Albert Frisch was a pioneering photographer, yet remains relatively unknown to this day. He died in Berlin on 30 May 1918 during the First World War and his passing went virtually unnoticed at first. It would be several weeks before the photochemist Adolf Miethe recalled the services of his deceased colleague, who even then was only known as a reprography specialist in expert circles. In his obituary, Miethe described how Frisch “spent part of his life in the tropics and carried out the most outstanding studies of vegetation at a time before the invention of dry plates and when other photographic devices were simplistic to say the least” (Miethe 1918: 51). However, Frisch not only produced vegetation studies in the tropics. During a photographic expedition in the Upper Amazon lasting many months, he took over 120 photographs of fauna and flora, the local population and their settlements.

After falling into obscurity for a number of years, several of the photographs from the Amazon were rediscovered by Brazilian photography historians in the 1970s. They did not, however, manage to establish the identity of the photographer, who had merely signed the images “A. Frisch”, nor did they determine the context in which they were taken and the total number of pictures sold by the Swiss art dealer Georg Leuzinger (1813-1892), who was based in Rio de Janeiro. Nevertheless, Frisch was viewed as the first successful expedition photographer in the region. The images he captured in 1867 and 1868 earned him the status of a pioneer of photography in Brazil and, above all, the Amazon region (Ferrez/Naef 1976: 76). He was seen as a forerunner of anthropological photography for his portrait photographs of the indigenous population of the Amazon, even though there are very differing views on the scientific value of his images, which were clearly staged and often manipulated using photomontage techniques (Ferrez 1990; Vasquez 2000; Kossoy 2002; Kümin 2007). However, the pictures, which were sold in Rio de Janeiro from 1869, are undoubtedly the first photographs of the largely unknown western part of Brazil’s Amazon Basin and its people, flora and fauna to be seen the world over.

Albert Frisch

Albert Christoph Frisch was born on 31 May 1840 in Augsburg. Following the early death of his mother, he grew up in an orphanage in the provinces of Middle Franconia, where he initially trained and worked as a confectioner (Kohl 2005, 2006 and 2012). At the end of the 1850s, he moved to the Bavarian capital Munich and tried his hand at art dealing. With the support of his employer at that time, he completed an internship at a renowned lithography workshop in Paris, where he hit upon the idea of selling colorful printed images featuring religious motifs in South America. Frisch travelled to the Argentinian capital Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 1860s, but failed to realize his business idea and initially eked out a living as a private tutor and manager for a German livestock breeder in the Pampas before returning to Buenos Aires in 1863. It was here that 23-year-old Frisch embarked on his career as a photographer. After a chance meeting in a tavern, a German photographer recommended Frisch to
“Caixanas. A peaceful ethnic group with a very pale complexion.” (1868)
his employer, the American Arthur Terry, who ran a studio where a position had recently become vacant. The inexperienced but clearly talented Albert Frisch received his training and was given his first job in Terry’s renowned portrait studio, where the high society of Buenos Aires came to be photographed. After just a few months as a photographer, he was dispatched to neighboring Paraguay to set up a photo studio in the capital Asunción at the personal request of the dictator Solano Lopez (1827-1870). However, following the outbreak of war between Paraguay and its three neighbors Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil in 1864, Frisch soon had to leave the country and made his way to Brazil’s capital Rio de Janeiro, where he continued his career at the Officina Photographica, run by Swiss businessman Georg Leuzinger. Leuzinger, who managed a company that made bookkeeping items and graphic art products, made his first forays into the picture trade in the 1840s when he began manufacturing and selling lithographic prints. In 1865 he set up a division within his company that specialized in photographing views of cities and landscapes and appointed Albert Frisch as in-house photographer. Up until his return to Germany in 1870, Frisch mainly photographed cityscapes in Rio de Janeiro and the tropical flora in the surrounding areas. Frisch’s body of work, which was sold by Leuzinger, included carefully composed individual shots and panoramic montages consisting of numerous images.

In October 1867, the Brazilian government commissioned Leuzinger’s son-in-law, Franz Keller-Leuzinger, to embark on a surveying expedition of the Rio Madeira, one of the Amazon’s most important tributaries. Leuzinger used the opportunity to dispatch Frisch on a photographic expedition of the Amazon region. While Keller-Leuzinger and his team set off down the Rio Madeira after a long stop in Manaus, Frisch travelled to the Upper Amazon as far as the Brazilian military outpost Tabatinga, where he began his photographic expedition.

On a rowboat, accompanied by two indigenous rowers, Frisch covered a route of some 1,600 kilometers back to Manaus. The expedition lasted five months and Frisch produced over 120 glass-plate negatives, which he developed into a series of 98 images after returning to Rio de Janeiro. The series was marketed by Georg Leuzinger from 1869 under the French title “Resultat d’une Expédition Photographique sur le Solimões ou Alto Amazonas et Rio Negro” (Andrade 2007; Kohl 2012).

Frisch returned to Germany in 1870 and continued his training under Joseph Albert, the inventor of the colotype process. At Albert’s workshop he learned the most modern photo-mechanical reproduction technique of the time. He was subsequently employed by Albert and continued his career as a photographer in the U.S. However, on his return to Germany in 1872, he set up his own business. In 1874 Frisch collaborated for a short period with the photographer Johannes Nöhring from Lübeck, before moving to Berlin in 1875 and opening the “Kunstanstalt Albert Frisch”, which specialized in producing premium quality, photo-mechanical reproductions. The workshop worked in various capacities for the numerous collections, libraries and museums in the Prussian metropolis and Frisch’s son – also named Albert – carried on the business after his father’s death (Frisch 1925).

Albert Frisch was already 23 years old when he left his original profession to try his hand at photography in Argentina. He went on to have an unparalleled career, working in four different capital cities and becoming the first person to complete a successful photographic expedition on the Amazon.
“Malocca. Dwelling of wild indigenous people from the Ticuna tribe.” (1868)
The first photographs of the Upper Amazon

Between 1867 and 1868 Albert Frisch produced over 120 negatives on his expedition through the Upper Amazon region (Kohl 2012). This is an extraordinary, ground-breaking achievement if only from a logistical and technical perspective. Frisch worked with the collodion process, which had been developed in 1851. It involved preparing the glass plate negatives in darkroom conditions immediately before the shot was taken and then exposing and developing the images while the plates were still wet. This meant that it was absolutely essential to have a portable photo laboratory, consisting of a darkroom and an extensive arsenal of photographic chemicals, bowls and working utensils. Together with the heavy photo equipment and the fragile glass negatives, all this was transported on the rowing boat along the Amazon during the expedition and throughout the entire 10,000 kilometer journey from Rio de Janeiro to Tabatinga and back, without suffering any damage. Frisch also managed to develop his own photochemical formulas suited to the light-sensitive coating and processing of the glass negatives, which enabled him to take excellent photographs in the humid climate of the Amazonian lowlands.

Another striking feature of the entire series of negatives produced by Frisch is the incredibly wide range of themes and motifs. These transform his images into a historical photo-reportage which, even today, provides valuable insight on the European perspective of the Upper Amazon region at the start of the last third of the 19th century.

The first major theme in Frisch’s series focuses on the inhabitants of the Upper Amazon. As well as shooting images of the four different ethnic groups he referred to as “wild” (Ticuna, Miranha, Caixana, Umpqua), Frisch also took photographs of “half-civilized indigenous people” and the hybrid population known as the “Tapuyas”. On the one hand, he took carefully staged portraits of these people, either with weapons and body jewelry or with their everyday working implements. On the other hand, he photographed individual huts or village settlements, thus always documenting his subject’s immediate living environment.

A second major motif are the fauna and flora of the Upper Amazon, i.e. the natural resources of the tropical rainforest. He photographed river species such as Amazon crocodiles, giant pirarucu fish or sea cows and always did so from two different angles to produce a detailed study of his subjects. In his numerous pictures of palms, shrubs and trees, which also have the air of portrait studies, Frisch removes elements that disrupt the image or skillfully positions the camera angle with the aim of detaching the plants from their environment.

The third major motif of the Amazon photographs can be described as “modern infrastructure” or “civilization”. It comprises shots of the provincial capital, Manaus, and other smaller towns and villages, which also map out the stops of the steamship liner that travelled along the Upper Amazon River. The image of a group of Bolivian rowers boarding their boat in the port of Manaus while a small steamship goes past in the background not only gives a glimpse of the facilities of the port in the largest city at the center of the Amazon basin, but also documents Brazil’s trading links to neighboring Bolivia.

Before being sold in Leuzinger’s workshop in Rio de Janeiro, 98 images were selected, edited and given short, descriptive captions. The portrait shots of the “wild” indigenous people underwent a particular transformation, involving an elaborate process to replace the blurred backdrops of the original pictures with sharp background
“Jacaré. Amazon crocodile on a sandbank of the Rio Solimões.” (1868)
images. In some cases, the painstakingly manipulated elements of these “combination photographs” (Kümin 2007: 78) are barely noticeable.

The anthropological and ethnological images clearly had great appeal, if one takes the number of photographs housed in various collections and archives as an indication of popularity. The shots of flora and fauna, however, feature less frequently, and the views of towns and cities, hardly at all. The huge level of interest in Frisch’s anthropological photographs was directly linked to the emergence of the field of ethnology in the last third of the 19th century. Albert Frisch himself undoubtedly also played a significant role in the distribution of his images: when the reprography specialist moved to Berlin, the center of German-speaking ethnology in the 19th century, he sold prints of his pictures from the Amazon series. The collection of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI), comprising 24 shots of the Amazon, is part of the papers and manuscripts of German anthropologist Paul Ehrenreich (1855-1914), who was probably given these pictures by Frisch himself. The 37 prints that have been identified as Albert Frisch’s work in the Ethnological Museum of Berlin are also from the papers and manuscripts of collectors and institutions that Frisch personally supplied with photographs. By contrast, the 65 pictures of the Amazon by Frisch in the papers and manuscripts of researcher Alphons Stübel, which are housed at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography in Leipzig, and the 98 prints archived at the World Museum in Vienna were acquired from Leuzinger, Frisch’s employer in Rio de Janeiro.

Numerous scientific and popular science publications in the fields of regional geography and ethnology from the late 19th century feature illustrations which are based on Frisch’s images of the Amazon, yet they do not credit the man who pioneered Amazon photography.

It can only be hoped that raising the profile of the series of Amazon photographs and the biography of their author will initiate a new debate on the various players involved in the processes of production and distribution, which will take a more detailed look at the role of “commercial photographers”. Frisch’s images of the Amazon also provide extensive visual source material for researchers to analyze how scientists and publicists in the late 19th century made use of photographs of the tropics.

1 Until recently, little was known about the biography and influence of Albert Frisch, the first person to successfully capture the Amazon on film.
2 The War of the Triple Alliance, 1864-1870.
3 See the essay by Paul Hempel in this volume for more details on Paul Ehrenreich.
4 The 98 prints have been mounted on the original cardboard, complete with captions in French by Leuzinger’s atelier, and are bound together in an album entitled “Amazon”.

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“Popunha. Very rare palm trees without spikes, near Rio Jutahi.” (1868)
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“Bolivian rowers boarding their boat in the port of Manãos.” (1868)