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Instituto Hercule Florence

Hercule Florence

AUTORRETRATO 1804-1879

New documentary reconstructs the journey of the visionary inventor who captured light in the interior of Brazil in the 19th century

Before photography established itself as one of the great inventions of modernity, Hercule Florence (1804–1879) was already seeking a way to capture images through the action of light. At the age of 20, the European artist and inventor left the Old World and came to Brazil, where he would take part in the celebrated Langsdorff Expedition and, years later, develop pioneering experiments in image reproduction in the interior of São Paulo.

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The first documentary dedicated to the journey of this restless inventor, Hercule Florence, Self-Portrait 1804-1879 held its first screening on October 14, 2026, at the Rainier III Auditorium in Monaco, at the invitation of the Principality. Directed by Jorge Pelicano, with a screenplay by Flávia Castro, editing by Laís Lifschitz and Eduardo Escorel, starring Hélder Afonso (Hercule Florence), and narration by Maurice Durozier (Théâtre du Soleil), the film follows Florence's life and investigates his relentless pursuit of a photographic process.

The documentary is structured like an exhibition: the viewer moves through a space where Florence guides the narrative through his own diaries, while drawings, manuscripts, and photographs appear before their eyes, creating a path through his life and research. The screenplay was built entirely upon these writings — a rare body of work in which Florence recorded not only his experiments and ideas, but also his feelings and anxieties about life. It is through this intimate voice that the film allows us to know the inventor from within, in all his complexity and poetry.

A SCIENTIFIC ADVENTURE IN THE INTERIOR OF BRAZIL

Far from the main scientific circles of his time and working without the structure of a laboratory, Florence developed, in the interior of Brazil, a series of experiments with image reproduction processes. In 1833, he succeeded in capturing an image through the action of light — and then developed processes to fix it, using substances such as urine, ammonia, and water. During this same period, he employed the term “photographie” to describe the process, six years before Daguerre’s announcement in Paris.

Through interviews with international experts, manuscripts, drawings, and other original documents, the film reconstructs the stages of this research and also reveals other inventions by Florence, including polygraphy, a printing technique he developed in Brazil, and zoophony, a system created to record the sounds of animals, considered a precursor to studies that would later constitute the field of bioacoustics.

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NEW MATERIAL EVIDENCE

The documentary features previously unseen images from recent scientific research conducted by institutions from three countries: the Getty Conservation Institute (USA), the HERCULES Laboratory of the University of Évora (Portugal), the Instituto Hercule Florence, and the Instituto Moreira Salles (Brazil).

The analyses identified the pioneering use of gold and silver in the images produced by Florence in 1833, bringing new material evidence to the study of his photographic experiments. Laboratory reconstructions of the processes described by Florence demonstrated the effectiveness of ammonia as a fixing agent. Furthermore, Florence was the first to employ the term “photographie” to describe the process. Among the objects examined are two pharmacy labels and a Masonic diploma, which are among the oldest photographic images in the Americas.

The research results were presented in September 2026 at the 21st ICOM-CC Triennial Conference in Oslo by Art Kaplan of the Getty Conservation Institute.

Almost two centuries after Florence’s first experiments with light, documents, research, and new investigations continue to expand our knowledge of his work and to place his contribution in the context of the different experiments that marked the emergence of photography in the 19th century.

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PRESS COVERAGE

The documentary and the scientific recognition of Hercule Florence's work are already making headlines in the European press. Check out some of the main articles published

LA GAZETTE DE MONACO

Hercule Florence à l'honneur du bicentenaire de la photographie à Monaco | Content in French

AD ASTRA JOURNAL

Hercule Florence: The forgotten pioneer of photography and the mystery in Russia's archives

CREDITS

TITLE Hercule Florence, autorretrato 1804-1879
GENRE Documentary
DURATION 73 minutes
COUNTRY Brazil / Portugal
DIRECTION Jorge Pelicano
SCREENPLAY Flávia Castro
PRODUCTION Antonio Florence
EXECUTIVE PRODUCTION Mônica Guimarães
GENERAL PRODUCTION Adriana Norte and Camila Roque
EDITING Laís Lifschitz and Eduardo Escorel
NARRATION Maurice Durozier
CINEMATOGRAPHY João Pedro Plácido
ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK Pedro Leal David
CAST Hélder Afonso (Hercule Florence)
PRODUCTION Instituto Hercule Florence

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