

The Fabrique: watchmaking and jewellery

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In the eighteenth century, the Genevans used the name “Fabrique” to designate the whole range of trades connected with watchmaking, jewellery, goldsmithing, engraving, enamelling and related activities. The Fabrique formed the heart of the city’s manufacturing economy and employed a substantial share of the working population.¹

Geneva watchmaking developed from the end of the sixteenth century, thanks to refugee artisans and to the retraining of goldsmiths, whom the Calvinist sumptuary laws forbade to make many kinds of jewellery and luxury objects.² The first regulations of the watchmakers’ guild governed apprenticeship, quality and access to the trade. Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, watchmaking became a major export industry, whose products were sold throughout Europe, in the Ottoman Empire and as far afield as Asia.

The organisation of the Fabrique rested on an advanced division of labour. Making a watch involved numerous specialised trades: makers of springs, wheels, hands and cases, engravers, enamellers, finishers. Many worked in small workshops, often located under the roofs of the houses of the Saint-Gervais quarter, on the right bank of the Rhône, hence the name “cabinotiers” given to these artisans.³ Part of the work was also entrusted to workers established in the surrounding countryside, notably in the Pays de Gex, in Savoy and in the Jura, where labour was cheaper.

At the top of the Fabrique stood the merchant-watchmakers, who coordinated production, supplied the raw materials, financed the artisans and marketed the products. These entrepreneurs had to advance substantial capital, bear long payment terms and manage the risks of distant markets. They practised credit, the bill of exchange and the commission trade. Several merchant families of the Fabrique accumulated fortunes that they would later invest in financial activities.

The reputation for quality of Geneva watchmaking constituted a collective asset. The guild regulations, the controls and the expertise handed down from generation to generation protected it. This logic of collective reputation, founded on shared standards, foreshadows that of the financial centre, whose credibility depends on the conduct of all its members.

Key point. The Geneva Fabrique, born of the contribution of the refugees and the retraining of the goldsmiths, rested on an advanced division of labour, on merchants who financed and coordinated production, and on a collective reputation for quality. The capital it generated fed the rise of Geneva finance.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Horlogerie”: “the Fabrique (which designated all the artists and workers employed in watchmaking and jewellery)”; division of labour from 1660, guilds of case-makers (1698) and engravers (1716), women admitted as chain-makers in 1785; “Geneva watchmaking reached its peak around 1770–1786”; Archives d’État de Genève, “Genève au XVIIIe siècle”: the Fabrique comprised “all the trades of watchmaking and jewellery organised in guilds”. ↩
2. Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie, “Genève, une immense Fabrique de montres” (hautehorlogerie.org): the Calvinist sumptuary laws prohibiting jewellery and ceremonial objects pushed Geneva’s goldsmiths towards watchmaking; Huguenot watchmakers arrived from 1550; in 1601, the watchmakers founded the first watchmaking guild in the world; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Horlogerie” (Fallet, Veyrassat): “From 1550, Huguenot refugees arrived in Geneva, bringing the expertise of a professional elite, notably in the field of portable timepieces”; watchmakers’ guild created in 1601. ↩

3. Worldtempus, “Quand Genève était un grand atelier” (fr.worldtempus.com): the workers in watchmaking and jewellery were called “cabinotiers” after their place of work, the cabinet, a small workshop set up under the roofs of the closely packed houses of the Saint-Gervais quarter; the activity was concentrated on the right bank (Saint-Gervais), then outside the walls in Les Pâquis, Plainpalais and Les Eaux-Vives. ↩

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