



Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell (Studies in Sensory History)

Jonathan Reinarz

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In this comprehensive and engaging volume, medical historian Jonathan Reinartz offers a historiography of smell from ancient to modern times. Synthesizing existing scholarship in the field, he shows how people have relied on their olfactory sense to understand and engage with both their immediate environments and wider corporal and spiritual worlds. This broad survey demonstrates how each community or commodity possesses, or has been thought to possess, its own peculiar scent. Through the meanings associated with smells, osmologies develop--what cultural anthropologists have termed the systems that utilize smells to classify people and objects in ways that define their relations to each other and their relative values within a particular culture. European Christians, for instance, relied on their noses to differentiate Christians from heathens, whites from people of color, women from men, virgins from harlots, artisans from aristocracy, and pollution from perfume. This reliance on smell was not limited to the global North. Around the world, Reinartz shows, people used scents to signify individual and group identity in a morally constructed universe where the good smelled pleasant and their opposites reeked. With chapters including "Heavenly Scents," "Fragrant Lucre," and "Odorous Others," Reinartz's timely survey is a useful and entertaining look at the history of one of our most important but least-understood senses.

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