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MURAL PAINTING OF MADAGASCAR TRAVELER'S TREE IN HALL OF PLANT LIFE

By B. E. DAHLGREN
Curator, Department of Botany

Another painting has been added to the series of murals which Staff Artist Charles A. Corwin is preparing for the Hall of Plant Life (Hall 29). The most recent addition represents the traveler's tree (*Ravenala*) of Madagascar. This is one of those striking exotic plants that never fail to attract attention wherever planted, whether in botanical gardens or elsewhere for ornament.

The general habit of growth of the traveler's tree is well shown in the new mural. The rough cylindrical stem of the plant, a foot or more in diameter and often ten to fifteen feet in height, is seen to support a huge fan of some twenty to twenty-five large, simple leaves. The long leaf-stems radiating from the tip of the trunk and compactly and regularly arranged on each side, toward the top of the stem, all in a single plane, give to the traveler's tree a very remarkable appearance, comparable to that of certain bacaba palms of the Amazon that also have their leaves arranged in one plane. *Ravenala* is, in fact, often known as "traveler's palm" because of its general palm-like aspect, produced by the straight cylindrical trunk bearing relatively few large leaves.

The botanical relationship of the traveler's tree is, however, not with the palms. If a single leaf be observed it will readily be seen to be decidedly banana-like in appearance and structure. The large green blade is often torn into narrow strips exactly as banana leaves are torn by the wind. This, together with certain characters of the flowers and of the fruit, places the traveler's tree botanically in the banana family, of which it is the largest representative, and

the most conspicuous if not the only species with a woody stem.

In Madagascar, where it grows commonly in close association with the raffia palm, it is said to exist in enormous numbers, being found from sea level up to 600, and less frequently up to 1,600 feet. Its generic name *Ravenala* is from the Malagasy vernacular, meaning "leaf of the forest." In its native home it is a plant of considerable utility. The stems are said to be used for the construction of shelters, and the

being clear and potable, and is responsible for the popular name of the plant. But as water caught in such natural receptacles in the tropics is usually warm and infested by a variety of small aquatic life, and that of the traveler's tree is difficult of access, it may well be suspected that the plant's reputation for yielding comfort to travelers is based mostly on popular fancy.

While the flower-clusters and fruit of the usual banana plant are terminal, their appearance marking the end of the life of the

plant, in *Ravenala* they are lateral in the axils of the leaves and do not interfere with the continued growth. It is not unusual to find two, three or four flower-clusters present at one time. They are large and woody, with several large stiff bracts protecting small hands of white flowers that have a curious explosive mechanism for the scattering of their pollen. The fruits, on maturing, split lengthwise into three parts. Each part has a double row of seeds with a bright blue fringed envelope or aril, of interest for its unusual blue color which may be extracted and used as a dye. These also contain a highly combustible oil which is utilized by inhabitants of regions where the plant is abundant.

The closest relative of the traveler's tree is a similar plant of the Guianas and the mouth of the Amazon, *Ravenala guianensis*, which is smaller, and does not have a woody stem. It has a bright pink instead of a blue aril. The existence of two such closely related, exceptional species in such widely separated places as Madagascar and the Amazon is not entirely without parallel. It may be interpreted as indicating the former existence of connecting links of much wider distribution.



Traveler's Tree of Madagascar

Mural painting, by Staff Artist Charles A. Corwin, shows *Ravenala madagascariensis* as it grows in its native habitat, accompanied in low ground by aquatic aroids, on higher ground usually by raffia palms.

broad leaves for roofing. The wood, which forms the outer part of the trunk, is prepared by spreading and flattening it into plank-like pieces that serve for flooring. The large leaves, like large leaves everywhere in the tropics, furnish ready-made wrappers for packages, and coverings and linings for crates and baskets.

The rain water which gathers in the leaf axils after trickling down the long petioles, is praised by the English missionary, William Ellis, in his book on Madagascar, as

are necessary for admission. A section of the Theatre is reserved for Members of the Museum, each of whom is entitled to two reserved seats on request. Applications for these seats may be made by telephone, or by writing to the Museum, in advance of the lecture. Seats will then be held in the Member's name until 3 o'clock on the day of the lecture. Members may obtain reserved seats also by presentation of their membership cards to the Theatre attendant before 3 o'clock on the lecture day. All reserved seats not claimed by 3 o'clock will be available to the general public.

The opening program of the Raymond series for children will include the following films: "Indians at a Pow-wow"; "The Fish That Builds a Nest"; "The Indian at Work," and "Whale and Walrus Hunting in Alaska." There will be two showings, one beginning at 10 A.M., and one at 11. Children from all parts of Chicago and suburbs are invited to attend.

Eight other lectures for adults, and eight more programs for children, will be given on successive Saturdays. Complete schedules of these will appear in the October issue of FIELD MUSEUM NEWS.

LECTURES FOR ADULTS, FILMS FOR CHILDREN

The annual autumn course of free illustrated lectures on science and travel for adults, and the series of motion picture entertainments for children presented by the James Nelson and Anna Louise Raymond Foundation, will both begin in the James Simpson Theatre of the Museum on Saturday, October 3.

First of the adult lectures will be "Alone Across Arctic America," by Mr. David Irwin, of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The lecture will begin at 3 o'clock. No tickets



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