Silk in European and American Trade before 1783: A commodity of commerce or a frivolous luxury?

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Silk in European and American Trade before 1783
A commodity of commerce or a frivolous luxury?

This outline is taken from my as yet unpublished book on The English Silk Industry 1700-1825, and especially from the chapters on raw silk and trial. In addition, I have widened the scope for this talk to discuss the subject more generally. In terms of general economic history the quantities of silk produced and sold are miniscule but there are a lot of instructive points to be made which are of general importance - as well as some very pretty objects. The latter are "documents" in the French sense as well as works of art - a point that many people have heard and make only too often. One aspect which I shall state now and, no doubt, several more times in different ways is that we must understand for what a particular fibre was used and how that use may change. Since for all clothing and furnishing there were, effectively, four fibres this should seem self-evident but it does not always seem to be. On the other hand, statistics compiled in a period when in no sense were they compiled scientifically or objectively I prefer to treat with great caution. They can point research in a useful direction but not much more. The Customs compiled yearly statistics of imports and exports in the Portland books now in the Public Record Office in London (1). They used the great pound, however, and an out of date Book of Rates. So what? The statistics did tell me to which countries English silks were exported and which were the most important markets, of which more anon.

Sources of raw silk:
The Warp

Even at this first stage an appreciation of the real object is of great importance. The silk for the warp had to be of higher quality than that for the weft since it took the strain of the loom in weaving. Not every country which grew silk could produce a suitable quality. In the 17th-18th century there were two main sources. The first was China and it was imported into Europe with other goods by the English, French and Dutch East India Companies. The quality was usually excellent but it arrived spasmodically [2] making it difficult for silkwomen and weavers alike. The second and more important source was Piedmont, an easy market for Lyon in the second half of the 17th century but as the English industry expanded competition in Piedmont between the French and English grew increasingly tense - and the price rose. Raw silk was also exported as organzine [3]. The pressure of demand led both countries to look for other sources in the 18th century. The English tried growing silk in Georgia and South Carolina but although the climate was suitable slave labour was not. [4] The white mulberry cannot grow in Northern Europe as a commercial enterprise. Whether or not the myth is true that James I of England encouraged the planting of mulberries is irrelevant because what grew nicely in England is the red mulberry, delicious for humans but not for silk worms. The French were much more practical and began to grow silk in Provence where both labour and climate were suitable. This did not entirely satisfy their needs but reduced French dependence on Piedmont.
The weft:

The weft could be of a much lower quality although the finest dress silks required good glossy tram. Raw silk was the main import of the English Levant Company [5] founded in the late 16th century. There were many qualities [6] and when thrown it had different uses. Thus even in the same textile the ground weft and the pattern and brocaded wefts had different needs, one functional and one decorative. Although imported from Turkey the silk itself came from Persia. The markup on its passage through Turkey was thought to be exorbitant and thus the English tried to negotiate for its passage through the south but that attempt proved abortive as the south were even more rapacious than the Turkish merchants [7]. Many different kinds of silk were handled by the importers, brokers, silkmen and throwsters. Silk with a naturally yellowish colour could be dyed deep colours, it was useless for white or pale colours. Silk was needed for decorative features in worsteds "silk camlets" or to be woven with linen as "half silks" or with cut and uncut worsted velvet for "caftcyes". Although the degree of twist and ply is highly relevant the initial quality was vital. If the thrower in Shrewsbury or Macclesfield opened a bale and found the wrong quality he could not carry out the order he had been given [8].

Bengal Silk:

This could not be used for high quality goods even as late as the mid 19th century. There are three hanks in the current exhibition of Flavoured Silks in the V&A, one from China, one from Hungary and one from Bengal all shown in the 1861 exhibition. The Hungarian is possibly the best and the Chinese is glossy and white but alas, the low quality of the Indian silk is quite apparent even to a non-specialist. It could be and was used for cheap goods like cheap handkerchiefs (which were going to be printed, for example, by the English were important East India Company imports - and these were cheap handkerchiefs). Bengal silk was also used for scarfs and tapes for "Bengal scarf" is listed in the inventories of two weavers of ferrits.

Our earliest silk handkerchiefs are the printed Oxford Almanacs which first appeared in the 17th century, printed with printer's ink and not indelible to take any stain. Because silk was imported, expensive and printing messy with considerable waste the best silk was not used for this purpose. The defects of Indian silk were a corroborative advantage to the English industry. Indeed in 1823 a silkman complained to a Select Committee of the House of Commons that "East India Silk is in its infancy as far as quality". [9]

Narrow Weaving:

Silk has, however, an essential luxury, a nice contradiction in terms. A worsted suit or a coat needed facings and linings. Linen was certainly used for the parts which did not show but silk was needed for the parts which did. Moreover, we are talking about western Europe and America in a time of increasing trade and rising prosperity. There were only four fibre and until the mid 18th century it was impossible to print fabrics with the skill of the Indian craftsmen. The natural way to decorate a textile was to weave a pattern and the natural fibre for all social occasions was silk. Wooll, worsted and linen were all important - indeed the most expensive fabrics bought by Barbara Johnson were broadcloth for the riding habit[13]. Mixtures were, however, an equally important part of the repertoire of both clothing and furnishing and there are some very interesting late 17th and early 18th century silk and linen mixed fabrics preserved in New England collections. Silk and woollen interests combined in 1719-21 in the campaign to prohibit the use and wear of printed cotton in England and the market over which they fought - for all the rhetoric - was not that of high fashion but the cheap mixtures and coarse silks used for mundane purposes[14].

Two other features are relevant to the period from the mid 17th century till 1783. Firstly, the period of petticoat breeches used. The finest silk ribbons from St-Etienne or Coventry required warp threads of comparable quality to the contemporary broad silks.
cut changed much less radically than colour and pattern until the 1770s. Secondly, silk furnishings were very important in the richest households in the 17th century but from the 1730s were ousted (though not overnight) by plain painted or wall-papered walls and by printed furnishing fabrics legal in England from 1736 and by printed cottons legal from 1774. In France the date when cottons became legal was 1759. Changes in the style of patterns belong mainly to another talk but their relevance here is the effect of such changes to the rich. Luxury silks, however, remained in use by the social classes from King to merchant and by the same people for their carriages, state rooms and, in England, barges, and for the Churches and Synagogues.

Such demand continued even when the more volatile changes in style changed the type of dress fabric. Venice had been the great supplier of silks to Europe from the 1720s. The last order for silks in initial is known is from the Leman designs while he was himself a merchant in Lyon. The Leman designs are crucial to this industry as they were to the production of all other consumer goods. While the French could not get out to their own markets this one grew rapidly. The first silk to come to light dating from 1710 is completely sophisticated both in design and execution. The French in Lyon complained to their Intendant in Paris that the ports were "bouchée" (11). The early designs by James Leman show that this was just the time when the English were boldly competing in the most fashionable market. The first silk to come to light dating from 1710 is completely sophisticated both in design and execution (17). The British Navigation Acts and command of the sea hampered France during the War of the Spanish Succession and continued to do so. The French in Lyon complained to their Intendant that the ports were "bouchée" (16). The early designs by James Leman show that this was just the time when the English were boldly competing in the most fashionable market. The first silk to come to light dating from 1710 is completely sophisticated both in design and execution (17).

There have been plenty of general discussions about the shift in trade from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic but while the former remained vital for the supply of raw silk for the weft it was the latter which was relevant to the success of the English. The British Navigation Acts and command of the sea hampered France during the War of the Spanish Succession and continued to do so. The French in Lyon complained to their Intendant that the ports were "bouchée" (16). The early designs by James Leman show that this was just the time when the English were boldly competing in the most fashionable market. The first silk to come to light dating from 1710 is completely sophisticated both in design and execution (17). The British Navigation Acts and command of the sea hampered France during the War of the Spanish Succession and continued to do so. The French in Lyon complained to their Intendant that the ports were "bouchée" (16). The early designs by James Leman show that this was just the time when the English were boldly competing in the most fashionable market. The first silk to come to light dating from 1710 is completely sophisticated both in design and execution (17).

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they needed for shipping but tar, hemp, rope, linen for sail-cloth. Just as in the American Colonies, they were constantly needed and supplied by the Dutch, Danes, merchants of Hamburg and by the Norwegians. In the early 18th century not only had the English burnt most of the timber outside England and Scotland was northern Europe. By the 1740s the export of French silks (worsteds are another matter). Holland was expressed so often in the letters not only from sea-ports but orders arrived back in Spitalfields. This was the only centre making fashionable goods in England throughout the 18th century. I have insisted long ago on the American wish to be fashionable [32] which was again evident in 1744. Mrs Charles Willing chose to be painted in it when another example is a dress silk of 1742 [37]. Moreover, her sister admired it so much that she, too, was painted in it in a much less successful portrait.

American merchants were the aristocracy of the Colonies. I would expect Isaac de Peyster to have a fashionable nightgown. Not only were they buying high quality goods of every kind to sell both in their own towns and to send on to the interior but they themselves were important private purchasers of such goods. The Port Books grouped the colonials [31] and it is evident both from the figures of exports and my own observation that there was a limited market in the South (although there are 18th century costumes in both Charleston, South Carolina and Richmond, Virginia their numbers are insignificant). The important destinations were New York, Philadelphia, Providence, Salem, Newport R.I. and aboard ships bound for Boston. The Boston Gazette advertised such imports regularly and other newspapers perhaps less frequently but the personal sales to the merchant and his family recur continuously. Whereas the colonies between Colonies covered a wide area geographically, not every Colonial order contained one for silk (woollens, linens and goods for trading to the Indians were the staples of the textile trade) it must be remembered, that piecemeal as they were, all the orders fell back in Spitalfields. This is the only proof of the only fabric that was fashionable goods in England throughout the 18th century. I have insisted long ago on the American wish to be fashionable [32] which was again evident in 1744. Mrs Charles Willing chose to be painted in it when another example is a dress silk of 1742 [37]. Moreover, her sister admired it so much that she, too, was painted in it in a much less successful portrait.

Another example neatly illustrates the significance of the two most important markets. Anna Maria Garthwaite sold another damask design in 1751 again to Simon Julins [38]. There is a dress in buff silk in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts but generally lent to the exhibition and also a version in the Victoria and Albert Museum which I can say are English but it is only those for which the actual objects and, pretty as they are, they are real historical facts of greater significance, in my opinion, than any statistic. I will repeat my earlier statement that it is necessary to look at the actual objects and, pretty as they are, they are real historical facts of greater significance than any statistic. Also interesting is a Christening Pouch in the National Museum in Copenhagen because this has been through two stages [40]. It dates from Albany, New York state ("people are more nice here than in Boston") in 1742. It can be dated by a design by Anna Maria Garthwaite. Albany was then on the border with the wild Indian tribes but - Catherine's father (or husband) was a successful merchant. Moreover, her sister admired it so much that she, too, was painted in it in a much less successful portrait.
entirely frivolous. Moreover, its effect upon the economy of Coventry was gentle with tender skins. Thus, although it was a luxury it was not a necessity.

The normal British summer is not like those of 1989 and 1990. Only the Colonies the need for a suitable summer fabric existed from the beginning and it was a market no enterprising merchant or producer could ignore. The numbers of silks in individual orders may be very small compared with trade figures but the importance of the trade is great for the Colonies in America. [44]. He praised English damasks and satins and quotes Bouquet on the American trade and it was interesting to see the comment by Anders Berch in a report from his study tour of 1759-61. Berch's son, Christers, in a report from his study tour of 1760-61. We know that these weavers existed and flourished because their orders and their stock either went or have been preserved.

London made mixtures of all kinds, worsted “town made camlets” featuring weaves and trade names that are well known from Spitalfields in the Eliz Collection [54] as well as silks. London made lines of various qualities, tapes, ribbons, and gauze, to sell, either with or without Hand Insurance Company or with the Sun. All benefitted from the English wasting silks (at least I think that was his source) “thus... England with her silk goods can never compete in price with Holland or France so that the only regions to which England can export such goods are the Colonies in America.” [44].

By the middle of the century some English silks were apparently exported to all parts of the New World with large elaborately decorated and patterned pieces[48]. In a few years, between 1770 and 1780, the New World was naturally reflected in new styles. Fashion was changing radically, anyway, in cut and in style. Nor was it irrelevant, since English Radicals approved of the Revolution and the New World was naturally reflected in new styles.

From the 1690s to 1770, approximately, there had been yearly, even daily, changes in pattern and style. The English were naturally reflected in new styles. Fashion was changing radically, anyway, in cut and in style. Nor was it irrelevant, since English Radicals approved of the Revolution and the New World was naturally reflected in new styles.

The picture was not entirely bleak - on the contrary. The London pattern-drawer virtually vanished from the scene. The answer is a simple one: Fashion. Provided that they had some purchasing power even the poor were as fashionable as they could be. Look at any print of London, New York or Boston - or indeed at the fortune made by Robert Peel in supplying them[46]. Look at a middle class lady like Barbara Johnson and the quantity of printed cottons which she had from the 1770s onwards [47]. She could have had silks and when their fashion returned she did - in the 19th century. Again, I will interject: we published her album not just because it was pretty but for a very serious purpose, to illustrate the demand for less expensive in costume. While the qualities of raw silk must have been influenced by the need for such softer fabrics even more important was the quantity. Such styles required fewer warp threads to the inch (the most expensive element) and fewer yards to the dress. Certainly, the future George IV had silk waistcoats and silk furnishings, often French, but since he did not pay his bills his was not an economic demand, albeit very useful for fashion history. What none of these authors noted, whether in the USA or Great Britain, were printed cottons, woolens, worsteds, and in the 1790s fine linens. The American War of Independence came at a point when fashion was changing. It was the French Revolution, radially, anyway, in cut and in style. Nor was it irrelevant, since English Radicals approved of the Revolution and the New World was naturally reflected in new styles.

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important. Silks for men's wear were still needed and the firm of Maze and Steer whose pattern book we have for the years 1786-1790 and possibly 1791, were so successful that nine of their waistcoats have survived. The customers who bought the silks produced by Batchelor Ham and Perigal and their successors after 1781 were among the most important in the trade as their predecessors had been: men with royal appointments who knew their customers. The satin stripes of the 1780s and 1790s were wanted or they would not have been produced. The main slum after 1781 occurred in 1792-3, other years were good. Thowestors, however, flourished until 1758-65 the silks produced were rich and possibly with breeds of silk. The profits recorded by William Willmott's executors in Sherborne were exceptionally good in 1792 although they declined afterwards, only recovering in 1800. Equally, the importer and the producer of raw silk, despite the hazards of trade in the late 18th century still had a market, if he could reach it.

What was lost in England was the export trade in woven silks. This may have been compensated by the increase in home demand until 1826 but that is another story.

British inventories for probate complete the picture: in the mid 18th century clothes were an asset to be valued and sold and in the 1790s they had often been "given away" or were given low values compared with other objects, which had, in any case, become much more numerous. By 1800 the assessors seldom bothered to mention them. The Americans may have been much more thrifty. If so, what did they have and what were the valuations compared with other possessions?

State rooms in any European court required silks, so did state occasions, especially marriages and funerals, the presentation of ambassadors and, equally, the marriage of the prosperous merchant's daughter. In England and Sweden there was a conscious effort by the state to patronise its own production - but, as far as one can tell, a good deal of French silk was also imported. Such very formal occasions and, however, rare compared with the more normal needs of the fashionable. I do not know because I have not worked there and it is likely that the taste for luxury silks continued much longer among the rich of South America. This was a French export market and was, presumably, affected by the wars of independence in those countries. By then, the demand for silk and indeed for patterned silk had revived in Britain and the French were 'well placed to supply it. The American market was also open to British merchants and also enable British merchants to supply woollens to Turkey cheaper than the French. An act of Parliament was passed 14 Geo 11 cap 36 to authorise the trade. This was closed in 1747 and re-opened in 1750 - despite the opposition of the Levant Company.

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Notes
2.Ralph Davis Aleppo and Devonshire Square London 1976. Table 31 lists the values of exports in a fairly limited period.
3.In the Bosanquet Account the silks imported under this book were not included. This list includes such breeds of silk as red, green, blue, yellow, black and various shades of grey.
4.4.N.Rothstein, editor, Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashion and Fabrics 1987 p.8 of the album, May 1760. It had cost her brother 20s for the yard.
5.7. Gentleman's Magazine Vol.XII 1742, p.21, a memorial was printed on trade with Turkey through Russia. The text is the same as one dated July 1740 in the Bosanquet papers. "The northern provinces of Persia produce the best and the best sort of raw silk" from which Koscheid and Turkey were supplied. It was suggested that the English should enter the trade with Turkey merchants and also enable British merchants to supply woollens to Turkey cheaper than the French. An act of Parliament was passed 14 Geo 11 cap 36 to authorise the trade. This was closed in 1747 and re-opened in 1750 - despite the opposition of the Levant Company.
7.18.3. Reports of the Committee of the House of Commons in 1749/50 that " China silk is not fine enough in common for the warp but that he has some as fine as any Italian... China silk in some years was imported as bad as the Turkey", Journals Vol 25 p.996
9.5. Ralph Davis Aleppo and Devonshire Square London 1976. Table 31 lists the values of exports in a fairly limited period.
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12.11. William Willmott wrote to Thomas Barrcer 15 May 1773 on the small profit in working belladine silk which he had only taken for the sake of other work. On December 17th he wrote to John Banning that he had had a great quantity of silk sent down "chiefly for the sewing trade... which is generally done in London" whereas he had only a few hands to do it and it gave him very little profit.
13.12. This application to Parliament was made by the Weavers Company because of a sudden shortage. This is a continuous theme in the Willmott correspondence. He complained for example in September 1773, December 1773, January 1774, February 1774 and December 1774 and this is just the difficulties of one short period.
15.14. P.Bertholon Du Commerce et des Manufactures de Lyon Montpellier 1787 p.170 also said that it was only useful for the weft and a tiny proportion was good enough for the warp.
16.15. N.Rothstein, editor, Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashion and Fabrics 1987 p.8 of the album, May 1760. It had cost her brother 20s for the yard.
1940 A4486. It is illustrated in Silk Designs, p.39.
18. House of Lords MS Report 23 January 1734 presented by the Commissioners for Trades and Plantations. The Colonists "do not at present manufacture a third part of what is necessary for their own use but are generally clothed in English manufactures", quoted by me in Connoisseur 1967, Vol.166, no.168 p.90.
19. N. Rothstein Silks for the American Market. Connoisseur Vol.166 1967 no.169, de Peyster and the design are illustrated on p.150
20. T.373-1972 no.112 in current exhibition
24. Lyon, Archives Departementales, Serie B Papiers de Commercants, see Rothstein thesis p.521
25. There is a discrepancy between the number in the order book "873" and on the design "879". I am very grateful to Alice Ziebelem and Lorraine Karafel for checking this design and its inscription.
26. By analogy with 67-1885 which is the "counterpart of patterns sent to Spain and Portugal" by John Kelly of Norwich in 1763.
27. April 10-12 1764 the London Chronicle reported that Robert Trott [of the Customs] had seized "a very large book of patterns of French wrought silks of all sorts from 5s per yard to £5 and upwards". It was hoped that the patterns "would be preserved for the benefit of our silk manufacturers". The book was bought from the Customs by the Weavers Company for £50 and on July 18th they organised its viewing. 28. A point discussed in Silk Designs, p.22
31. They were grouped as New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland, and Carolina.
32. Connoisseur articles above published in 1967
33. Flowered Silks no. 60, Albany Institute of History and Art 1964, no.61. The design is in the V&A Museum. Both are illustrated in Silk Designs, p.47 and pl.164
34. 1764 National Museum of Ireland
35. Silk Designs p.22
36. Silk Designs pp.312-313
38. Flowered Silks exhibition nos.93,94,95, Museum of Fine Arts Boston 47.1021, Kunstindustrimuseet Oslo 5685 Silk Designs, p.49
40. Flowered Silks exhibition no.56 design 5981.r.
41. The Christening pouch in the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen was too fragile to lend. Its number is F.122 b 61/1892. It is illustrated in Silk Designs, p.47
43. Berch Collection pp.90 and 92
44. Silk Designs p.312
45. Daniel Gobbee gave evidence to Parliament in 1750 saying that a great quantity of textiles were exported to France and flowered silks to Germany, Silk Designs, p.312. The Gentleman's Magazine reported "our merchants now send their silks to Vienna and many other foreign courts where the excellence of English brocades is distinguished and applauded", Vol.xix p.319. This opinion may be compared with that of Dutillieu, footnote 20.
46. His success is described in S.D. Chapman and S. Chassagne European Textile Printers in the Eighteenth Century. A Study of Peel and Chevremont. Samples of printed cottons are illustrated p.83.
47. Daniel Gobbee's Albus p.32 and in the album itself pp.19-52
51. Three are in the V&A, three in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter and two in the Museum of London. The first six are displayed in Flowered Silks nos.141-146. See also Silk Designs pp.254-255. The pattern book from Rome and Steen, T.384-1972, also shown no.140. Some pages from this are illustrated in Silk Designs pls.335-338
* I have not had time to check Margaret Spufford's study which, by all reports, is most valuable. The Great Re-Clothing of Rural England, Peter Chapman and their wares in the 17th century 1984, to see what silks the chapmen did distribute.

By Natalie Rothstein
In the eighteenth century, a great deal of linen was produced in the American colonies. Virtually every farming family spun and wove linen cloth for its own consumption. The production of linen was the most widespread industrial activity in America during the colonial period. Yet at the same time, large amounts of linen were imported from across the Atlantic into the American colonies. Linen was the most important commodity entering into the American trade. This apparently paradoxical situation reflects the importance in pre-industrial society of the production and consumption of the extensive range of types of fabrics grouped together as 'linen'.

The range of uses of 'linen' is greater than for any other type of fabric. Clothing, bedding, the table and other domestic needs required various sorts of linen, and the transport and packaging industries required others - sailcloth, sacking and bagging of all sorts. The range of quality was considerable, from the finest cambrics and lawns and damasks to the coarsest sackcloths. In colonial America there was a sort of dual economy: basic linen needs were provided outside the market by the widespread domestic production of homespun coarse linen while the market was dominated by a range of better-quality (though still low-priced) linens imported from England, Scotland and Ireland, and imported too from the continent of Europe (especially Germany) via London.

The point was well made by Thomas Fitch, a Boston upholsterer, writing in 1726. "Very coarse Garlets [i.e. linen from Gulik, or Julich] not being serviceable won't suit our people, though we certainly have enough that are poor. Yet they won't wear Garlets but homespun linens, or rather cotton and linen cloth that is very durable though not so white. Those that buy Garlets therefore are for a sort that will wear and look pretty and so decline buying coarset than [pattern] No.1772." (Quoted in Montgomery, 1984, p.345.) The rapid population growth in the American colonies - from little over a quarter of a million in 1700 to nearly a million and a quarter in 1750, 2.2M in 1770 and 5.3M by 1800 - resulted in an expanding and buoyant market for British and European linen. Linen became the most important single commodity shipped across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century.

1. Linen Production in England, Scotland and Ireland.

The production of linen in England, Scotland and Ireland was transformed in the early eighteenth century. From a situation in which the market had long been dominated by continental producers, especially in France and in the low countries, a new economic...