealism to their depicted reality.

## 8



Beyond the exhibition space, discussions about *Travelling Back* have expanded into a series of debates and media coverage that are crucial for understanding how the expedition is perceived today, both in academic circles and among the general audience, as exemplified by the opening conference on 9 February 2024. It featured artists Frauke Zabel and Yolanda Gutiérrez, alongside writer Micheline Verunschik and historian Karen Macknow Lisboa. Each speaker related the points of departure – visual arts, history and literature – that led them to explore Spix and Martius's travels to Brazil and their implications for contemporary public discourse.

While their works engage with aspects that are often uncomfortable for those seeking to preserve the legacy and reputation of the Bavarian scientists, it is important to distance these critical views from political attacks on historical biographies. Rather, they seek to highlight colonial dimensions in the history of the natural sciences, prompting discussions beyond simplistic narratives that overlook the complexities of knowledge produced from such experiences.

Fig. 20  
**Frauke Zabel speaks at the opening conference of the exhibition *Travelling Back* (February 2024), Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich. Photo: Sabrina Moura**



Thus, a critical history of science, in dialogue with the arts, intersects with the politics of memory. It underscores that history is a field for contestation, that should challenge the pitfalls of homogeneous temporal linearity and single narrators. *Travelling Back* attempted to escape these risks by portraying Spix and Martius as just two among many other narrators of this Bavarian-led journey through the hinterlands of Brazil.

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Fig. 21  
Micheliny Verunshk, Yolanda Gutiérrez and Karen Macknow Lisboa at the location of ancient tomb of Iuri and Miranha at the Munich Old South Cemetery (February 2024). Photo: Sabrina Moura