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10

Wartime fabrics in the historical archives of Como weavers and in the collections of the Fondazione Antonio Ratti

Margherita Rosina

The archives of Como manufacturers, which have never been studied before, and sample books held at the textile museum Museo Studio del Tessuto (MuST), which is part of the Fondazione Antonio Ratti (FAR), in Como, highlight how high-level Italian silk production never ceased during the war.¹ This essay focuses on silk fabrics, since they are the production of excellence of the Como district as well as the main field covered by Antonio Ratti's collecting practice.

The supremacy of France in the silk weaving trade remained undisputed for at least three centuries and was still unchallenged in the early twentieth century. By the start of the First World War, Italian silk mills were making good-quality products that could have, indeed, competed with those produced in Lyon. For what concerned woollen fabrics, though, Italy was still dependent on imports. The most authoritative women's magazine in Italy during the period of World War I, *Margherita*, reported in October 1914 that: "whilst our silk industry has made surprising progress, to the point of seriously competing with Lyon itself, the same cannot be said—at least not for the moment—of woollen fabrics. For these, the supremacy of France, Germany and Britain remains undisputed."²

Italian silk fabrics for clothing were produced mainly in the Como area, where many medium-sized manufactures were in a position to meet internal demand and attract orders from abroad. Historical texts on weaving in Como and orders found among the few extant paper documents held in private Como archives confirm this.³ The biggest part of the work was carried out in the surrounding area, where families owned looms enabling them to work at home. On the eve of the First World War, firms like Bressi

owned 250 handlooms and 25 Jacquards;⁴ Casnati had 360 Jacquard looms that produced plain silks of the most varied qualities, had salespersons around the world, and won prizes at world exhibitions;⁵ Rosasco employed about 500 people in the production of plain silks and linings;⁶ and Luigi Taroni specialized in high fashion garments made with Brianza silk on mechanical as well as manual looms.⁷

In fact, the First World War was beneficial to silk manufacturers:

Many of the looms of the world, which have heretofore given so much of their time to the weaving of beautiful stuffs for women to wear, are delegated to the sterner tasks of making uniform materials. Until now, the main business of weavers has been to dress women; men were clothed in what was left. Now men, the warriors of the world, must be clothed in such a way as to resist cold and wet, and women must be clothed in that which he does not need. This means a revolution in the making of textiles, and from this revolution, as with other revolutions, there will undoubtedly be many benefits. . . . Since man needs wool to keep him warm and dry, woman is requested—in fact she is in eminent danger of being summarily ordered—to wear silk.⁸

Wool was a raw material saved worldwide for soldiers at the front.⁹ Silk became, out of necessity, one of the materials that could be most widely employed. This was particularly true towards the end of the war, *Margherita* also observed: “One of the principal consequences of the cornering of wool by the army has been the democratization of silk. Grownups and kids adopt it for dresses and cloaks, whilst wool is used only for trimmings.”¹⁰

It is difficult to get a comprehensive view of wartime Como production as none of the manufacturers operating at that time and mentioned earlier are still active today. The surviving production archives covering those years are very few and incomplete. This makes it impossible to give an exhaustive account of what was being woven in the Como area or to make comparisons in terms of quality or quantity with the corresponding output in Lyon. The textile samples considered by this research only represent what can be dated with certainty from the period of the First World War, originating from the few sample books found.

The FISAC silk-mill wartime production

Among the silk mills operating in Como during the First World War, one of the most important was FISAC (Fabbriche Italiane di Seterie A. Clerici Sa). This firm was established in 1906, following the closure of Sas Braghenti Clerici & Co, which had been founded in 1890 and converted into Fabbriche Italiane di Seterie Clerici Braghenti & Co in 1902.¹¹ What remains today of the FISAC production archive is divided between Guarisco spa in Grandate, which took over the firm’s premises at the time of its closure, and the Fondazione Antonio Ratti, which acquired a substantial number of its sample

books. Since the corresponding paper documentation is unfortunately patchy, this material cannot be fully placed within its proper context.

FISAC's production consisted mainly of plain and figured fabrics for womenswear, in pure silk or in silk and cotton blends. These range from large floral patterns, in pastel shades or sharp color contrasts, to small brocaded motifs on taffetas. Numerous striped samples are also present; many of them feature a black-and-white contrast. This was one of the most fashionable trends of the 1910s, as witnessed by the journals and photographs of the era.¹²

It is difficult to say to what extent the war caused changes in production. There are no sensible differences between what was produced in the period between the beginning of the century and the outbreak of war and what can be gathered from the textile records of wartime years.

The FISAC color range between 1915 and 1918 continued to be just as extensive and rich with bright colors. This contradicts the news, as reported several times by the magazine *Margherita*, of a shortage of the dyes necessary to the textile industry. It also goes against the observations made by Jacqueline Field, who noticed a change in textile production in the United States due to a lack of dyes that had until then been imported from Germany.¹³

The Como silk industry does not appear to have been affected by this problem. The consumption of silk for women's fashion only represented a small section of the market since the articles made from this precious material were aimed for an elite market.¹⁴ The amount of dyes required was therefore limited and could be found even under such exceptional circumstances as war. Nor does the war seem to be reflected in FISAC's output, which shows no hints of patriotism. Only the emphatic presence of black crêpe samples in different weights may, perhaps, be related to the veils worn by women in mourning, whose numbers dramatically increased during the conflict.

Parravicini & Co.

Another extant archive is that of the firm Parravicini & Co., now held by Industria Serica Taroni in Grandate. Parravicini had its headquarters in via Morazzone in Como. When Taroni was founded in 1921, it took over the Parravicini factory and also acquired its archives. Parravicini's earliest *contremarque* books date from 1913 and show that the firm's output was based on good-quality yarn-dyed silk in a broad color range, although most of its production remained confined to black and to neutral shades.

As in the case of FISAC, black and white striped samples often appear. The books cover all the war years, highlighting orders from Italy and abroad which show that trade was both brisk and international. In 1915, orders were placed by Ambrogio Spada, which had offices both at Lierna (Como) and in Buenos Aires; in February 1916, orders were placed by Aldermanbury & Co. of London; in November of that year, orders came from Baily & Huber, London, for miscellaneous pieces of *paillette glacé* in a

wide variety of shades. Another London customer was Angel & Spiro, “Manufacturers and Silk Merchants,” who bought numerous items in many color variants from Parravicini.

A careful examination of the surviving *contremarque* books clearly shows that Parravicini’s production, which has unfortunately survived only in tiny samples, presented no particular wartime novelties. From 1913, however, heavy dark blue or black satins began to appear, characterized by highly particular selvages, which sometimes were in nuanced colors or striped bands. In one or two cases, patriotic combinations were used in these selvages during the war years, such as red, white, and green, or red, white, and blue, or black, yellow and red. Why devote so much work and so many precious dyes to a part of the fabric that is in reality normally cut while the garment is being made up, and is, in any case, not visible? A scholar of Como weaving, Pietro Pinchetti, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, defined selvedge as “the clue to the piece,” by which he meant that selvages were an indication of the yarn quality and weaver’s ability, especially in the simpler fabrics.¹⁵

It has not been possible to find garments of the war period that were made with fabrics with selvages like those by Parravicini. Yet, a brief mention from the magazine *Margherita* in 1915 does perhaps provide a clue in this respect: “attractive for informal wear is the blue marine serge with a high hem in small blue and wine-red stripes, to be used on the neck or waistcoat and for skirt pockets.”¹⁶ Could this have been the purpose of the striped selvages? During the war, to display the colors of one’s flag might have been an indirect way of supporting the soldiers at the front. Given Parravicini’s international contacts, it is possible that similar textiles may have also been produced to meet foreign orders. A suit, cut in the manner of a military uniform, featured in the American magazine *The Dry Goods Reporter*, was decorated at the cuffs with a thin edge that appears to be tricolored.¹⁷

A 10 cm ribbon of Savoy-blue silk *gros*, crossed at the center by the red, white, and green stripes of the Italian flag, produced in 1917 and repeated in 1918, was certainly meant to be patriotic. We know that Parravicini occasionally produced a ribbon of these measurements, for Italy, other European countries, as well as for Argentina. A ribbon of this size could have served a military purpose, as trimmings for pennants, regimental insignia, or for the manufacture of patriotic cockades.

Fermo Fossati 1871

Not even in the tie sector, represented by the archives of Fermo Fossati 1871, another historic Como manufacturer, do any patriotic signs appear.¹⁸ And, yet, this company had celebrated the 1911 war in Libya with ties decorated on the front side with the names of Italian victories or with miniature scenes depicting the conflict. And, in the 1930s, it paid homage to fascism with a line of ties glorifying the Duce.¹⁹

The weave patterns dating from between 1915 and 1918, and the related small samples of silk created, reflect a traditional production of polka-dotted and minute geometric motifs, interspersed

with the occasional fine Paisley pattern in the first year (for Italy) of the war, without any reference to the war itself. The completeness of this archive, on the other hand, points to a drastic drop in production, which plummeted from more than one hundred new patterns per year of the prewar period, to approximately fifty for the period of 1916–18. The quality of the fabrics, too, deteriorated, with poorly beaten or opaque-looking silks. One of the causes of the lower output of ties may be identified with the very small number of civilians still around at the time. The war throughout Europe had put two generations of men into uniform, notably reducing the market.

French wartime silk production

The archives of the Fondazione Antonio Ratti hold a considerable number of sample albums of French silks, covering the years of the First World War. These are product samples, purchased by Antonio Ratti as a source of inspiration for his work. In the majority of cases, there are no paper documents to date them with certainty.

Among the more conspicuous items are the books of Chavent Père & Fils of Lyon, which cover an extraordinarily long period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the Second World War. These books contain textiles for womenswear, used by many important French couture houses, including Worth.²⁰ Despite the lack of reliable dating, the comparison with contemporary textiles shows that production was not conditioned by the conflict. During the war, Chavent continued create new, mostly floral, motifs.

The books of the Lyon firm Boisson & Fesquet, complete with explanatory notes on the dating and composition of its samples, are noticeable both for the completeness of their technical and industrial data, and for the attention paid to the subject of the war. Since the outbreak of the war, a small part of the firm's output included samples with the colors of the French flag. The emphasis on the patriotic theme is unique; it is not seen in the majority of samples of the same period kept in the archives of the Fondazione Antonio Ratti. From a technical point of view, striping is the simplest, fastest and most economical system of effectively evoking patriotic themes. It only requires the preparation of a warp with yarns of different colors to obtain an immediate decorative effect. The Boisson & Fesquet sample books contain veritable French *gros de tour* flags (similar to those seen in Parravicini's Como production), as well as lighter fabrics such as taffeta and *poult de soie* striped in red, white, and blue.

How were these fabrics used? Almost exclusively related to women's apparel, they may have been employed to make plain dresses, perhaps with the odd drapery, or in blouses and waistcoats worn underneath suits. An examination of the fashion magazines of the period, such as *Les Modes*, *Le Style parisien* and *Les Éléances parisiennes*, helps us imagine how patriotic silks were used in France.²¹

French red-white-blue colorways appear, but so do those of the flag of Belgium, the martyr nation which, despite its neutrality, was invaded by the Germans at the beginning of the war (Figure 10.1). The red, yellow, and black combination is not a random choice or one dictated by fashion; the sample book textually reproduces the wording “Sergé Belgique.”²² It is possible that during the war, the belts of women’s dresses may have echoed the tricolor and have been made with fabrics similar to those presented, which celebrate the French and the Belgian flags, respectively (Figure 10.2). Ribbons on the same theme may have become patriotic trimmings on shirt collars.²³

Another evidence of this wartime trend is represented by the “cartes de nuances” (hue cards), published twice a year by the Chambre Syndicale des Teinturiers (Association of Dyers) in Lyon. Kept in the Fondazione Antonio Ratti collection, the 52 folders cover, except for a few gaps, a period from 1906 to 1932.²⁴ These *cartes* were working tools for textile mills. Reproduced on every page—there were four to eight pages per book—were minute tufts of yarn-dyed organzine in six graduated shades for each color. They hint at passing color trends. Each color, besides having a numeric reference to the

Figure 10.1 Lyon, Boisson & Fesquet, *Sample of Taffetas rayé*, 1915. Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, LC. 1362, p.on 7542.

Figure 10.2 *Lyon, Boisson & Fesquet, Sample of Poult de soie rayé, 1914. Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, LC. 1362, p.on 7539.*

dye formula, also had a trade name evoking objects, flowers, places, or persons. In the case, for example, of the autumn 1914 *carte de nuances*, groups of skeins in lively tones are gathered under the name of Loie Fuller, the dancer who became famous spinning brightly colored veils as part of her performance.²⁵ The autumn 1916 edition, besides having fewer pages than usual, titled many of its colors with names closely linked to the war theme, such as “Miss Cawell” (*sic*), “Shrapnel,” “Croix de Guerre,” or “Lord Kitchener,” after the British field marshal who, in June of that year, had perished in the North Sea on a cruiser sunk by the Germans.²⁶

Ribbons

The items held in the FAR archive that most frequently refer to the First World War are ribbons: albums contain mostly French ribbons samples produced in the Saint-Étienne area. The wartime albums are the only ones containing explicit patriotic references, with stripes suggesting the colors of flags.

For items of this type, an important market—and one unaffected by fashion—was that of the orders of knighthood and military. These official decorations hung from wide, striped ribbons whose colors denoting their distinction. Heavier ribbons served to hold medals of merit and honors, as witnessed by a fragment kept in a miscellaneous album still bearing the specific words “Croix de Guerre.”²⁷ Another album, also in the MuST archives, preserves other fragments of fabrics with the British flag, probably made for a specific British commission. Their quality and form suggest that they are thin strips to be cut to distinguish military uniforms.²⁸ Their usage was suggested by Nina Edwards, in her book *Dressed for War*, in which she has the following description:

An eager English recruit, expecting that war will be a noble experience, finds that uniforms are initially unavailable, so he has to be satisfied with “just a square of card with the name of his regiment stamped on it, together with a bit of red white and blue ribbon attached, and such was sufficient to proclaim to the world at large that we were members of the British Army.”²⁹

Hats, too, were a way of stating one’s patriotism. They had always been decorated with ribbons, but during the war they became expressions of love for one’s country. In the FAR collections, there are fragments which refer to the war in their colors and decorative theme. For example, in the sample with a black background and two bands on either side with small tricolor seals, or in the sumptuous trimmings in brocaded satin decorated with the Gallic rooster, symbol of France.³⁰ A small part of the Boisson & Fesquet production of small textile flags may also probably be traced to this function,³¹ as can be seen from two photographs published in *Les Modes* in 1917, illustrating two wide-brimmed hats with the base of the crown surrounded by wide tricolor ribbons.³²

But above all, it was the patriotic cockades to be pinned onto jackets and hats that kept the ribbon-makers busy. An article published in the 1915 Christmas issue of *Les Modes* illustrates a competition for the creation of patriotic cockades, named after Mimi Pinson, the *grisette* and protagonist of a poem by Alfred de Musset. Entries came from leading Parisian fashion houses:

Since the fashion shops and ateliers closed, the ones left unemployed have started making emblems for our buttonholes. The Allies supplied all the necessary colors with those of their flags. Fashioned by the women’s skilled artists’ fingers were firstly cockades, and then a gamut of fascinating feminine knick-knacks. From pin-cushions to garters, came a whole world of infinitely delicate, deliciously subtle coquettishness that never belied the fame of Paris. These works, which are almost works of art—were sold in aid of the wounded.³³

The article features photographs of the stands mounted by the various couture houses, from that of Worth, decorated on its sides with long tricolor ribbons, to that of Chéruit, which presented rows of small multi-colored cockades in a riot of flags; Maison Callot Sœurs showed the Gallic rooster, symbol of France, standing out among festoons of cockades and charming hats decorated with patriotic

ribbons. Another photo illustrated the creations of Paquin: a variety of cockades with original forms which, despite the black and white photograph, manage to convey the liveliness of these small objects. The competition was certainly a popular event, seeing that even the cover of *La Vie Parisienne* was dedicated to it, illustrated with a cockade-skirt in the colors of the French flag.³⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, let us look at a ribbon of which unfortunately only a small portion remains (Figure 10.3). Represented in it, enclosed in a single circle divided into four parts, are the flags of the nations that were united as Allies at the outbreak of war: Britain, France, Belgium and Tsarist Russia.³⁵ The absence of the Italian flag next to those of the Allies dates it before May 24, 1915, when Italy entered the war.

It is technically a bravura piece, which, in a minute amount of space, manages to represent clearly the alliance between the four powers and the tragedy of war. It is a further demonstration of how, alas, war too can provide an interesting market opportunity.³⁶

Figure 10.3 Lyon (?), *Fragment of ribbon, Gros de Tour broché, 1914. Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, LC.316, p. 104.*

Notes

- 1 This essay originates from research first developed for an exhibition held in 2003 at the Museo della Guerra, a war museum in Rovereto, Italy. *Le donne la moda la guerra. Emancipazione femminile e moda durante la prima guerra mondiale*, Rovereto, Museo della Guerra, December 13, 2003–March 14, 2004, exhibition curated by Enrica Morini and Margherita Rosina. The text I wrote for the exhibition catalogue was based more on articles dedicated to textiles in Italian and international fashion magazines of that period than on the direct consultation of production archives. For the conference, “Fashion, Dress & Society during World War I,” the sources of evidence for the research were broadened.
- 2 *Margherita*, October 1914.
- 3 Francesco Scardin, *L'Italia nei grandi esponenti della produzione*, vol. 1 *La Lombardia* (Milan: Capriolo & Massimino, 1912), 174–212.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 8 “Patriotic fabrics to charm the New Mode,” *Vogue*, March 15, 1918, 35–6.
- 9 “Save wool and serve the soldier,” *Vogue*, February 1, 1918:

At first the Government thought that the wool situation could be handled without restrictions, but recently it has placed wool under the control of the War Trade Board. Before this, however, the manufacturers and the makers of clothes had begun to conserve wool. To this end the men tailors are agreed that civilians shall sacrifice the flaps upon their coat pockets, the cuffs upon their trousers, and the belts upon their coats and overcoats. But when it comes to women the matter is much more difficult. . . . At a recent meeting in New York, the important makers of women's clothes agreed to use no more than four and one-half yards of material fifty-four inches wide in any suit or dress for spring and, if possible, to limit the quantity of material to three yards.
- 10 *Margherita*, June 1918.
- 11 Francina Chiara, “Indice documentario delle aziende,” in *Seta. Il Novecento a Como*, Chiara Buss, ed. (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2001), 336.
- 12 *Les Modes*, February 1916, 15, “robe d'après-midi per Zimmermann”; *Margherita*, June 15, 1916.
- 13 Jacqueline Field, “Dyes, chemistry and clothing: The influence of World War I on fabrics, fashions and silk,” *Dress* 28 (2001): 77–91.
- 14 Before the introduction of artificial and synthetic fibers, the ones most employed in clothing were wool, cotton, hemp, and linen; silk, a luxury fiber, only covered a small portion of the market.
- 15 Pietro Pinchetti (1838–1916) was a prominent professor at the Istituto Setificio, the training school in Como for workers in the silk industry. Pinchetti authored many publications on the techniques and history of silk-weaving, including a historical manual for weavers, c.f. Pietro Pinchetti, *Manuale del Tessitore* (Milan: Hoepli, 1907).
- 16 *Margherita*, October 15, 1915.
- 17 *The Dry Goods Reporter*, January 15, 1916, pl. XVI, at: <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112106960112;view=1up;seq=109> (accessed August 20, 2020).

- 18 Francina Chiara, "Indice documentario delle aziende," 336.
- 19 Chiara Buss, ed., *Seta. Il Novecento a Como* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2001), 206.
- 20 Margherita Rosina, ed., *Ritratti di signore. Tessuto moda e pittura tra Otto e Novocento* (Como: Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 2011), 30.
- 21 By way of example, cfr. *Les Modes*, February 1914, 15, "robe d'après-midi par Zimmermann"; April 1914, 16, "Mlle Lena Bruze du Théâtre Impérial habillée par Parent Sœurs"; May 1914, 18, "Robe d'après midi par M. Marcel Regis"; *Le Style parisien*, 1915, figure 275, "Robe d'après-midi par Lanvin"; *Les Élégances parisiennes*, May 1916, figure 88 and 102, "Robes d'après-midi par Redfern."
- 22 Fondazione Antonio Ratti, LC. 123 and 1632, p. on 7603.
- 23 Adelheid Rasche, ed., *Wardrobes in Wartime, 1914–1918* (Berlin and Leipzig: Kunstbibliothek Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and E.A. Seemann Verlag, 2014), 90.
- 24 Chiara Buss, "Le 'Carte de Nuances' lionesi della Collezione Antonio Ratti," in *Seta e Colore* (Milan: Ratti s.p.a., 1997): 85–191.
- 25 FAR, MuST, LC. 892.
- 26 Edith Cavell (1865–1915) was a British nurse, based in Brussels, who was executed by the German forces in 1915. Cavell aided the escape of 200 British and French soldiers during the German occupation of Belgium. She was court martialed for war treason and sentenced to death, despite the numerous efforts of international governments and the press. Shrapnel is an anti-personnel shell containing a large number of bullets or metal objects, which are thrown in the air by an explosion. It was invented by the British general, Henry Shrapnel, in 1784. It was first used in 1808 by the British Army against the French Army, during the Battle of Vimeiro in Portugal, and was later extensively employed during the First and Second World War. FAR MuST, LC. 892.
- 27 FAR, MuST, LC. 135.
- 28 FAR, MuST, LC. 316, p. 110.
- 29 Nina Edwards, *Dressed for War: Uniform, Civilian Clothing and Trappings, 1914 to 1918* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 5.
- 30 FAR, MuST, LC. 316, p. 93; FAR, MuST, LC.144, p. 52.
- 31 FAR, MuST, LC. 1362, p.on 7532, indicated on the page as "Drapeau National."
- 32 *Les Modes*, 173, 1917, 16, "Chapeaux de ruban, par Claire et Marie Louise."
- 33 "Pendant la guerre: Les Parisiennes," *Les Modes*, Noël 1915, 2–5:

Et, d'abord, rendons hommage à Mimi-Pinson. Musset avait chanté sa bravoure, il aurait bien d'autres raisons de faire son éloge aujourd'hui. Délassait le magasin de modes ou l'atelier, celles qui ne trouvaient plus à s'y employer se sont mises à fabriquer des emblèmes pour nos boutonnieres. Les alliés leur fournirent, avec les couleurs de leurs drapeaux, toutes les nuances. De leur doigts artistes, elles chiffonnèrent des cocardes, d'abord, puis toutes sortes de charmants colifichets féminins. De la pelote à épingles aux jarretelles, c'est un ensemble de coquetterie infiniment délicate, délicieusement recherchée, qui ne fait point mentir le renom de Paris. Ces ouvrages, qui sont presque d'art, se vendirent au profit des blessés.
- 34 *La Vie parisienne* 49, December 4, 1915.
- 35 FAR, MuST, LC. 316, p. 104

36 My warmest thanks to the owners and to the archivists of the Como firms that still keep historical archives and who kindly allowed me to consult them for this research.

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