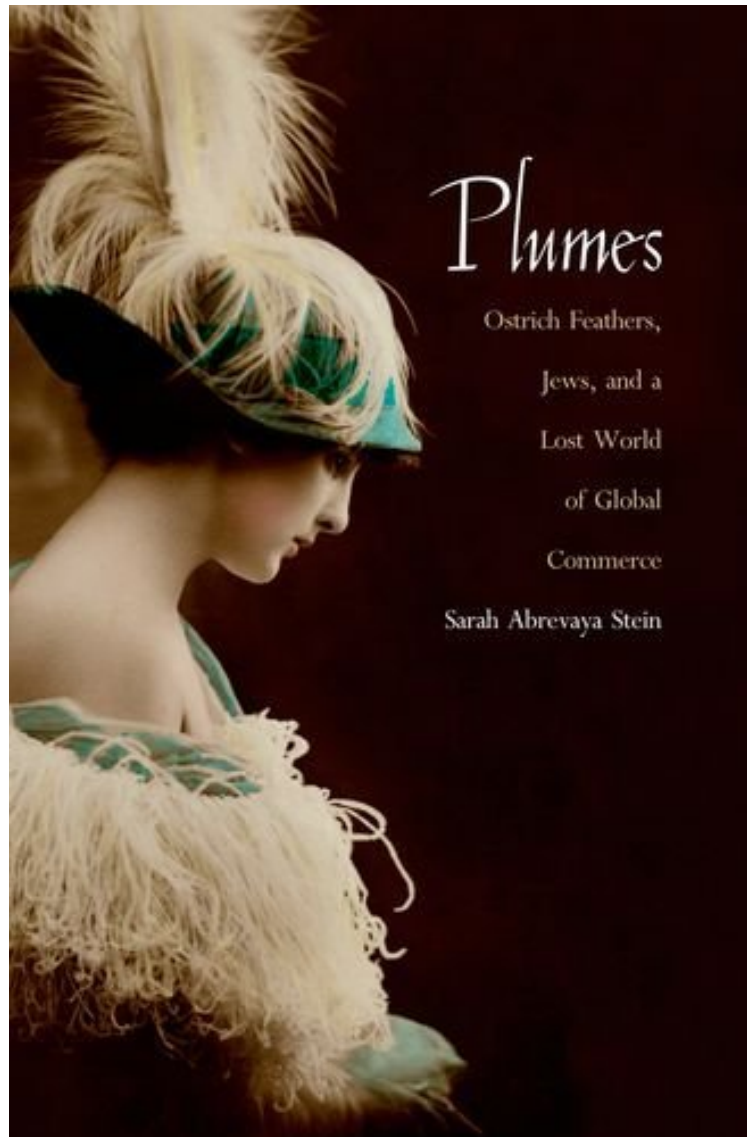


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Sarah Abrevaya Stein PhD

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Sarah Abrevaya Stein PhD : Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Feathers and FollyBy Rob HardyWhy is it that diamonds are regarded as high value and feathers are not? It seems like a silly question, unless one takes into account the foibles of

human enthusiasms and the price tags we put on them. One hundred years ago, ostrich feathers were worth almost as much by weight as diamonds, and businessmen argued that they were equivalent in durability. A fine ostrich feather was "an investment for life" wrote one observer at the time, and went on that the plume "has been in fashion for centuries past, and will probably be for centuries to come. It holds its place like the diamond." Ostrich feathers have, of course, faded from fashion, but any bubble can make an interesting study of human behavior. Sarah Abrevaya Stein has done that, and more, in *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (Yale University Press). Stein, a professor who concentrates on Jewish Studies, takes a look at this episode which has not only been forgotten but its Jewish origins have been forgotten, too. *Plumes* is an academic treatise, full of footnotes and wide research, but the peculiarity of its topic makes it funny and sad as well. Not only that, but studying of the feather bust is probably healthful for those of us a hundred years later who have our own economic woes. Feathers had adorned hats and clothes for centuries, but in the 1880s they became a fashion essential, used on women's large, elaborate hats and on boas. The South African trade in ostrich feathers was coincident with the boom of the area in diamond and gold mines. Stein shows that Jewish workers, traders, manufacturers, and financiers were all involved in the feather trade. Her review shows that this was a process of history rather than any coordinated Jewish effort; Jews had spread out and had mercantile, lingual, and industrial skills that could flourish in new areas. "Jews brought certain elements of human capital to the ostrich feather trade: background in like industries, contacts of kith and kin within and across sub-ethnic diasporas and political and oceanic boundaries, copacetic relations with the reigning authorities, geographic mobility, and, no less important, economic need." That there could be this sort of Jewish involvement made it almost inevitable that some would use it as a focus for anti-Semitic thought, but it is hard to see any great conspiracy at this remove, especially since any such conspiracy would have to be one of the least successful ever. Before the bust things looked bright indeed. The harvesting and preparation of the feathers was surprisingly complicated, and the industry employed thousands. A big problem for American ostrich feather manufacturers was that there were import duties to be paid on feathers from London, so that ostrich farms sprang up in the South and Southwest. Governmental aid for such farms was sought, one Arizona representative declaring to his colleagues in the House in 1913, "No one need have any fear for the future of the ostrich industry. The feather is undoubtedly the most beautiful ornament of its kind, and as such is independent of fashion." Counting on continued demand proved to be an unwarranted gamble. There were various reasons for the bust, beyond the mere capriciousness of Dame Fashion. There was a nascent preservationist movement which sought laws to halt the obliteration of wild birds at home and overseas, and laws were passed to protect them and their feathers. Ostriches, of course, were domesticated birds in no danger of extinction, but when the public started linking feathers and cruelty or extinction, ostrich feathers were included. World War One influenced women to dress practically to enter the workforce. The automobile made wearing big, feathered hats or boas impractical. Brokerage firms that had invested in feathers, and those that had stockpiled large amounts in order to take advantage of an expected upsurge in value, were ruined. The downfall provided some humor in the popular press, which suggested an ostrich for the Thanksgiving table ("Heaven help him who gets the neck."). There was a short relief from a fad of dressing kewpie dolls in feathers, and eventually some of the stock got turned into less-than-haute-couture feather dusters. This is a story of "livelihoods lost to the caprice of global markets," and any twenty-first century reader is going to find familiar its themes of luxury, greed, and economic chaos. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Important history By J. Alyce Reads like a PhD thesis project.....AND we got a lot of important historical information about the effect of the feathers on the hat industry. Have used the info in sharing with Smithsonian and Audubon. This is a must for any hat museum. It is a bit much to slog thru but read it from cover to cover. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Dani Goldsmith Thank you

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.

"In this innovative and intriguing book, Stein zeroes in on one colonial commodity—ostrich feathers—and produces the first coherent history of their production and trade. This book is in conversation with, and contributes to, many fields, including colonialism, economic history, and Jewish history." —Derek

J. Penslar, professor of history, University of Toronto and author of *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe*