

Field Museum News

Published Monthly by Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

Vol. 12

DECEMBER, 1941

No. 12

STORY OF EARLY COFFEE TRADE DEPICTED IN MUSEUM MURAL

By B. E. DAHLGREN

CHIEF CURATOR, DEPARTMENT OF BOTANY

At a time when French ships in the Red Sea would be news, and when the sea-borne traffic to the Near East must resort to the long route by way of the Cape of Good Hope, one of the murals in Field Museum's Hall of Food Plants (Hall 25), viz., that of French Coffee Buyers in Arabia, appears to be of particular interest.

It recalls the centuries before the existence of the Suez Canal when the same sea-route, around the southern tip of the African continent, was the only one available for direct European commerce with the countries bordering the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. Those who are at all historically minded will remember that even that route, now so important for the transportation of supplies to the British armies in the Near East and of American materials for Russia, has been known only since the time of the Portuguese navigators.

The painting depicts an historic incident in the early days of the water-borne commerce which followed upon the discovery of this route and not only made the West independent of the ancient caravan trade by bringing the products of all parts of the East directly to Atlantic seaports, but also, and fully as important, opened the way for an enormous increase in the world's supply of food and other products of vegetable origin by initiating a far-flung distribution of the useful plants of all continents.

Even at the present time, this process of transportation of economic plants from one part of the world to another is still going on. The Asiatic soybean, for example, grown in the Far East since times immemorial, is finding new and extensive areas of cultiva-

tion and (as described elsewhere in this issue) new uses in North America. Peruvian bark and the Brazilian rubber tree attained their present importance in the tropics of the Far East, whence after half a century of intensive cultivation they are now returned, improved and pedigreed, as stock for plantations in their original habitat.

The most spectacular, if not the most important, instance of the transposition of



FRENCH COFFEE BUYERS IN ARABIA

Mural by Julius Moessel, in the Hall of Food Plants, showing a historic incident of about the year 1706 when water-borne commerce was established between Europe and the countries on the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf.

a cultivated plant from one part of the world to another far removed, is furnished by the history of coffee, to which Mr. Moessel's mural refers. Originally a native of the highlands of Abyssinia, where it was of relatively slight importance, the small tree which produces coffee beans had been introduced in southwestern Arabia some few hundred years before it attracted general attention. Though the beverage made from its roasted seeds had become popular there and its use had spread by way of Mecca to all of the Mohammedan world, it was not until it was sought by European buyers that coffee became considered an important article of commerce.

In Arabia the areas suitable for coffee
(Continued on page 2, column 1)

VISITORS SEE THE "INVISIBLE" IN MUSEUM EXHIBIT

By HENRY W. NICHOLS

CHIEF CURATOR, DEPARTMENT OF GEOLOGY

The Department of Geology has encountered and solved the problem of exhibiting specimens that, from their nature, are actually invisible. There are five rare gases present in minute quantities in the air. Like the principal components of the air,

oxygen and nitrogen, they are absolutely invisible, and a bottle filled with them would appear empty. Although it is impossible to show them in their normal state, these gases can be made to glow with brilliantly colored light when they are excited by an electric current.

Through the courtesy of the Air Reduction Company it has been possible to exhibit tubes of these gases. Although the tubes appear empty in their usual state, they glow brilliantly with the most beautiful colors when the visitor presses a button.

These rare gases—argon, neon, helium, krypton and xenon—are peculiar in that they cannot be made

to enter into any chemical combination. The most abundant, argon, is found in the air in the proportion of one part argon to 125 parts air, and the most rare, xenon, is present only in the proportion of one part to 1,700,000 parts air. Rare as they are, these gases have an important commercial value, for they produce the light of the numerous neon lights seen at night along many of our city streets.

MUSEUM TO CLOSE CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S DAY

in order to permit as many employees as possible to spend the holidays with their families.

STORY OF EARLY COFFEE TRADE

(Continued from page 1)

growing are limited to the slopes of the mountains and highlands adjoining the Red Sea just above the western tip of the peninsula, a narrow zone where climatic conditions and mountain streams make irrigation possible. The production of the none-too-extensive coffee gardens of the Arabs was necessarily limited, but that part of the crop which was not required for home consumption passed up the Red Sea or along its coast, and overland to near-by Mediterranean ports, either to Cairo and Alexandria, or to Acre, Jaffa, Tripoli or other cities of the eastern Mediterranean coast for transportation and sale to consumers in Damascus, Aleppo, or in Constantinople where coffee houses were opened in 1554.

In Europe coffee was unknown until travelers to the Levant returned with stories of the black drink, which, in the words of Francis Bacon, "comforteth the brain and heart, and helpeth digestion." From Constantinople coffee soon found its way to Venice. This and other commercial cities in the north of Italy obtained a supply from Alexandria for resale to western Europe and for a short time held a virtual monopoly of this as of other exotic products of the Near and Far East, until Marseilles on the French Mediterranean coast, also securing its supply from Alexandria, became the center for the coffee trade in France. The Dutch had in the meantime not been idle and regular shipments arrived in Amsterdam. Coffee was soon sold at public auctions there, in London, and in New York. Dutch traders obtained seeds from Aden and planted coffee in Ceylon, where it did not thrive, and later, more successfully, in the Netherlands Indies. In 1706 a coffee plant grown in Java was received in the botanic gardens at Amsterdam.

It was about that time that merchants of St. Malo, a small island off the channel coast of France, decided to dispute the French coffee trade with Marseilles and dispatched three ships directly to Arabia. The story of that expedition, which took several years, was told by Jean La Roque in his *Voyage de l'Arabie Heureuse*. How the enterprise of the St. Malo merchants afterwards led to the formation of the French India Company and how the ships of the French pioneers were followed by others, including chartered American clippers, belongs to the history of commerce and would take us too far afield.

The presentation to the king of France, a few years later, of a coffee plant raised from the seed of that in Amsterdam, is however, a link in the story of coffee, for the plant in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris was carefully described and well figured by the French botanist Jussieu, and seedlings derived from it and from the parent coffee

trees in Amsterdam are said to have been the first to reach the West Indies. At any rate the French soon afterwards introduced coffee plants in Haiti and Martinique; the Dutch in Curaçao and Dutch Guiana. Before the middle of the eighteenth century coffee plants were being grown in almost all West Indian islands and in all the Central and South American countries, which have since become the chief producers. Africa, the original home of the coffee tree, was the last to undertake its large-scale cultivation.

The destruction of millions of sacks of surplus crop in Brazil is spectacular evidence of the enormous increase which has taken place in the production of this one commodity since the ships of the merchants of St. Malo appeared in Yemen to bargain for a share of the product of the Arabian coffee gardens. Who could have predicted at the time of the visit of the French coffee buyers that the economy of entire nations in another hemisphere some day would be largely dependent on commerce in the dried seeds of this Abyssinian plant!

EXOTIC BIRDS IN NEW EXHIBIT

BY EMMET R. BLAKE
ASSISTANT CURATOR OF BIRDS

Two temporary screens of mounted birds recently installed near the southwest end of Hall 21 illustrate in a striking manner the great diversity of color, pattern, and form to be found in the bird world. Sixty-two species, representing more than thirty families, are included. All of the birds are of foreign origin, with the Australian region particularly well represented.

Among the more striking exotic species is a crowned pigeon of New Guinea. This handsome bird, the largest member of its family, attains the size of a small turkey and superficially bears little resemblance to any other pigeon. An erect fan-shaped crest, dull bluish, like the general plumage, arises from the top of its head and lends it a particularly distinguished appearance. Smaller, but scarcely less attractive, is the Nicobar pigeon of Australasia with its remarkably developed mantle of greenish-bronze feathers.

Of special interest is the kea, a large olive green parrot of New Zealand. Keas inhabit the higher mountains during the warm months but descend to the sheep ranges in winter. Although normally omnivorous, these sturdy birds have become a serious economic problem in some areas through their attacks upon sick or weakened sheep which they destroy by devouring the fat about the kidneys.

Weaver finches, an Old World family of extremely diverse sparrow-like birds, are represented by nine of the more colorful species. Several hundred forms are known to science. Many have become popular as cage birds because of their attractive colors and hardiness in captivity. Our ubiquitous



CROWNED PIGEON

The largest member of its family, this beautiful bird of New Guinea may grow to the size of a small turkey.

but relatively drab English "sparrow" is, in reality, a weaver finch, which has spread over most of this country since its introduction at Brooklyn, New York in 1850.

The bird fauna of the American tropics is represented by numerous rare or beautiful species. The oil bird of Trinidad and northern South America constitutes an anatomical link between owls and goat-suckers and bears a notable superficial resemblance to the latter. Oil birds dwell in caves from which they emerge at night to feed upon palm seeds. Their name is derived from the condition of the nestlings, which become so distended with fat as to attract native hunters who melt out the oil for use as butter.

A quetzal, the national bird of Guatemala (also represented in a habitat group in Hall 20), a crested oropendola, a motmot, an Australian tawny frogmouth, a Philippine hornbill, and various tanagers and other exotic species which pique the imagination or delight the eye are also displayed. The birds were prepared for exhibition by Staff Taxidermist John W. Moyer.

Folk-lore of Christmas Plants

You have to have holly at Christmas, of course, and you know what to do when you encounter the mistletoe. But do you know why you do these things? The origin of the customs surrounding these Yuletide shrubs is traced in *Mistletoe and Holly*, a leaflet published by Field Museum. This little book, which makes a charming Christmas gift itself, presents in interesting form the principal botanical facts about the plants.

On sale at THE BOOK SHOP of FIELD MUSEUM. Price 25 cents. Copies may be ordered by mail.



Dahlgren, B. E. 1941. "Story of Early Coffee Trade Depicted in Museum Mural."
Field Museum news 12(12), 1-2.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25723>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/364971>

Holding Institution

Field Museum of Natural History Library

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.