

The origins of the silk industry

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The most important economic contribution of the refugees was the silk industry. Silk had been a luxury good in medieval Europe, imported from the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world and later produced in Italy, where Lucca, Florence, Venice, Genoa and Milan developed an industry of spinning, dyeing and weaving that supplied the courts and the wealthy of Europe. In the sixteenth century, the industry spread to France, where Lyon became its principal centre, and to other countries, often carried by refugees.

In Basel, the silk industry developed in several branches. The spinning of silk waste, the *Florettseide* or *Schappe*, which used the short fibres and damaged cocoons that could not be reeled into continuous silk, became an important branch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and developed into a major industry in the nineteenth. The weaving of silk fabrics was practised on a limited scale. But the branch that made Basel's fortune was the weaving of silk ribbons, the *Seidenbandweberei*.¹

Ribbons were an important article of fashion in the early modern period. They decorated hats, dresses, shoes, hair and uniforms, and their colours and patterns followed the changing tastes of the courts and the cities. The demand for ribbons was large and variable, and their production required skill in weaving and dyeing and close attention to fashion. The ribbon industry was an industry of design, quality and responsiveness to the market.

Silk ribbon weaving was introduced in Basel in the last decades of the sixteenth century by refugees from France and Italy. The early ribbon weavers worked on simple looms that produced one ribbon at a time. They were organised in the traditional way, as independent masters who owned their looms, bought their materials and sold their products. The guild of the weavers, the *Weberzunft*, claimed jurisdiction over them and sought to regulate their activity.

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1 Notes

1. On the branches of the Basel silk industry (silk waste spinning, Florettseide or Schappe; silk ribbon weaving, Seidenbandweberei) from the late sixteenth century, see HLS, articles "Seidenindustrie" and "Posamenterei". To be verified. ↩

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