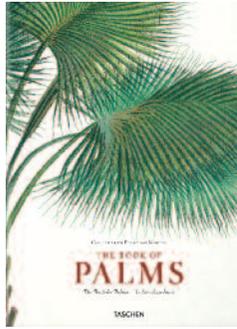


PALM LITERATURE

MARTIUS, BOOK OF PALMS. H.-W. Lack. Taschen, Germany. 2010. ISBN: 978-3-8365-1779-9. Price \$150.00. Hardcover. Pp. 442. Multilingual: English, German, French.



Martius, Book of Palms is a breathtaking book. It is a reprint of the plates from what was the most influential palm book of the 19th century, Carl von Martius' *Historia Naturalis Palmarum* (Natural History of Palms), a three-volume folio work published in ten parts from 1823 to 1853. In those volumes, Martius summarized everything that was known of the palm family, a group of plants that symbolized the romanticized tropical world that was succumbing to European colonial expansion. Martius' work tamed the palm family in much the same ways that Europe was "conquering" the Tropics. The large size of the original books allowed the illustrations to be presented at their best, but more importantly, it gave gravitas and a strong sense of irrefutability to the work.

Historia Naturalis Palmarum was inspired by Martius' expedition to Brazil and Peru, sponsored by King Maximilian I of Bavaria. In 1817, at the age of 22, Martius set out on a trip that was to define his life's work. He travelled throughout the Amazon Basin, collecting and sketching specimens, and making observations on the use of palms by the indigenous people. Upon his return in 1820, he immediately set about writing his *magnum opus*. His work was not, however, limited to South American palms; Martius wrote about the world's palms, through his own study of museum collections and published works by his predecessors and contemporaries. The scope of these three volumes was truly encyclopedic.

My first impression of *Martius, Book of Palms* was of its size (31.4 × 43.5 cm [12.4 × 17.1 in.]). This is a big, commanding book packaged in a cleverly designed presentation box. As I hefted the book out of its box and began leafing through the sturdy pages, I immediately appreciated that this book is as much a work of art as are the illustrations on its pages.

Taschen is a publisher that has made a name for itself by producing elegant art books. The new book is a compilation of the plates (but not the text) from Martius' original work, reproducing the 240 hand-colored lithographs, including charming landscape views, along with technical illustrations and dissections of flowers and fruits (Figs. 1 & 2). There are even entire plates showing the different scale patterns on fruits of *Calamus* and its kin, as well as plates of palm fossils and anatomical sections. The detail is astounding and so faithfully accurate that the illustrations are still used by botanists to identify species. Each plate is reproduced with the original title (from a pristine copy held by the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn), but opposite each plate, the modern nomenclature is provided, revised according to Kew's World Checklist. Thus, the reader can see the work as it was originally published, along with the modern context of a 21st century understanding of palm taxonomy. Many of the palm genera have changed, but most of the species remain. A scanned copy of Martius' work is freely available on-line at the Biodiversity Heritage Library, www.biodiversitylibrary.org, for anyone interested in seeing the text (in Latin) that accompanied the original plates.

1. *Desmoncus orthacanthos*.



Three illustrations are given fold-out treatment. The plate is printed at the usual size on one side of the paper, but the page folds out two times, and is printed on the other side with the same image at a size even larger than the folio size of the original. The fold-out page size is 60.6 × 84.7 cm (23.9 × 33.4 in.). At that size, the vivid colors and exquisite detail of the illustrations are truly magnificent.

At the beginning of *Martius, Book of Palms*, there is an essay on the life and work of Martius. It provides the historical context in which these illustrations first appeared and describes the effect they had on the botanical community. Looking at these reprinted

illustrations, one gets a feel for the wonder they must have inspired in Europeans. The essay and all the captions in the book are in three languages, English, French and German.

The author of this superlative new work, H. Walter Lack, is director at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem and professor at the Free University of Berlin. He is a leading expert in the history of botany, and he is to be congratulated for bringing forth this tribute to one of the world's most important palm books. It is, in a word, magnificent.

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2. *Plectocomia elongata*.

