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Review:

The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects

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REVIEWS

The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects, Laura Arnold Leibman (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2020), ISBN 978-1-94179-220-9, pp. xxiii + 289, \$30.

Writing about the lives of early American Jewish women has always posed a challenge due to the dearth of primary sources. Only in a few instances, as in the cases of prominent Jewish women such as Abigail Franks and Rebecca Gratz, has robust documentary evidence, including letters, diaries, and other writings, survived. In *The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects*, Laura Arnold Leibman, a professor of English and humanities at Reed College, presents an innovative approach to the recovery of the stories of ordinary early American Jewish women through the analysis of material culture. According to Leibman, “in order to examine the full range of Jewish women’s lives in America we need to” both “expand our definition of evidence”, and “listen to the silences in the archive” (p. 5). In a scholarly yet engaging style, complimented by ninety-six images that add detail and colour to the five case studies presented, Leibman does just that with great skill and verve.

Leibman offers a fresh approach to the daily lives of Jewish women between 1750 and 1850 by carefully studying, in minute detail, various quotidian non-Jewish objects that five women of diverse backgrounds and status who resided in New York at some point in their lives used or created and, in some cases, considered important enough to pass on to their descendants. Maintaining that “relying on objects as well as texts helps recenter Jewishness in the family rather than the synagogue” (p. 14), she shows how the biographies of these five Jewish women reflect evolving ideas about what being Jewish meant.

Leibman first examines a letter an impoverished Hannah Louzada wrote to New York’s oldest synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel, in 1761, requesting financial aid. The second chapter focuses on six silver cups owned by Reyna Levy Moses (1753–1824), which were given to her as a wedding present by her uncle Myer Myers, a leading early American silversmith. The third chapter analyses a beautiful ivory miniature created in about 1815 that shows Sarah Bandon Moses (1798–1829), a young

woman of mixed race who was born a slave in Barbados, converted to Judaism, was subsequently educated in London, and went on to marry Joshua Moses of New York, where she became an accepted member of the city's elite Jewish community. Chapter 4 studies the commonplace book compiled by Sarah Ann Hays Mordecai (1805–1894). It allows Leibman to shed light on changes in Jewish women's lives in the course of the nineteenth century. In chapter 5, placing an intricate family silhouette by the renowned artist Auguste Edouart at the centre of her analysis, Leibman charts the life of Jane Symons Isaacs (1823–1884), a poor young woman from London's East End whose husband went on to become one of the leaders of traditional Judaism in New York. Leibman offers a compelling exploration of the lives of these little-known Jewish women against the wider backdrop of the evolution of Jewish life in early America and changes in communal structures that opened up new paths for women, and gradually rendered their voices more audible. Leibman thus helps restore their agency, and illuminates their experiences with, and their influence on, the creation of Jewish identity in the New World and the preservation of Jewish families.

Laura Arnold Leibman has provided us with a valuable study that increases our understanding of Jewish women's experiences in early America. Although she sometimes relies heavily on conjecture, for the most part her inferences appear sound. Leibman ably demonstrates that everyday objects have the potential to provide us with new insight into the lives of Jewish women such as those featured in *The Art of the Jewish Family*. Material culture has much to reveal about social, religious, economic, and political experiences and outlooks. Leibman's novel methodology can serve as a valuable model for telling the stories of diverse women over generations whose experiences have all too often been left out of the historical record.

Jeanne Abrams