

Venetian Silk Textiles and Fashion Trends in the Ottoman Empire during the Early Modern Period

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This essay presents the relation between the production of silk textiles in Venice and the change in fashion in the Ottoman Empire during the Early Modern Period.

Venice was of great interest to several 20th-century scholars, both Italian and foreign, who examined the most important issues in its economic history. Indeed, Venetian historiography reflects more general cultural tendencies. The Republic of Venice was seen as a great Mediterranean power that had achieved a position of preeminence until the 16th century, and later followed a path of inevitable decline that was finally completed in 1797. Venice was a victim of the negative view regarding the entire Mediterranean, according to which, after the rise of the Ottomans and the great discoveries culminating in Columbus's enterprises in America, the whole region rapidly entered into a dramatic and irreversible crisis caused by the emergence of the Atlantic powers¹.

In fact, after 1618, Venice faced many crises such as the European economic slump of the 1620s², the war with Persia, and the Thirty Year's war in Europe. Venice also suffered from the famine of 1628-29 and the plague following it in 1629-31. Merchants from Marseilles began to invade the markets of Alexandria and Istanbul, taking over a large portion of the cotton and silk trade previously monopolized by Venice².

However, facing these crises, the Republic of Venice transformed its economic structure from that based on long-distance trade into a system based on landed revenue and some export-oriented industries by which the Republic could avoid going into drastic and irreversible economic declines.

From the beginning of the 17th century, the silk industry replaced the woolen industry as

1 Pezzolo, L., 'The Venetian Economy', Dursteler, E.R. (ed.), *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400-1797*, Brill, 2013, p. 255. On Venetian economy in the Early Modern Period, Sella, D., 'L'economia', Cozzi, G., Prodi, P., (eds.), *Dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, (Storia di Venezia, Dalle origini alla caduta della serenissima); 6) Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1994; Pezzolo, L., 'L'economia', Benzoni, G., Cozzi, G., (eds.), *La Venezia Barocca*, (Storia di Venezia, 7), Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1997.

2 Panciera, W., 'The Industries of Venice in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *At the Centre of the Old World, 1400-1800*, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, 2006, pp. 185-8.

the busiest economic sector in the Republic of Venice. The silk industry of the Republic of Venice can be divided into two categories: the lagoon capital and the mainland territory (*terra ferma*).

Venice, the lagoon capital, was concerned mainly with the production of silk textiles of higher quality, for example, precious damasks, brocades and velvets. They were often interlaced with gold and silver threads, and had always been the pride of Italian silk manufacturing since the Middle Ages. In the course of the 17th and the 18th centuries, the Ottoman Empire, Eastern Europe and the local market gradually became the most exclusive outlet for Venetian silk fabrics³. Today, we can find some of their examples among the kaftans that belonged to the sultans of the Ottoman Empire⁴ (Figure 1 & 2).

Conversely, in the Venetian mainland, the major economic activities were sericulture and silk-reeling (spinning and throwing by the hydraulic silk mill '*alla bolognese*') for export beyond borders, mainly to France and to the transalpine countries. In the Venetian mainland, silk textile weaving was a sub-task and was limited to the moderately-priced goods, such as ribbons and small objects⁵.

In the middle of the 17th century, the long conflict against the Ottoman Empire, the so-called war of Candia, 1645-69, dealt the finishing blow to what was left of the city's traditional Mediterranean maritime trade business.

3 Della Valentina, M., 'The Silk Industry in Venice: Guilds and Labour Relations in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', Lanaro, P., (ed.), *At the Centre of the Old World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-113.

4 'Italian silks for the Ottoman market', Raby, J., & Effeny A., (eds.), *İpek, The Crescent and the Rose, Imperial Ottoman Silks and Velvets*, London, 2001, pp. 182-190.; Mackie, L. W., 'Italian Silks for the Ottoman Sultans', *Electronic Journal of Oriental Studies*, IV (= Kiel, M., Landman, L. & Theunisse H. (eds), Proceedings of the 11th International Congress of Turkish Art, Utrecht, August 23-28, 1999), No. 31, 2001, pp. 1-21.; Id., 'Ottoman kaftans with an Italian identity', Faroqi, S., & Neumann, C.K., (eds.), *Ottoman Costumes, From Textile to Identity*, Istanbul, 2004, pp. 219-229.

5 On the history of silk industry of Venice and Italy, Panciera, W., 'The Industries of Venice in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *op. cit.*, pp. 185-214.; Sella, D., *Commerci e industrie a Venezia nel secolo XVII*, Venezia & Roma, 1961.; Cavaciocchi, S. (ed.), *La seta in Europa secc. XIII-XX* (atti della 'ventiquattresima Settimana di studi', 4-9 maggio 1992, Istituto internazionale di storia economica F. Datini, Serie II. Atti delle "Settimane di studio" e altri convegni; 24) Le Monnier, 1993.; Molà, L., *The Silk Textile Industry of Renaissance Venice*, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000.; Molà, L., Müeller, R.C., Zanier, C., (eds.), *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento: dal baco al drappo*, Venezia, 2000; Battistini, F., *L'industria della seta in Italia nell'età moderna*, Bologna, 2003.; Poni, C., *La seta in Italia. Una grande industria prima della rivoluzione industriale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.; Sella, D., *Trade and Industry in Early Modern Italy*, (Variorum Collected Studies Series), London, 2009.; Ciriaco, S., 'Silk Manufacturing in France and Italy in the XVII Century: Two Models Compared,' *The Journal of European Economic History*, X, 1981, pp. 167-199.; Id., "Mass Consumption Goods and Luxury Goods: the De-Industrialization of the Republic of Venice from the Sixteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century", van der Wee, H., (ed.), *The Rise and Fall of the Urban Industries in Italy and the Low Countries* (Late Middle Ages – Early Modern Times), Leuven Univ. Press, 1988.; Ericani, G., Frattaroli, P., (eds.), *Tessuti nel Veneto. Venezia e la Terraferma*, Verona, 1993.; Della Valentina, M., *Operai, Mezzadi, mercanti. Tessitori e industria della seta a Venezia tra '600 e '700*, Padova, 2003.; Vianello, F., *Seta fine e panni grossi, manifattura e commerci nel Vicentino 1570-1700*, Vicenza, 2004.; Prandin, R., *La Magnifica Città e la mercatura della seta, Ascesa economica, grandezza e stagnazione di Vicenza nei secoli XVI e XVII*, Verona, 2015.

Nevertheless, relative to woolens, even the trade restrictions imposed by the Ottomans during the War of Candia did not have a fatal effect on Venetian silk textile exports. After the war, Venetian silk weaving reached its height in terms of quantity and kept product activities until the 1770s. According to Della Valentina, up to the end of the 1760s, 65-70% of Venice's entire silk production comprised high quality fabrics (patterned fabrics, *auroserici* and, in a somewhat smaller quantity, velvet), whereas the remainder (30-35%) was made up of the simpler and cheaper plain fabrics (*drappi alla piana*)⁶.

The marine insurance policies drawn in Venice between 1592 and 1609⁷ reveal that Venice exported luxury silk textiles exclusively into the Ottoman Empire (Table 1).

Also some Ottoman *narh defter* documents, that is, the official price registers made in the first half of the 17th century, contain many Venetian, Florentine, and European silk fabrics. They are mainly luxury and expensive products. "European" fabrics were very possibly made in Northern Italy⁸. Their presence in the *narf defter* indicates that these fabrics acquired a reputation in Istanbul and in other cities in the Ottoman Empire.

The success of Venetian silk fabrics has been explained that the markets of the Ottoman Empire reflected their conservatism and their steady demand for heavy cloths with traditional patterns. Actually, a contemporary writer of the 18th century wrote that Venetian damasks still continued to be preferred because of the "unchangeability of Oriental fashions and ways of dressing," whereas all attempts of lighter French and Dutch products to compete with them failed⁹.

Conversely, with respect for "the fluctuating (ever-changing)" European fashion trends led by Lyon in France, the Venetian silk textile industry could take a highly flexible approach to catch up.

Was there actually no mode or fashion trend in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire? Did they want only traditional fabrics and costumes?

It has sometimes been assumed that fashion changes were a European specialty, which began in the later Middle Ages in courtly circles, and slowly spread towards the less well-to-do. At least on the Continent, the 18th century seems to have been a turning point.

By contrast it has often been assumed that Ottoman clothes were timeless; and it is true that in the Topkapi Palace collection of kaftans worn by sultans and their family members before the 1830s, a non-textile expert will have some trouble placing individual pieces in their proper periods. However, they were high luxury clothes that in many settings are not

6 Della Valentina, M., 'The Silk Industry in Venice', *op. cit.*, pp. 110-112.; Id., *Operai, Mezzadi, mercanti*, *op. cit.*, Appendice n. 9.

7 Tenenti, A., *Naufraiges, corsaires et assurances maritimes à Venise, 1592-1609*, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1959.

8 Iida-Sohma, M., 'The Textile Market in Istanbul and Bursa in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century: An Introduction', *Mediterranean world*, 19, 2008, pp. 161-197.

9 Molà, L., *The Silk Textile Industry*, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-303.

as amenable to fashion change as less expensive items. Given the expense of silk fabrics, we must assume that they were accessible only to the well-to-do. But during the 17th and the 18th centuries, silk cultivation expanded in the vicinity of Bursa and silk cloth manufacture in Istanbul, Bursa and other Ottoman cities such as the island of Chios developed. That must have made silk accessible to a wider stratum among the better-off town dwellers in the Ottoman Empire¹⁰.

As a matter of fact, already in 1572, the Venetian weavers opened a petition to the government to permit lighter and cheaper silk fabrics to defeat their competitors in the market of Ragusa, Messina, Alexandria, in Syria and elsewhere¹¹. It would be evidence that customer preferences were evolving not only in Europe but also in the Ottoman Empire.

According to some textile art historians, Italian silk velvet enjoyed great popularity among the court members and the upper circles of the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern Period¹². However, since the second half of the 17th century, the Venetian silk industry had been in sharp decline for production of velvet. In the 18th century, velvet represented no more than 2-3% of the total Venetian silk production. Velvet was no longer a leading product for export for the Venetian weavers¹³.

Ottoman customers' preferences for lighter and cheaper silk fabrics may have given the Venetian weavers another door of opportunity on the Ottoman market. One of the clues may be the mixed clothes woven with silk and cotton or linen. In the *narf defter* register for Istanbul of 1640, there are one Venetian, two Florentine, and two European mixture (silk and cotton) textiles. There is the same kind of two Venetian and one European textile examples also in the *narf defter* register for Bursa of 1624¹⁴.

In the Ottoman Empire, local mixed fabrics of silk and linen (or perhaps cotton) such as *kutunu* and *alaca* were very popular¹⁵ (Figure 4 & 5). The *narf defter* registers contain some names of these local mixed fabrics¹⁶.

Until now, it is not quite known about the change of fashion in the Ottoman daily life, especially that of better-off dwellers. The miniatures of the early 18th century, in spite of the stylized images that they convey, show that favored designs in those days were often smaller than the great elaborate patterns that were esteemed in the Ottoman court during the 16th century. In addition, stripes (often in blue and white) seemed to have become a favored feature of fabrics destined for the upper class. It also appears that the veils of fashionable

10 Faroqi, S., 'Introduction, or why and how one might want to study Ottoman clothes', *Ottoman Costumes, op. cit.*, p. 28.

11 Molà, L., *The Silk Textile Industry, op. cit.*, p. 149.

12 See Note 4.

13 Della Valentina, M., 'The Silk Industry in Venice', *op. cit.*, p. 112, note 11.

14 Iida-Sohma, M., 'The Textile Market in Istanbul and Bursa', *op. cit.*

15 On the general history of the textiles in the Ottoman Empire, İnalçık, H., *Türkiye Tekstil Tarihi üzerine araştırmalar*, Istanbul, 2008.; *İpek, The Crescent and the Rose, op. cit.*

16 Iida-Sohma, M., 'The Textile Market in Istanbul and Bursa', *op. cit.*

Istanbul ladies now were often almost diaphanous, whereas the wide collars of their coats fell cape-like over their shoulders. In those days, delicate ladies' shifts were made of a fine crinkly silk known as *bürümcük*, whereas a variety of striped satins also were mainly used in undergarments¹⁷ (Figure 6 & 7).

Certainly, changes were not as radical as those that happened, for instance, in the French fashions of the late 18th century. But among wealthy inhabitants of Istanbul during the 1700s, the very principle of fashion change was certainly not unknown¹⁸.

Conclusion

Until the 1770s, the leading product of export-oriented Venetian silk weaving kept strong connectivity with the Ottoman market. The change in fashion in the Ottoman daily life was going on not so radically but definitely, and some documents suggest that the Venetian industry could adapt successfully to it. Further analysis is requested for this subject.

17 Faroqhi, S., 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, p. 28.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Table 1 Venetian Export and Import (1592–1609)—Major Articles

Region	Cities (or regions) of destination or departure	Export from Venice	Import to Venice
Venetian overseas territories	Cephalonia Corfu Zante (Zakynthos) Candia (Crete)	Textiles Textiles (including luxury items) Textiles, cash various articles, lumber, grain	Raisins Cordovan, raw silk, olive oil, wine etc. Wine, raisins Wine, raisins, olive oil, cheese
Ottoman Empire	Istanbul Izmir Foca (Phocaia) Dubrovnik (Ragusa) Lezhë (Alessio) Durrësi (Durazzo) Vlora or Vlorë (Valona) Cyprus Syria Alexandria	Textiles (including luxury items) Textiles Textiles (including luxury items) Textiles Textiles Textiles (including luxury items) Textiles (including luxury items)	Hides/leather, wool, camelot cotton Cotton Hides/leather, wool, camelot wool Cordovan, raw silk Cotton, indigo Raw silk, cotton, spices, indigo Spices, indigo, gunpowder
Italy and Sicilia Marche Abruzzo Puglia Calabria Sicily	Maran delle Grotte Fortore Vasto Molfetta Bari Lecce Otrant Puglia Messina Palermo	Hides/leather Textiles etc., a few luxury items Textiles Various articles Metal, various articles lumber, books, glassware, etc.	Grain Grain, olive oil Grain, olive oil Olive oil Olive oil Olive oil Olive oil Sugar, spices
Iberian Peninsula	Lisbon Iberia	Various articles (no textile)	Sugar Wool
Northern Europe	Amsterdam Middelburg Hamburg England London	Raisins Raisins, malmsey wine Raisins	Grain Grain Grain Grain, herring, metal, various articles kersey, lead

Source: A.Tenenti (1959), *Naufraiges, corsaires et assurances maritimes à Venise, 1592-1609*, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N.

Figure 1 Kaftan made of Italian Velvet, Second Half of the 16th Century, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, İstanbul.



Figure 2 Kaftan made of Italian Patterned Silk, 17th Century, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, İstanbul.



Figure 3 Kaftan made of Atlas (satin), Süleyman I, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, İstanbul.



Figure 4, Figure 5 Entâri made of Kutunu



Figure 6

Lady with Carnation.
Istanbul, 1720; Levnî,
Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, İstanbul.

Her clothing reflects the fashion popular during the Tulip Period and consists of a striped *şalvar*, a thin chemise of woven silver *bürümcük*, chickpea-colored jacket with floral motifs, and a patterned lilac dress with light blue lining¹⁹.



Figure 7

Young Lady in Winter Garments.
Istanbul, 1744; Abdullah Buharî.
Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, İstanbul.

The clothing worn by this lady corresponds to the fashion popular at the time. The particular charm of this outfit results from alternating different, colorful textile patterns of small flowers²⁰.



19 Erduman-Çalış, D. (ed.), *Tulpen Kaftane und Levnî, Höfische Mode und Kostümalben der Osmanen aus dem Topkapı Palast Istanbul / Tulips Kaftans and Levnî, Imperial Ottoman Costumes and Miniature Albums from Topkapı Palace in Istanbul*, Museum für Angewandte Kunst-Frankfurt, 2008, Hirmer Verlag, München, p. 101.

20 Ibid., p. 107.

FIGURES

Figure 1, 2, 3: *İpek, The Crescent and the Rose, op. cit.*

Figure 4: İnalçık, H., *Türkiye Tekstil Tarihi, op. cit.*

Figure 5: Tezcan, H., *Children of the Ottoman Seraglio, Customs and costumes of the princes and princesses, Istanbul, 2006.*

Figure 6, 7: *Tulpen Kaftane und Levnî, op. cit.*