

**FEATHERS AND SKINS: AVIAN ART IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND
IMPERIAL IMAGINATION**

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines U.S. art and visual cultures that relate to the acquiring, commodifying, and exchanging of birds and avian products within a broader Western Hemisphere—stretching from the Atlantic Islands to South America and the Caribbean—in the mid to late nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, U.S. artists increasingly depicted animals, people, commodities, and landscapes from across the world, a practice indicative of imperialism’s widespread grasp. The U.S. artists I discuss in this dissertation, including Martin Johnson Heade, George Catlin, and John Haberle, produced images that contributed to the market culture around guano, feathers, taxidermy, and pets, and aestheticized the violence associated with these extractive industries. In images of birds and avian products, these artists found a subject imbued with scientific meaning and economic potential. Their works confronted representational challenges associated with the depiction of birds—as living creatures, as taxidermy, and as commodified objects. My case studies explore these artistic projects and related material culture that arose around certain commodity trades such as the extraction of guano, a highly sought-after bird excrement that produced high-yielding fertilizer; feathers harvested from hummingbirds for the international plumage trade; the sport of hunting wild flamingoes for game; and the practice of owning pet canaries, between 1823 and 1915. This period—which stretches from the signing of the Monroe Doctrine to the completion of the

Panama Canal—can be described as one of increased U.S. political and economic activity in the Western Hemisphere. By studying the ways in which North Americans participated in the nineteenth-century bird market, this project will shed light on how birds and avian products traveled and were transported through imperial commodity chains, impacting local ecosystems, environments, and species. Examining the ways that U.S. artists represented American and Atlantic avian products, this dissertation recaptures the contributions that artists made to hemispheric cultural discourses and the work that art objects did to underwrite U.S. economic and political imperialism.