



Silk in Lucca

by Claudia Casoli

The ladies of the Antiche Tessiture Lucchesi

According to the sacred texts, a big leaf was the first garment that a human wore. Adam and Eve plucked it from the foliage of the fig to clothe their shame, after surrendering to the temptation of the serpent. We all know the rest of the story, but to keep on the garment side, there is a lot to say about how it developed over the centuries.

If you look at what you are wearing now, you have clothes made of cotton, polyester, linen or, most precious of all ... of silk! This is the point I want to get to: talk about silk and just be seduced by the onomatopoeic sound of the word that gives the idea of its sensual touch.

As the nude with that strategically placed fig leaf has become a favourite subject for artists throughout the centuries, likewise silk – in itself a masterpiece of nature – is the fabric most represented in paintings. The aristocrats portrayed in the paintings hanging in museums worldwide are mostly dressed in silk, and visitors are always mesmerized by the painters' ability to reproduce its gleam.

Silk was and still is largely used as tapestry to richly embellish mansion walls and furniture. This fabric was the core business of Lucca in the past centuries, until a silkworm disease in the 16th century stopped the business. Today there is



Workshop at Torre Guinigi



return to origins in the silk process and a new interest in the ancient manufacturing techniques.

In Segromigno, a silkworm farm has been started where these mysterious mulberry eaters are bred and fed by caring "mothers" for the few weeks necessary to grow until they are ready to emit the precious thread for the joy of our wardrobe. The threads are then spun and dyed with natural colours. I love the delectable yellow obtained from dyeing the fabric with chamomile flowers because it evokes forgotten tinges. In the ateliers in town, silk arrives ready to be worked on the looms and to be transformed into fabric under the weavers' passionate hands. Dresses and shawls are made from soft silk, cashmere and vicuña.

The first to transform the worm's threads into silk and then into cloth were the Chinese. For many centuries they kept the secret, but eventually the secret came out and Japan, India and Europe all had their worms in production.

But there is no secret as to how the ancient hand-activated looms are operated by our lady weavers to produce the silk fabric. Pay a visit to their atelier located in Via Anfiteatro 85, or to their workshops at Torre Guinigi in Via Sant'Andrea 45 and Palazzo Mansi in Via Galli Tassi 43. They will be more than happy to show you how they work. The relationship between tradition and modernity is there to be witnessed. Ancient performance but modern garments able to compete in the international fashion market. Shawls, clothes, handbags, any item ready to be worn, and lampshades too. They sometimes mix silk with linen or with gold and silver threads, and take inspiration from Lucchese motifs like the *rosetta di Barga* (the little rose of Barga), or *il filaticcio lucchese* and *il quadratino lucchese*.

Visiting them is a must if you are in Lucca. Long life to our weavers!

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