

The chain of production

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The production of a silk ribbon involved a long chain of operations, each requiring specific skills and each adding value to the material. It began with the raw silk, the continuous filament reeled from the cocoons of the silkworm. Raw silk was produced in Italy, especially in Piedmont, Lombardy and the Veneto, in southern France, in Spain and, increasingly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the Levant, Persia, India, China and Japan. It was traded in skeins through the silk markets of Milan, Bergamo, Lyon and other centres, where the Basel merchants bought it through agents or directly from producers.¹

The raw silk had to be thrown, that is, twisted into threads suitable for weaving. The throwing of silk was a skilled operation that was carried out in Italy, where water-powered throwing mills had been developed since the Middle Ages, and later also in Switzerland. The thrown silk was then degummed, to remove the sericin that coated the fibre, and dyed. Dyeing was one of the most delicate operations of the chain: because the colours of ribbons followed fashion, the merchant who could offer the colours the market demanded, in consistent quality and fast shades, had a decisive advantage. The dyers of Basel used natural dyes, madder, indigo, cochineal, weld, logwood and others, imported from distant places. Their craft required a knowledge of chemistry that was empirical and jealously guarded.

The dyed silk was then wound onto bobbins and distributed to the weavers, who wove the ribbons on their looms according to the patterns supplied by the merchant. Plain ribbons were woven on the engine looms that could produce many ribbons at once; figured ribbons, with complex patterns, required more elaborate looms and more skilled weavers. The finished ribbons were returned to the merchant, who inspected them, finished them by pressing, calendering or watering, measured and packed them, and shipped them to the markets.

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Each step of this chain was controlled by the merchant, who owned the material throughout the process. The weavers, dyers and finishers worked on the merchant's material for a wage or a piece rate. This control of the material, which distinguished the putting-out system from the guild system, in which the craftsman owned his material and sold his product, placed the merchant at the centre of the industry and gave him the power to organise it.

1 Notes

1. On the supply of raw silk to the Basel ribbon industry from Italy (Piedmont, Lombardy), France and later the Levant and East Asia, see the literature on the history of the silk trade. To be verified. ↩

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