

Markets and fashion

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The market for silk ribbons was a market of fashion. Ribbons were worn on hats, dresses, bonnets, shoes and in the hair; they decorated uniforms, military insignia and ceremonial garments; they served as trimmings for furniture and carriages. Their colours, widths, patterns and textures changed with the seasons and with the tastes of the courts and the cities. The Basel merchants had to anticipate these changes, design new patterns, produce them quickly and deliver them to the markets before the fashion changed again.

The principal markets were France, the Empire, the Netherlands, England, Italy and, from the eighteenth century, the Americas. Because Paris set the tone of fashion for all of Europe, the Basel merchants followed the Paris fashions closely, sent designers and agents to Paris, and copied or adapted the patterns of the Lyon and Saint-Étienne manufacturers. The fairs of Frankfurt, Leipzig and Beaucaire were important outlets. Beyond them, the merchants maintained correspondents and agents in the principal commercial cities.

The American market became increasingly important in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the independence of the United States, Basel ribbons were exported in large quantities to New York, Philadelphia and other American cities, where they competed with English and French products. The American market was large, growing and less bound by tradition than the European markets, absorbing a significant share of Basel's production in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹

The dependence on fashion made the ribbon trade a risky business. A merchant who misjudged the fashion could be left with large stocks of unsaleable ribbons, while a change in the tariffs of an importing country could close a market overnight. The protectionist policies of France, which imposed high duties on foreign silk goods, and the wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which disrupted trade, caused

repeated crises in the Basel ribbon industry. The merchants who survived were those who diversified their markets, maintained reserves and managed their risks carefully.

1 Notes

1. On the export of Basel silk ribbons to the United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see the literature on the history of the Basel ribbon industry and on Swiss–American trade. To be verified.



For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-markets-and-fashion