ENGLISH

# SILK AND THE SILK FACTORY IN THE 17TH C.

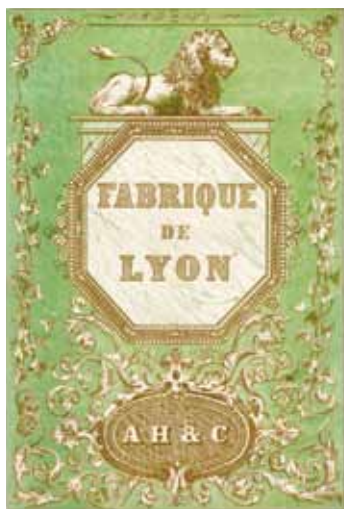
TOPIC

## ROOM 14:
## THE SILK FACTORY - 17TH-18TH C.

## Expansion of the factory in the 17th c.

### Lyon, the centre of the silk industry

The silk industry in Lyon grew considerably in the 17th c., in particular thanks to the mechanisation of cocoon emptying, developed in the Condrieu region, and with the invention of a special weaving loom **(Inv. 428)** by Claude Dangon in 1620, which enabled producing wider patterned silks. The Factory employed 1,700 master-craftsmen – trimming makers, cloth makers and ribbon makers in 1621 **(Inv. 822 c - Regulations of the town's master trimming makers, cloth makers and ribbon makers)** – and 3,000 in 1660. In parallel to this, within the framework of the Colbert regulations of 1667 relating to manufacturing, its activity tripled between 1665 and 1690. Workers were abundant there: from then on Protestants were admitted and the Aumône Générale charitable organisation directed abandoned children towards this sector. Silk-making thus extended beyond its traditional districts of Saint-Georges and Bourgneuf to conquer the Rue du Plâtre, Rue Terraille and the Place Croix-Paquet in the Presqu'île (peninsula) area. At the turn of the century, Lyon became the indisputable centre of the silk industry, thus freed from the Italian competition!



Lyon Silk Factory a., h. and C., label, engraving, anonymous author, 19th c., Inv. 2099.6

However, with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, many Protestant silk-workers left the town for Switzerland: the number of weaving looms declined towards the end of the century.

Factory of Antoine Guerrier in Lyon, Côte Saint Sébastien (now known as Montée de la Grande Côte), address card, drawing, Thomas Blanchet, 1674, Inv. 45.115

## The Economics of the Factory

### Hierarchy of silks

The Factory was structured around 3 levels of workers: the **fellows of the craft** or apprentices assisted the **master-craftsmen**, owners of the looms in their own small workshops **(Inv. 54.208 Weaver's tools)**. Less than half of the latter worked for themselves: having neither the time to devote to selling the finished product, nor sufficient money to buy the raw materials, the majority of them worked for **dealer-manufacturers**, active from the beginning of the century. A particularity of this sector was that there were fewer apprentices than master-craftsmen. The master-craftsmen frequently worked for several dealer-manufacturers who in turn gave work to several master-craftsmen. Mainstays of the activity, the dealer-manufacturers became increasingly powerful during the 17th c. and sometimes extended their activity into the financial sector as bankers. More than half of the production was in their hands.

### The price of silk

In the 17th c. silk kept major trade and banking alive. The powerful bankers of Lyon – the Lumagne, Mascrany and Particelli families – turned towards silk foreshadowing the Lyonsnais bankers of the 19th c. Built on this trade, finance was sensitive to crises. The banking crisis of 1613-1614, the European crisis of 1619 and the crisis of 1629, associated with the plague, periodically weakened the price of silk, especially as there were no hard and fast rules with regard to the manufacturing price which could be extremely variable!

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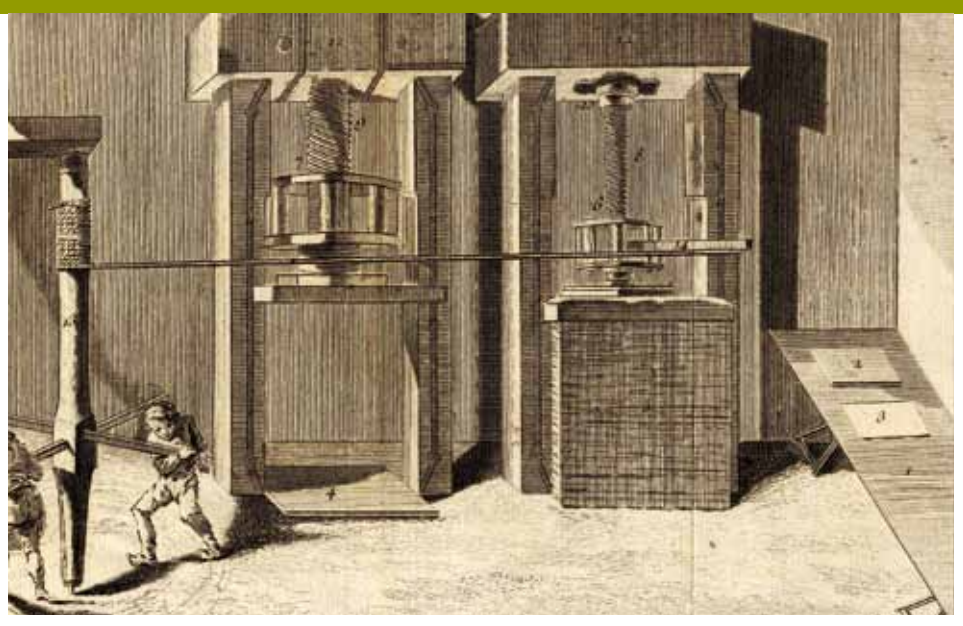
But the dealer-manufacturers came off better than the master-craftsmen: they simply needed to stop the orders and store the silk in the shop, while the master-craftsmen had to let their apprentices go and pay off their equipment when production stopped... **(Inv. 1677.20 - Velvet looms and Inv. 1140 - Shanks of the silk carders).** During the course of the century their relationship deteriorated and they had less and less direct contact with one another, leaving the apprentices to assume this role. The gap gradually widened between the two professions.
Nevertheless, the town recovered from the two crises which had led to an exodus of bankers to Paris. It remains a strong financial place, renowned throughout the whole of Europe for being one of the primary French artisanal and industrial regions! In the late 17th c., the price of Lyonnais silk reached its peak.

## Colourful techniques

### Lustering silk... to obtain beautiful taffetas

In 1655, the Lyonnais dealer-manufacturer Octavio Mey (1618 – 1690) quite by chance, invented a decisive finishing technique for silk. While his business was going badly, he took to the habit of chewing strands of silk without paying attention to it. It was then that he was struck by the brilliance the strands took on. He became interested in the process: pressed, moistened and warmed up a little, the silk appeared wonderfully... lustrous! His invention led him to perfect a machine for creating taffetas, which boosted both his business and that of Lyon silk!

Sample of silk, figured fabric, Salomon and Haime, 19th c., Inv. N 4477



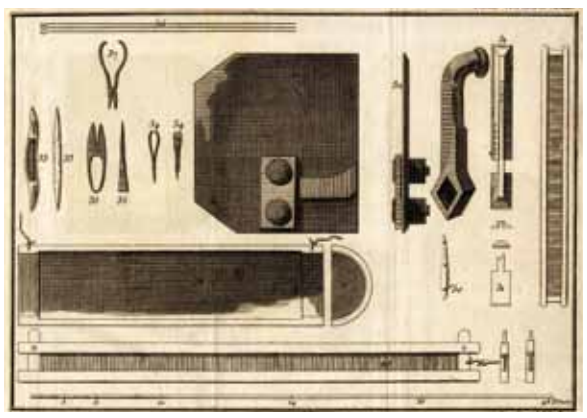
Press for lustering fabric, plate from volume VI of "Spectacle de la nature", engraving, 17th c., Inv. 1677.14

### Silk crêpe

In 1649, Blanchet imported a technique to Lyon for manufacturing silk crêpe in the "Bologna fashion": the fabric was subjected to strong twisting and its fibres were deformed to obtain a wavy appearance. His business did not prosper but in 1666, the idea was taken up by Antoine Bourget who obtained the letters patent for manufacturing silk crêpes for fifteen years in Lyon, Saint-Etienne and Saint-Chamond. Associated with Aymon, he created a flourishing establishment and, after a few months, more than 321 looms, "of a new and extremely curious invention" according to the consulate, were used to make silk crêpe in Lyon!

### Silk and gold

During the same period, Honorat created a gold wyre drawing plant in Lyon, which enabled him to merge the gold destined for precious fabrics. The bars of gold were transformed into gold thread using a machine known in French as an "*argue*" and which has since given its name to the Passage de l'Argue in the 2nd arrondissement of Lyon. The technique enabled making sumptuous fabrics, created in Lyon for the princes of the court or royal residences.



Tools for making velvet, plate from volume VI of "Spectacle de la nature", engraving, 17th c., Inv. 1677.21

### Importation of silk stockings!

In 1589, the weaving technique for silk stockings on a mechanical loom was invented in England by Reverend William Lee in Calverton, near Nottingham... intended, it has been said, to speed up his fiancée's knitting as she was continually absorbed in her work! It was imported to France, first of all in Rouen, and then the hosiery machine was established in Lyon by manufacturer Jean Fournier in the middle of the 17th c. and its use quickly increased. Its output was still low as in 1667, in the Fournier establishment, well-known for the intensive work required of the personnel, a good worker worked twelve to thirteen hours a day and only produced 3 pairs of silk stockings a week... and even fewer if they were fully fashioned!

**glossary**

**Factory:** designates all of the activities of the silk trade, their regulations and their organisation.

grey words: items that can be seen in this room

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