



Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce

Sarah Abrevaya Stein PhD

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The thirst for exotic ornament among fashionable women in the metropolises of Europe and America prompted a bustling global trade in ostrich feathers that flourished from the 1880s until the First World War. When feathers fell out of fashion with consumers, the result was an economic catastrophe for many, a worldwide feather bust. In this remarkable book, Sarah Stein draws on rich archival materials to bring to light the prominent and varied roles of Jews in the feather trade. She discovers that Jews fostered and nurtured the trade across the global commodity chain and throughout the far-flung territories where ostriches were reared and plucked, and their feathers were sorted, exported, imported, auctioned, wholesaled, and finally manufactured for sale.

From Yiddish-speaking Russian-Lithuanian feather handlers in South Africa to London manufacturers and wholesalers, from rival Sephardic families whose feathers were imported from the Sahara and traded across the Mediterranean, from New York's Lower East Side to entrepreneurial farms in the American West, Stein explores the details of a remarkably vibrant yet ephemeral culture. This is a singular story of global commerce, colonial economic practices, and the rise and fall of a glamorous luxury item.

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