

## BOOK REVIEW

CARL FRIEDRICH PHILIPP VON MARTIUS AND TEXT BY H. WALTER LACK. 2009. **The Book of Palms**. (ISBN 978-3-8365-1779-9, hbk.). Taschen GmbH, Hohenzollernring 53, D-50672 Köln, Germany. (**Orders:** www.taschen.com, contact@taschen.com, +49-221-20-18-00). \$150.00, 412 pp., color illustrations, line illustrations, 12½" x 17½".

When I picked up the book to begin reviewing it I was amazed not just because of its size and weight, but also because of the quality of the production and illustrations. This large format book, over a foot by a foot and a half, is a reproduction of Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius's magnificent 19th century botanical study of palm trees; *Historia naturalis palmarum: opus tripartitum* (Natural History of Palms: a work in three volumes), published between 1823–1853. This book was the first modern classification of palms, including the first maps of palm biogeography and which described all the palms of Brazil, and collated the sum of all then-current knowledge of the palm family. TASCHEN has reproduced this book and Martius's incredibly illustrated plates from a copy of his original work. The text was authored by H. Walter Lack.

"On 15 December 1868, Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794–1868), Professor of Botany at the University of Munich and director of the Royal Botanic Garden, was carried to his grave in a coffin covered with fresh palm leaves. These were a reference to his groundbreaking *Historia naturalis palmarum: opus tripartitum*. At the time, this encyclopedic treasury contained the sum of human knowledge on the topic, and included 240 exquisite chromolithographic illustrations, including landscape views of palm habitats and botanical dissections. This epic folio was based on Martius's expedition to Brazil and Peru with zoologist Johann Baptist von Spix, sponsored by King Maximilian I of Bavaria, to investigate natural history and tribal Indians. From 1817 to 1820 the pair travelled over 2,250 km (1,400 miles) throughout the Amazon Basin, the most species-rich palm region in the world, collecting and sketching specimens. On their return both men were awarded knighthoods and lifetime pensions.

In his epic work, Martius outlined the modern classification of palm, produced the first maps of palm biogeography, described all the palms of Brazil, and collated the sum of all known genera of the palm family. For apart from his own collection of specimens and notes, Martius also wrote about the findings of others. Martius's folio is unusual in its inclusion of cross-sectioned diagrams, conveying the architecture of these mighty trees, which central Europeans would have found hard to imagine accurately. Equally remarkable are the color landscapes showing various palms – often standing alone – which have a simple and elegant beauty. This famous work is an unrivaled landmark in botanic illustration and taxonomy."

The history of the book is interesting in itself but you need to see the illustrations to appreciate the full scope of this publication. Three of the illustrations fold out to nearly four times the dimensions of the book itself—24 x 33 ½ in. They are simply awesome in their size and detail. And did I mention intensity of the color? This is a publishing event and a labor of love from TASCHEN. I applaud their dedication to the size and scope of the original and the decisions they made during the production of this magnificent volume.

Prof. Dr. H. Walter Lack is Director at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem and Professor at the Free University of Berlin. A leading expert in the history of botany, his research interests focus in particular upon the consequences of the global transfer of useful and ornamental plants from the point of view of our cultural history. He has also authored *The Flora Graeca Story*, Oxford 1998, *A Garden of Eternity*, Berne 2000, *Garden Eden*, Köln 2001 and most recently *Florilegium Imperiale*, Munich 2006.—Gary Jennings, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, 1700 University Drive, Fort Worth, Texas 76107-3400, U.S.A.