Between Tradition and Modernity: Textile Design Education in Lyons at the Beginning of the 20th Century

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by
Florence Charpigny

With regard to textile design in general, and Lyonnais designers in particular, there is still no global synthesis and very little detailed research available. Yet, some studies were published in Lyon, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, by local historians with family, professional and cultural links with the silk manufactures. It is not coincidence that their work occurred at this period: at the end of the 19th century, the Lyonnais silk industry went through a series of serious economic and structural crises. The change begun at the beginning of the 19th century with the introduction of the Jacquard mechanism was painfully reaching completion, transforming the Lyonnais silk manufactures (la Fabrique lyonnaise), and provoking an identity crisis in Lyonnais textiles. Historians echoed this crisis in their research which was largely devoted to the “golden age” of the manufactures, which, for them, was the 18th century. Their texts and, in particular, studies devoted to the 18th century designers, form the basis of my paper which focuses on the influence of these texts on the teaching of silk design at the beginning of the 20th century. In addition, the collections of the Musée des Tissus de Lyon and the institutional archives, allow development of my discussion along three lines: firstly, the image of silk designers and their education in the 18th century will be described, analysed and discussed; secondly, the institutions which educated designers at the beginning of the 20th century, the teaching staff and the curricula will be presented; and thirdly, the main reforms in teaching design at the time will be analysed through the personalities, statutes and philosophy of their authors. In particular, the successive professional status of these authors, and their views on an ideal training derived from that of the 18th century, will be discussed, as well as the resistance that they met, and the actual implementation of their ideas.

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