

Principes, 39(1), 1995, pp. 42-45

An Artist of Palms Remembered

LESTER C. PANCOAST

2964 Aviation Ave., Miami, FL 33133, USA

One hot July day of 1953, I drove unannounced into the Kampong in Coconut Grove, Miami, Florida to see Dr. Fairchild's trees. Mangos and unusual fruit were everywhere; if the aroma had been any stronger it would have made one ill. Walking among the trees and the mosquitos, I was challenged in a soft southern accent, "Can I help you?"

He and I explained who we were. He said Doctor and Mrs. Fairchild were in Canada, that they usually invited him, his wife and three daughters to live on the Kampong while he painted (Figs. 1, 2). "Come see my studio and talk a spell while I work." I had met Lee Adams, described to me by a friend as a possible "Audubon of Tropical Plants." At 34, he was eight years older than I.

The studio was a small, aged shack called "The Wampery" after a Wampi tree growing beside it. The doors and windows were open. Water dripped from every eave because Lee had placed a sprinkler on the roof peak to cool the air. He painted on a tilted pane of heavy plate glass, on a large paper kept wet by a surrounding mound of wet rags. On an easel was hung a colossal panicle of shiny blue green fruit of *Livistona chinensis*. A parrot squawked.

As we talked I watched that deft brush place and lift color, forming one perfect seed, then the next. It amazed me that this could be done on wet paper, and while talking entertainingly to a visitor about his work and about his conversations with "Doctor."

A rain squall covered the sun, and Lee invited me "up to the house" to meet his family and to have a drink. As we walked through the exotic rock arch entry, sky and bay turned yellow-pink with tropical light. Mimi Adams was beautiful, the girls charming. We talked about plants and art and people. I remember thinking, "Lee Adams has found paradise."

As part of the discussion that splendid evening at the Kampong, I told Lee that I also used watercolors, without any effort to achieve realism, but rather in an abstract expressionist way, chasing the essence of a subject or mood. There was a

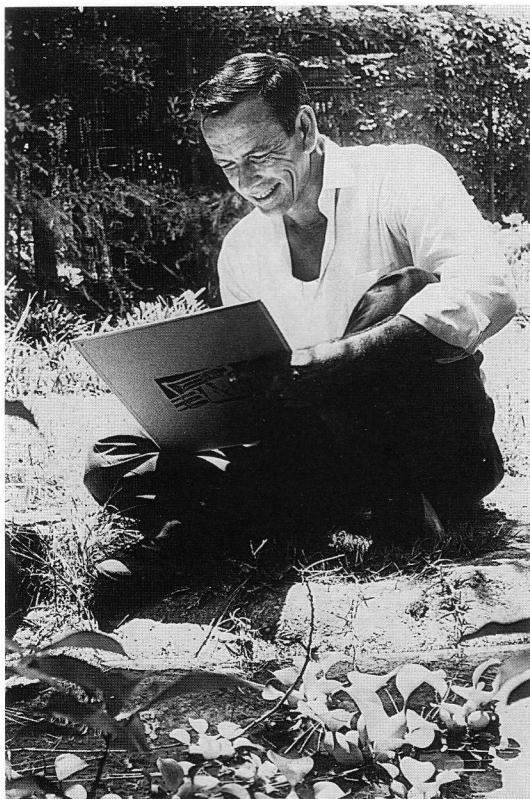
hint of annoyance that I might be saying that he did not achieve the essence of his subjects, but I hastened to say that his work was so superbly composed and presented that it filled me with pleasure. He graciously requested to see my work, and later when he did, was moved to say, "Isn't it strange that the two of us are trying to express ourselves in such different directions?" He was a kind person, and gentle.

Only recently, through reading an archive of correspondence, mostly letters exchanged with Nixon Smiley, do I realize the extent that Lee Adams had no use for the art movements of the day, classifying all of them as "mumbo jumbo." He never used the phrase to me; as a friend he might not. But as a largely self-taught artist, he resented the disdain of the avant garde. He wanted to be botanically accurate, scientifically precise, and also to be recognized as an artist. He was a superb technician, able to convey "essence" with such success that his works are treasured by fortunate owners, paintings that bring prices which would astound and please him today.

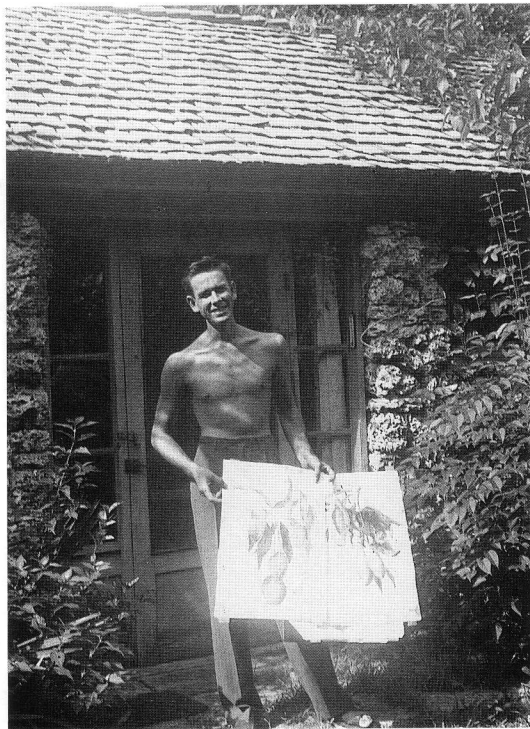
Growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, Lee was a frail child who suffered from asthma. He was so ill at age six that he had to remain in bed for a year. To keep him occupied, his mother supplied him with paints and paper. Because of his illness the family moved to nearby Mandarin on the St. John's River, a place of cleaner air, giant live oaks, spanish moss, and sabal palms.

As Lee continued his interest in painting, he began to observe the wild things around him, especially plants and birds. When his health improved in his middle teens, he decided to study biology and botany in college so that his art could become scientifically correct.

A wealthy art connoisseur who lived at Rollins College saw some of Lee's early work there, and at once arranged a meeting with his friends, David and Marian Fairchild in Coconut Grove. The generous Fairchilds were to have a great influence on his life, plunging him into a newly intellectual world. Dr. Fairchild convinced him that he should



1. Lee Adams working on a painting.



2. Lee Adams holding two watercolors in front of Tom's (Thomas Barbour's) House at the Kampong.

paint "all" of the tropical fruits, and arranged for the United Fruit Company to invite him to spend several months at its Lancetilla Botanic Garden to do so.

The fruit paintings were admired but not purchased. The fruits were strange to look at and were identified with still lives, no longer in vogue. Lee found that by including Lancetilla birds with the fruit, the paintings began to sell. In 1949 he married Mimi Stockton, from a well known socialite family in Jacksonville, and they spent their honeymoon at the Kampong and in Central America.

Three girl children followed. Dr. Fairchild died in 1954. It was no longer easy to bring small children to Miami to visit for several weeks at a time, and the most pressured painting schedule could not produce enough work to cover expenses.

In Miami the Adamses had met Nixon Smiley, a widely read newspaper writer who for a number of years was Director of Fairchild Tropical Garden. In 1956 he wrote to Lee to ask if he might be

interested in painting the palms at Fairchild as he had painted tropical fruits, suggesting that the forms and colors were worthy of his talents. The following year Lee made his first attempt, at *Ptychosperma macarthurii*, which required several days. Smiley was thrilled with the result, but Lee rejected it, starting immediately on *Aiphanes acanthophylla*. This was to be the first of what was to become a series of 20" by 30" watercolors, which would include a new *Ptychosperma macarthurii*, to hang in the Nell Montgomery Garden House at Fairchild Garden.

As the palm paintings accumulated, they caused generous response, but no one wanted to pay \$300 for a palm painting. In 1961 an angel, a geologist who knew nothing about palms except that his father had collected them, made a commitment. Dr. Arthur Montgomery offered to pay for four paintings per year, at \$300 each. He also asked that Dr. Harold E. Moore, Jr., of Cornell University, select the species to be painted. This worked well because Hal and the Adamses were warm friends.



3. *Copernicia macroglossa*, showing a close up of an inflorescence branch, as painted by Lee Adams.

The two men planned paintings of twenty genera, selecting from each genus a species both representative and interesting. These were done during the following years, the Montgomery Collection being completed by 1966. Friends urged him to boost his prices to \$500 and \$800 by 1963-64, but he completed the twenty paintings at the earlier agreed price.

After completing his contract, Lee made no further effort to paint palms. The market for rare plant paintings was limited, and he stayed with subjects which he could sell where he lived, such as common birds and plants, even animals which would excite "the joy of recognition" in a buyer. But those of us who were close to him understood

that he was looking forward to a time when he would be free to paint subjects he wanted to paint.

That time was never to come. In November of 1971, Lee and Mimi died instantly in an automobile accident in Jacksonville.

To put a value on the Montgomery Collection today is hypothetical; the originals are not for sale at any price. Someday they should be engraved a la Audubon, to be offered as elephant folios. Until then, Fairchild Garden has entered an agreement with the South Florida Chapter of IPS to share costs and sales of superbly printed reproductions, one each year, until all are available to the public at minimal cost (see Front Cover and Fig. 3).

NOTICES

Notice from: Bermuda's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Parks

58th BERMUDA AGRICULTURAL EXHIBITION

April 20-22, 1995 — all day

Admission \$5.00 adults
 \$2.00 for children

1995 Board of Directors' Meeting

The International Palm Society will hold its 1995 Board Meeting on October 26-29, 1995, in the Sarasota and Tampa area of Florida. See CHAPTER NEWS AND EVENTS.

Do You Have Questions About Palms?

Send your queries to: DR. KYLE BROWN, Rt. 2, Box 2700, Glenn St. Mary, FL 32040. Telephone: (904) 259-2754.