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Author

Balslev, Henrik

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book review

The palm book

The Book of Palms, by Carl Friedrich Phillip von Martius [a reprint of the 240 illustrations from C. F. P. von Martius' *Historia Naturalis Palmarum*, published in installments between 1823 and 1850, with an introduction by H. Walter Lack]

2009, Taschen, 442 pp. ISBN: 978-3-8365-1779-9

Price: £99.99 (Hardback); <http://www.taschen.com/>

This is a magnificent reprint of one of the most influential books in the botanical literature, Martius' *Historia Naturalis Palmarum*, famed for its scientific accuracy and aesthetic qualities. Carl Friedrich Phillip von Martius (1795–1868) was an assistant at the Royal Bavarian Academy of Sciences when in 1817, aged 22, he was asked by Maximilian I Joseph, King of Bavaria, to join an expedition that was sent to Brazil by Franz I, Emperor of Austria. The expedition was held on the occasion of the marriage of Franz I's daughter Leopoldine to Dom Pedro, eldest son of Joao VI, King of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarve. The wedding was celebrated in Vienna on 13th May 1817, but later confirmed in Rio de Janeiro, and the 13-man natural history expedition was organized to foster relationships and increase trade between Brazil and the European kingdoms with interest in these new frontiers. The celebration in Rio was held on 6 November 1817, and following that, Martius and his zoological companion Johan Baptiste Spix set out on a 2200 km long journey to the interior of Brazil. During the journey they amassed large quantities of natural history specimens, and when Martius returned to Munich on 8th December 1820, almost four years had passed. Martius and Spix had brought back considerable collections of rocks and minerals, 350 species of birds, 130 amphibians, 116 fish, 2700 insects, 80 arachnids, 50 crustaceans and 6500 plants. The other members of the expedition had returned similar quantities to Vienna and other European museums.

Apparently being a natural historian and collector at that time was something important to the political powers. King Maximilian I Joseph made Martius and Spix Knights of the Order of Merit of the Bavarian Crown. Aged 26 Martius was elected a full member of the Royal Bavarian Academy of Sciences. At age 31 in 1826 Ludvig I, King

of Bavaria, made Martius full professor at the University of Landshut. In 1832 he became senior curator of the Botanical Institute, and in 1840 he was elected secretary of the Mathematics and Science section of the Royal Bavarian Academy of Sciences, a post which he had until his death in 1868.

From this background it is perhaps easier to understand how Martius could publish such a magnificent work on his collections from Brazil. Actually he worked on three large book projects simultaneously. One was a general account of the expedition which was published as *Reise in Brasilien in den Jahren 1817–1820* and published 1823–1831. The other was *Nova genera et species plantarum quas in itinere per Brasilian annis 1817–1820 --- suscepto colegit et descripsit*, published 1823–1826, which was a technical description of all the plants – except palms – that Martius had collected during his travels. Finally the third book project that Martius embarked on during his tenure at the Bavaria academic establishment was *Historia naturalis palmarum*, the illustrations of which are featured in the book reviewed here.

The finished version of *Historia naturalis palmarum* was made up of three volumes. But the volumes did not appear chronologically. Instead they were released in fascicles at irregular intervals. The first fascicles to appear in 1823 were from volume 2 on the American palms, and this volume was completed in 1837. This was followed by volume 3 which was completed in 1853. Volume 1 began to appear in 1831 and was completed in 1853. The publication was printed at the author's expense, and to finance that, Martius had secured that it could be sold through subscription. Those who subscribed appear on a page in the 2nd volume and include several central European royalties, and some of the famous cultural leaders

of the time, such as Goethe, who in his writing commended Martius for his contribution to humankind's understanding of the beauty of nature. The first volume is a general introduction to the palm family including sections on the structure of palms written by Hugo Mohl, a colleague to Martius at the University of Tübingen, a section on palm fossils written by Franz Unger from the University of Graz, and sections on morphology and biogeography of palms, written by Martius himself. The first volume is illustrated with 53 plates that are so detailed and precisely produced that they may serve as study objects even today. For the readers of *Frontiers of Biogeography* a World map showing the distribution and density of palm over all tropical regions may be the most interesting part. The patterns and densities shown are much in line with modern understanding, though some regions, such as the interior of Africa are white on the map, which is not surprising considering that they had not been explored at the time in the early 19th century. There are also two plates showing the New and Old Worlds, respectively, indicating the phytogeographic regions, called Imperia Floræ.

The second volume describes and illustrates palm species found only in the New World (the Americas). It includes 97 plates that either show a whole palm individual, a detail of leaves and/or reproductive structure as seen in herbarium specimens, and some landscapes that show palms in their natural habitat. These drawings are all made by Martius himself. The detail, again, is incredible and exceptionally true to what palms look like in reality.

The third volume covers palms from the Old World plus a few additional ones from the New World. The illustrations here are copied from other works on palms, but they stand out with the same beauty and accuracy as the ones illustrating the New World palms.

This book is truly breathtaking. Looking through the fantastic plates gives one the same feeling as when pressing palm specimens in the field. The structural diversity and complexity of the plants and their organs stand out and become lively in front of the reader. It is art and natural history in a splendid combination. The illustrations can be used for identifying specimens of palms without any limitation at the same time as they provide the special pleasure of seeing and disentangling the details of nature. The plates come with the original naming of the specimens that Martius provided, but for each plate the editor has generously updated the naming so all illustrations come with their modern and accepted names.

The introduction by H. Walter Lack of the Berlin Botanical Garden is nicely written and provides a thorough understanding of how this book came to exist in the first half of the 19th century. The introduction provides a wealth of detailed facts (some of which are presented above) that place the book in a historical context which enhances the pleasure of using it. The technical quality of this reprint is of a very high standard; the colouring appears to be entirely natural, the paper quality is superb with a half mat surface which make the lithographs stand out in their crisp splendour. The Taschen Book and the author of the introduction are to be congratulated on this splendid production, which comes at a very reasonable price.

Henrik Balslev

Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Denmark.

e-mail: henrik.balslev@biology.au.dk; <http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/henrik.balslev@biology.au.dk>

Edited by Markus Eichhorn