

Indiennes and gilt thread: export industries

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Alongside the Fabrique, other export industries developed in Geneva during the eighteenth century. The printing of cotton cloth, known as “indiennes” because it imitated the painted cottons imported from India, enjoyed a remarkable boom. In France, the manufacture and import of indiennes were prohibited for a long time in order to protect the national textile industries.¹ This prohibition created an opportunity for manufactories established outside the kingdom, notably in Geneva and Switzerland, which supplied a smuggling market and foreign markets.

Huguenot refugees who had mastered the techniques of dyeing and printing founded indienne manufactories in Geneva and its surroundings. Some of them reached a considerable size for the period and employed several hundred workers.² Their activity required substantial capital, to buy the cotton cloth, the dyes and the mordants, to build the workshops and the drying meadows, and to finance stocks. It also depended on access to water, which the Rhône supplied in abundance.

The indienne industry illustrates a phenomenon that recurs throughout the history of the financial centre: Geneva’s capacity to profit from the restrictions imposed by its neighbours. By making the prohibited goods scarce and expensive, the French prohibition offered high margins to producers established outside the kingdom. This form of regulatory arbitrage carried risks, since the goods had to be brought into France by roundabout routes, and it left the manufactories vulnerable to any change in French policy. The lifting of the prohibition in the middle of the eighteenth century and the development of French manufactories would indeed alter the conditions of competition.

Gilt thread, that is the manufacture of gold and silver threads and braids intended for the ornamentation of clothing and fabrics, was another Genevan luxury industry.³ It required precious metals, technical know-how

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and access to the markets of the European courts. It maintained close links with the precious-metals trade and therefore with finance.

These industries shared several characteristics: they produced goods of high value in relation to their weight, they were oriented towards export, they required substantial capital and they depended on extensive commercial networks. On the manufacturing side, they reproduced the logic that had made the fortune of the medieval fairs: Geneva prospered by serving distant markets with luxury products.

Industry	Characteristics	Links with finance
Watchmaking and jewellery	division of labour, merchant-coordinators, worldwide export	credit to craftsmen, bills of exchange, accumulation of capital
Indiennes	large manufactories, substantial capital, smuggling markets	financing of stocks, regulatory risk
Gilt thread	precious metals, markets of the European courts	metals trade, credit
Commission trade	intermediation between producers and markets	advances, guarantees, correspondents

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland], art. “Indiennes”: “The prohibition of the consumption and manufacture of painted cloth in France (1686) [...] opened up an immense and lucrative smuggling market”; the ban was lifted in 1759.
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2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Indiennes”: “There were four manufactories in Geneva by 1710, including that of Antoine Fazy, the first of a long line of indienne printers, and seven by the 1720s”; after the lifting of the French prohibition (1759), “Geneva and Neuchâtel each had around ten factories at that time, employing at least 2,500 workers”; 8,000 to 10,000 people worked in Swiss indienne printing towards the end of the eighteenth century; decline after 1790.
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3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Dorure”: “gilt-thread making grouped together the craftsmen who specialised in producing threads for the manufacture of brocaded fabrics, braids, trimmings and gold and silver lace”; introduced by French refugees in Basel and Geneva at the end of the sixteenth century, “particularly flourishing in Geneva during the second half of the seventeenth century, thanks to the activity of the Baulacre-Perdriau, Lullin, Marcet, Calandrini, Dufour and Bagueret families”. ↩

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