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1990

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Mikosch, Elisabeth, "The Manufacture And Trade Of Luxury Textiles In The Age Of Mercantilism" (1990).
Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings. 612.
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THE MANUFACTURE AND TRADE OF LUXURY TEXTILES IN THE AGE OF MERCANTILISM

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When Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's minister for finance and economic affairs, said: "Fashion is to France what gold mines are to the Spaniards," (quoted by Minchinton 1977,112) he recognized how significant the manufacture of fashionable luxury textiles was for the economy of France. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century many absolutist rulers of Europe who pursued mercantilist policies fostered the production and trade of expensive textiles.

Tremendous resources went into the making of woven silks, lace, tapestries, fine embroideries and table linens. The best designers and craftsmen were employed who used the most valued materials, such as silk, precious metals and stone. Textiles, as they appear in painting and surviving pieces, are to a considerable degree responsible for our notion of the seventeenth and eighteenth century as an era of extravagant luxury and splendor. A study of the interrelationship of luxury textiles and the theories and policies of mercantilism will provide the historical background necessary to understand why this period created textiles of extraordinary artistic and technical quality.

Although the usefulness of the term mercantilism has been questioned by some (De Vries 1976,236 and Blaich 1973,1-10), in the context of this paper the following widely used definition is still helpful. Here the term mercantilism refers to economic theories and policies which European countries applied to different degrees and at various periods during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Implementing mercantilist policies governments forcefully intervened in economic processes in order to expand national income and to use economic power for political ends (Minchinton 1969,vii and De Vries 1976,236-237). Striving for a positive trade balance rulers sought to accumulate monetary wealth which they regarded the key to political power. For the first time governments extensively and systematically used protectionist measures to increase the production and trade of goods. They granted generous financial support and privileges to new enterprises, controlled the quality of goods through industry regulations, and tried to ward off the import of competing foreign goods through high custom duties.

Luxury textiles received particular attention even though they formed only a small part of the entire textile production, the leading economic sector in Europe

since the middle ages. On the one hand, governments hoped that domestic production of expensive textiles would satisfy the needs of the court and prevent the loss of money for costly imports, and on the other hand, they regarded luxury textiles among the most profitable export goods.

Luxury textiles: a vital necessity for the aristocratic court society

The social significance of luxury textiles in maintaining a hierarchical aristocratic society represents one important reason why enormous efforts were invested in the production of these textiles. As Max Weber has argued, the consumption of luxury goods did not mean a frivolous or superfluous waste of money and time for the aristocratic society (Weber 1976,651). Rather, they were an important status symbol and served as a crucial instrument asserting one's social position in a highly hierarchical society. For this reason, the aristocracy spent enormous sums of money for items of clothes and the interior decoration of their palaces: Louis XV could easily spend over 16,000 *livres* on lace in a single month alone. This sum was more than one hundred times the annual income of a Valenciennes lace maker (Ratzki-Kraatz 1983,119).

Social pressures demanding expensive clothing were most powerful at the royal courts. In his comprehensive study of French court society under Louis XIV Norbert Elias describes how relentless battles in the courtly hierarchy compelled the French aristocracy to spend a large part of their income on costly clothing and extravagant lifestyles (Elias 1983,98-99,174). One was only accepted as a duke if one lived and appeared as one. Saint Simon, a rather critical eyewitness at Louis XIV's court, describes how the king himself made conspicuous consumption of luxury a "political maxim" at court (quoted by Sombart 1983,104). Louis made it quite clear that those courtiers would gain his personal favor who could display extravagant luxury at their dinner parties, in their dress, carriages and in the decoration of their houses. The constant competition for the King's favors drove many aristocrats to ruin themselves financially, rendering them even more dependent on the king's benevolence. Thus, the social and political pressures of conspicuous consumption helped Louis XIV to strengthen his power and keep that of his aristocrats in check.

For the ruler himself, it was politically vital to appear in the greatest splendor at official occasions. Johann Michael von Loen, an eighteenth-century German commentator of court life, echoes the opinion commonly found in books on princely education of the period (Loen 1972,160):

The position of a grand prince requires proper decorum and splendor. The prince consolidates in his person the whole power of the people. Therefore his appearance and character have to impress upon his subjects obedience,

respect and admiration. Splendor, grandeur, and majestic dignity should mark all his actions in order to evoke love, respect and happiness of his subjects. The magnificence that surrounds the head of state will, at the same time, bring honor to his subjects. (my translation)

That the display of opulent clothes and textiles was politically necessary became especially evident at diplomatic occasions. In order to project an image of wealth and power when receiving foreign ambassadors, a ruler would usually have his palace decorated with his best tapestries and embroideries, and he would order his courtiers to dress in their most splendid state suits. When Louis XIV received the Persian ambassador in 1715 the king "wore a gold and black cloak decorated with diamonds worth twelve and a half million *livres*, and many other jewels, some borrowed from various princes" (Walton 1986,19).

Sumptuary laws and the economic significance of luxury textiles

The economic significance of luxury textiles is well reflected in the sumptuary laws of the period which prescribed in detail what kind of clothes and textiles certain social ranks were allowed to wear. Although the main purpose of sumptuary laws had always been to maintain the social order of a hierarchical society, their justifications changed during the course of time (Eisenbart 1962 and Hampel-Kallbrunner 1962). During the middle ages religious and moral arguments were used to enforce sumptuary laws: at least in theory, the Christian values of modesty, decency and humility were not compatible with lavish dress. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century economic reasoning dictated the sumptuary laws which now mainly tried to restrict the consumption of costly foreign luxury goods.

In 1671 the Roman-German emperor Leopold I passed the so-called *grosse Leopoldinische Luxuspatent* which determined how much each rank of society was allowed to spend on foreign and domestic fabrics (Hampel-Kallbrunner 1962,50-54). This law exempted the aristocracy from any restrictions; for them regulations were merely promised. However, the rest of society was divided into five classes. At the upper end, high court and administrative officials could wear expensive clothes and fabrics except for those foreign textiles decorated with gold, silver and precious stones. At the lower end, the common peasants had to wear only domestic cloth costing not more than half a guilder per ell.

Mercantilists attached special significance to gold and silver because they regarded the accumulation of bullion as the prime measure of a nation's wealth. This resulted in two contrary effects on the consumption of luxury textiles. On the one hand, the court promoted textiles with heavy decorations of precious metals as effective signs of conspicuous consumption. But on the other hand,

sumptuary laws, which served as a very common method to retain the stock of gold and silver in a country, tried to control the use of these metals in personal adornment. Textiles with gold and silver thread were regarded as especially wasteful. If imported, such expensive textiles threatened to channel large amounts of money out of the country. Making the loss worse, precious metal threads tended to wear away as the textiles were used.

With the increasing wealth and self-confidence of the bourgeoisie during the eighteenth century, sumptuary laws were less successful than ever and were gradually abandoned altogether. It was in the interest of the luxury trades that anybody who could afford them should be able to buy fine clothes, irrespective of status or birth. The Austrian empress Maria Theresa finally gave up her plans for a new sumptuary law when her ministers convinced her that, besides being impossible to carry out, such a law was economically ill-advised since Austria itself was making and exporting fine textiles (Hampel-Kallbrunner 1962,68-69).

Eighteenth-century writers promoted this new liberal attitude towards luxury. Instead of denouncing luxury clothes, they tended to justify the economic advantage of producing and consuming fine clothes and textiles. In his article on luxury, leisure and craftsmanship, Benjamin Franklin distinguishes useful from wasteful luxury (Franklin 1967,55-62). Whereas he condemns the economic harmfulness of tobacco, rum and sugar, he praises fine textiles as especially beneficial luxury goods which inspire diligence and fine craftsmanship. Hence, Franklin regarded the production of luxury textiles as a great asset to a nation's economy. Even if a fool were to ruin himself buying luxury goods, he would nevertheless have given a livelihood and bread to several craftsmen and their families.

Colbert and the French luxury textile industries

The economic policies promulgated by Jean Baptiste Colbert represent the most prominent example of mercantilism in action and inspired many other European countries. In the beginning of his long career as the king's chief minister (1661-1683), Colbert worried about France's negative trade balance taking special note of the extensive textile imports. In 1662 the imports of fine woolen cloth into France totaled 5,220,000 *livres* (Cole 1939,2:142). Less than twenty years later Colbert could state with satisfaction that French-made serge and stockings alone cost the Dutch four million *livres* yearly in lost trade (Cole 1939,2:155). When Colbert set out to develop the luxury textile trades, he was actually following a long-standing French tradition. Already in the sixteenth century the luxury-loving Valois kings had begun to foster domestic production of silk in order to prevent silk imports from draining money out of the country (Cole 1939,1:10).

Even though Colbert concentrated on the woolen cloth industry, he spent enormous efforts reorganizing the French luxury textile industries, including those of tapestry, silk and lace. Colbert invited foreign textile specialists to France when he realized that French workers could learn from their superior skills. From Flanders he recruited experienced tapestry weavers, lace makers and weavers of fine cloth, and from Venice he planned to bring in thirty skilled lace mistresses. At this time most governments were fiercely protective of their own industries, and skilled workers were forbidden to leave the country. The recruitment of foreign specialists could cause international incidents; the successful recruitment, however, was considered an impressive feat of economic statesmanship (Kisch 1968,4).

Colbert sought to closely direct and control industrial production. Granting special privileges and generous financial support, he encouraged new companies. Exemption from taxes and from the lodgings of soldiers, as well as the granting of a monopoly and freedom from guild regulations, gave a business important economic advantages. Colbert, an excellent administrator, himself personally supervised many of the new textile companies. Regulations were drawn up for the textile industries of each French city in an attempt to control the quality of the finished product. The pervasiveness of regulations testifies to the importance of the textile production for France. Nearly two-thirds of the about two hundred regulations issued by Colbert concerned the textile industry (Cole 1939,2:415). The government not only regulated the technical quality of the textiles, such as width, the number of warps and the quality of dyes, but also tried to control work conditions and labor relations in the textile companies.

In some cases the state even tried to influence the design of the product. For example, in order to counter Italian and Flemish imports Colbert established a royal lace company in 1665 which had production centers in several French cities. Court artists were asked to create the designs for the lace, and the lace-makers were only allowed to use the patterns provided by the lace company. Colbert's attempts to force French lace-makers to abandon their old lace styles and imitate the more fashionable Venetian lace met with considerable resistance (Cole 1939,2: 239-286). The problem of Venetian imports was solved later, around 1675, when Alençon lace makers developed a new French needle lace style, the "point de France," which gradually supplanted the fashion for Venetian lace and conquered the international market.

Colbert also used custom duties and import quotas to protect and encourage domestic industries. He issued the tariffs of 1664 and 1667 mainly to protect the textile industries. Colbert reduced taxes on the import of raw material and on the export of French products, but raised considerably duties on imported finished textiles. The decree of the Council of State of April 24, 1664 specifically limited

the import of foreign tapestries to two hundred per year for tapestries costing between one thousand and twelve hundred *livres* and restricting the import to twenty-five for those costing between two thousand and twenty-five hundred *livres* (Cole 1939,1:432). Those who ignored Colbert's regulations faced the possibility of fines or confiscation of property. Someone who illegally imported or wore Venetian or Flemish lace had to expect its seizure and to pay a three thousand *livres* penalty (Kraatz 1981,1168).

With all this governmental support the French luxury textile industry was soon able to satisfy the needs of the court. According to the inventories of the French royal household of 1665, the majority of silks still came from Italy; only two years later, in 1667, most silks were ordered from Lyon. (Schmidt 1955,373).

The promotion of French fashion abroad

France became the leader of European fashions not only because the state invested enormous resources and efforts into the luxury industries, but also because the French vigorously promoted their fashions all over Europe. The *Mercurie Galant*, published since 1672 and endowed with royal privilege in 1677, informed the elegant world of Europe about the French court and its latest fashions. The *Mercurie* published the first commercial fashion advertisement, which promoted the merchandise of the textile merchant Gautier and of the carpet manufacturers Bon and Bailly (Kleinert 1980,53). Even more important for the spread of French fashion were engraved fashion plates sold by the print shops in the Rue St. Jacques in Paris. Prolific printmakers such as the Bonnarts and Larmessin families, Jean de St.Jean, Mariette, and Trouvain created numerous elegant engravings often depicting popular members of court in the latest fashion. Between 1682 and 1689 alone, about three hundred fashion engravings appeared in series or as single prints (Kleinert 1980,36). Eagerly awaited and collected, they were distributed all over Europe. Offering the most vivid and immediate impression of the latest Parisian fashions, fully coiffed fashion dolls began to travel regularly to European capitals.

The French government used also its political power to spread French fashion. When Louis XIV's troops occupied Strasbourg in 1685, its inhabitants were given four months to stop wearing German clothes and dress in the French style (Boehn 1920,151).

A more elegant way to promote French luxury goods abroad was the exchange of diplomatic gifts. Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld clearly expressed a mercantile attitude when ordering a set of tapestries and twelve matching chairs from the royal Manufactory at Gobelins to be sent as a gift to a Roman dignitary in 1779. Asking the French king for the usual discount, de la Rochefoucauld

reasoned that the set would give Rome a magnificent idea of the state of the arts in France and would certainly help to procure more orders for the French tapestry industry (Pallach 1987,100). The French practice of paying subsidies to European rulers in return for political and military loyalty often resulted in French economic gain. For example, the splendor-loving Bavarian Elector Max Emanuel received over four million *livres* in subsidies between 1718 and 1727 most of which, in addition to over two million of his own money, he spent on French luxury textiles, clothes and accessories (Hartmann 1973,350-360).

Thanks to Colbert's unrelenting efforts French exports increased considerably; and fashion and luxury goods averaged half of all French registered exports during the eighteenth century (Stürmer 1979,234). According to Sombart, silks from Lyon alone were responsible for between one-eighth and one-seventh of the exports during the same century (Sombart 1983,171). Colbert's legacy still continues today. A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* mentions that, with a share of forty-eight percent, French brands still dominate the international market of luxury goods (*The Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 1990).

Luxury textile production in other European countries

Fighting the competition with France, several European countries tried to build their own luxury industries. Besides porcelain, it was silk that many absolutist monarchs, inspired by mercantilistic theories, turned to in the hope of finding a resource which could improve their national income and help to finance their increasingly lavish and expensive courts. Silk manufacturies were established for example in Sweden, Denmark, Prussia, Saxony, Austria and Russia.

Despite enormous sums invested in the development of silk industries, most companies depended heavily on official support. They represent typical examples for the artificial and short-lived nature of many luxury good manufacturies set up per royal decree in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Kriedte 1980,144).

The Prussian king Frederick II, who regarded the silk industry as a pillar of his economic policy, gave over 1.8 million thalers for its support, more than half of the total amount spent on all industrial expansions during his forty-six-year-long reign (Kisch 1968,13).

Since most of the silk industries founded by absolutist rulers had no traditional roots, these countries relied largely on the import of skilled labor. While Vienna recruited many Italian silk weavers, Prussia and Saxony mainly invited French Protestants. In the fifteen years following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, about two hundred to three hundred thousand Huguenots left France. As highly skilled craftsmen they contributed considerably to the creation of new luxury ware industries outside of France. Even though they

produced goods that competed with France, at the same time, they spread the taste for the French style throughout Europe and thereby increased the demand for French luxury products.

The mercantilistic demand for self-sufficiency in raw material inspired several rulers to invest enormous sums of money in experiments with sericulture. Between 1749–55 Maria Theresa spent over thirty-three thousand florins on the distribution of over three hundred thousand mulberry saplings to be planted in and around Vienna (Bucek 1974,97–100). But the unfavorable climate of northern Europe doomed the costly attempts to raise silkworms to fail, and most of the raw silk continued to be imported from Italy and France.

Instead of having demand and supply determine the success or failure of the new industry, European monarchs tried to protect the domestic silk industry. They hoped to control consumption through taxes and import bans of competing foreign silks. To keep the supply of rawsilk and its price stable many governments opened central storehouses for this fiber. Frederick II forced quotas upon the reluctant silk merchants who had difficulties selling the Berlin-made silks because they were more expensive and of lesser quality than the imported silks. Frederick did his best to set an example for his subjects. As at Versailles, the display case for French luxury manufacture, Frederick II had his palaces in Potsdam decorated with Berlin-made silks (Paepke 1982).

The extent of the silk industry throughout Europe during the eighteenth century is quite impressive. In addition to the new silk centers established by mercantilistic governments, there were also traditional silk weaving centers in Spain, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, and more recently in England. All these silk weaving centers could exist because during this period there was an increased demand for high quality textiles. With the emergence of a new prosperous and self-confident bourgeoisie, fine textiles, like other luxury goods, were no longer a privilege of the aristocracy, but found a market in wider circles of society. In and around Berlin there were about 1750 silk and velvet looms working in addition to several hundred looms producing half silks during the peak years of 1777 to 1778. In 1794 the number of silk looms in Vienna had increased to three thousand in twenty-nine silk factories, obviously profiting from the decline of the Lyon silks after the French Revolution. While Berlin exported silks to north-eastern European markets, Vienna sold its silk textiles to south-eastern Europe, to Bohemia, Hungary, Siebenbürgen, and Turkey. In Stockholm the number of silk looms reached the impressive number of 2474 in 1762, and in 1772 Russia the silk industry, which had been particularly nurtured by czarina Elizabeth, counted eighty factories (Bucek 1974,191–203). Leipzig, the silk producing center of Saxony, also enjoyed special protection from its monarchs. In 1747 there were fourteen silk manufacturies registered, eight of which produced silks with gold

and silver threads and six made velvet and silks (Czok 1978,152). Of course, for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, all these silk centers were overshadowed by France. Only one year before the Revolution there were 14,777 looms working in Lyon alone (Bucek 1974,192).

Problems of mercantilistic policies and the luxury textile trades

By the second half of the eighteenth century inherent problems of mercantilistic policies became obvious. When in 1766 Frederick II asked for a report about the effectiveness of his economic policy, his advisors responded with an unexpected frank condemnation of his entire mercantilist approach (Kisch 1968,10). The so-called *Ursinus* report singled out the silk industry as being particularly inefficient and entirely dependent on royal support. Berlin silks suffered severely from overproduction, and found no market because they were forty to seventy percent more expensive than foreign silks of the same quality.

Pervasive governmental interference and overprotection aimed at eliminating all outside competition often produced a weak uncompetitive industry. Depending heavily on financial aid, most silk companies declined when official support failed. For example, when the government in Sweden changed in 1765 and was no longer interested in a national silk industry the number of looms decreased dramatically. In the following twenty years the number of working silk looms declined by over sixty percent, from about 2474 to 829 (Bucek 1974,194).

Joseph II, Maria Theresa's son and successor, was a more enlightened monarch than Frederick II in terms of economic policies. Although he vigorously supported the Viennese silk companies, he realized that government protection had its limits. In 1782 Joseph abolished the regulations of quality control with the argument that free competition between the silk companies would take care of poor quality textiles (Bucek 1974,94).

In his comparative study of the Prussian and Krefeld silk industry Herbert Kisch argues why Krefeld was by far more successful than Berlin (Kisch 1968). Unlike the Berlin companies run by immigrated craftsmen and tightly controlled by the government, the Krefeld's silk industry was organized by clever mennonite merchant-manufacturers, who were able to escape the stifling Prussian mercantilistic regulations. Competing successfully on the international market Krefeld supplied silks, velvets and silk ribbons to a wide range of foreign customers. The leading manufacturing family von der Leyen, who in 1786 accounted for ninety percent of all Krefeld silk production, earned 735,000 thalers in this year alone and gave employment to 3,400 weavers working on 815 looms (Wescher and Zeller 1950,3013).

During the eighteenth century it also became obvious that import bans and high import duties often did not have the desired effect. Instead of protecting the domestic industry they encouraged an extensive smuggling market. Similarly, sumptuary laws prohibiting the wearing of foreign textiles were notoriously ineffective. Quite often drastic import bans and tariffs provoked animosity resulting in retaliatory measures from the affected country. Here the underlying aggressive nature of mercantilism becomes obvious. Like most practitioners of mercantilism, Colbert did not think that trade could be mutually beneficial. Instead, he believed that trade was limited and that one country could only expand its manufacture and trade at the expense of another country. With pride Colbert noted in his memoirs that the successful build up of the French lace industry had ruined the lace production of Venice and Genoa, depriving these cities of a crucial source of income (Cole 1939,2:245). Colbert's keen sense for economic rivalry with Holland led him to enthusiastically support Louis XIV's war against this country. On July 8, 1672, at the outbreak of the second war, Colbert wrote the following words to his king: "If the king were to subjugate all the United Provinces of the Netherlands, their trade would become His Majesty's trade; there would be nothing left to wish for." (Murat 1984,150) As Milton Sonday has pointed out, Louis XIV's wars with the Netherlands affected the control of important centers producing lace and the fine linen yarn used for making expensive lace (Sonday 1982,13-22).

But ultimately Louis' aggressive foreign policy backfired. In the end he was not able to conquer Holland, and he had to abolish the tariff of 1667, a very high import duty that protected the French industries from foreign imports. The war had devoured enormous financial resources and ruined or jeopardized many of Colbert's economic plans.

The unique socio-economic and political conditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were to a large degree responsible for the creation of luxury textiles displaying an exceptional level of fine craftsmanship and artistic brilliance. While the court society, more than ever, required splendid textiles as a crucial form of status representation, mercantilistic efforts concentrated on the production of luxury wares regarding them as vital stimulation for the national economy. Along with other luxury goods, such as porcelain and furniture, fine textiles were at the center of the material culture of the period. They epitomized what John Nef has called the "economy of quality" (Nef 1958,128-155), an economy that is historically more significant for its production of high quality than for the mass manufacture of goods that would characterize the following centuries.

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