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Textiles

Robert S. DuPlessis

Swarthmore College, rduples1@swarthmore.edu

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Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture, ed. Dale Southern

“Textiles”

Robert S. DuPlessis

Textiles were among the first articles of human manufacture and trade thanks to the wide availability of raw materials and to fabric’s many uses—utilitarian, symbolic, aesthetic. Lengths of textiles can be used as clothing or for ornamentation, but typically fabrics undergo further transformation before consumers buy them. Creating textiles always involves a sequence of processes from preparing raw materials through fabricating and finishing the resulting cloth. Yet over five millennia textiles have experienced repeated changes in virtually every respect—primary materials, production methods, manufacturing centers, regulations.

The long history of making, trading, and using cloth reveals the ways in which new and hybrid products and styles are created in numerous locations by all kinds of groups and individuals for a dizzying array of purposes. Textile products and practices have consistently traversed borders of all kinds: the process now termed “globalization” has occurred repeatedly in the past. Historical analysis of textiles likewise emphasizes how regulation—formal and informal, state-imposed and market-based, secular and religious—has shaped consumption and how fashion, expressed first and most durably in clothing, became central to the understanding of, and a dominant motive for, consumption in the modern period. Studying textile consumption underlines that production and consumption, far from being separate spheres of activity, form a broad network of constant interaction and mutual modification.

Until quite recently, most textiles were destined for those who made them. Yet often the same individuals who made simple fabrics from local raw materials for their own use also purchased fancy textiles, made from non-local materials, in the market. As a result, the textile trade has been one of the largest sectors of commerce since early antiquity and remains so today, encompassing not only finished fabrics, but fibers, styles, techniques, tools, and even workers. The diffusion of textile knowledge has therefore occurred for as long as the circulation of the goods made with that knowledge.

For many centuries, textiles were woven, knitted, knotted, crocheted, felted, or otherwise fabricated by hand, usually employing inherited techniques and tools. Traditional technologies were not changeless, however; many innovations from horizontal looms to spinning wheels were introduced to improve productivity, quality, or uniformity. But because most machines depended on human muscle, textile production was carried out either in the home or in small workshops. The development of machines powered by wind or water, and later by steam and electricity, changed all that. As early as the Middle Ages, some finishing processes moved into buildings with central power sources, followed in eighteenth-century Britain on a much larger scale by spinning and weaving, setting off the momentous and eventually global transformation known as the Industrial Revolution. Textiles remain central to development policies today, thanks to the historical mobility of textile skills and knowledge, the relatively low capital requirements of most textile production, and the ongoing strong demand for cloth throughout the

world. So even though most nations engage in some textile manufacture (whether handicraft or industrial) within their own borders, cloth and products made from it remain vital to international trade.

Natural fibers—chiefly cotton, flax, hemp, silk, and wools—have dominated textile production throughout the world. Sometimes this supremacy reflects the fact that similar plants are found in disparate regions of the globe: cotton, for instance, was indigenous to both Asia and the Americas. But plants and animals have also been widely diffused, a process that began in remotest antiquity and continues today. The cultivation of cotton was introduced into West Africa between the tenth and thirteenth centuries CE; sheep were brought to western Europe in remote antiquity and into Australia at the end of the eighteenth century; alpacas, native to Andean regions in South America, are now being raised in Europe and North America.

Textiles are versatile and varied. They can be made into all sorts of products for all sorts of uses; the same fibers can be fabricated into expensive or into cheap goods depending on the cost of the labor, other raw materials, and techniques chosen; they are relatively easy to imitate, counterfeit, and smuggle. Hence formal regulations issued by governments, professional organizations, even religious authorities have targeted cloth production and consumption. At times, manufacturers have been supervised to protect consumers against shortcuts in the production process like inferior materials, fraudulent workmanship, or improper measurements. But regulations have equally sought to shield producers against competitors, or to facilitate collecting taxes on them.

Protective laws seek particularly to ban competition—domestic as well as foreign—that might harm nascent or important industries. As calicoes became wildly popular in western Europe in the late seventeenth century, for instance, many nations barred calico import, manufacture, or printing, in order to preserve established silk and woolens industries. More recently, governments in Europe and North America have tried, in the annually negotiated Multi-Fibers Agreement, to defend existing cloth and clothing manufacturers by instituting quotas on imports from developing countries.

Equally common are rules directed at consumers for social, moral, economic, or even political reasons. Sumptuary laws are best known. They sought to prevent subordinate groups from wearing expensive fabrics or apparel (thus a 1720 law in French West Indian colonies threatened fines if enslaved people donned garments made of anything but rough linens and cottons) or specified proper apparel for other groups, such as the distinctive “habits” assigned to members of religious orders.

Informal interventions have often affected textile consumption. The market accomplishes much of this type of regulation, whether by advertising or pricing. Historically, too, moralistic appeals, like the prolonged debate in early modern Europe between proponents and critics of fabrics and sartorial practices that smacked of “luxury,” have strongly conditioned consumer behavior. The amalgam of attitudes, images, and practices called “fashion” is especially influential. Rules of fashion once dictated conformity to conventional styles. But beginning in fifteenth-century Italy, and growing as capitalist

market economies spread globally, fashion has come to signify change and novelty. An entire industry has arisen to create and diffuse distinctive clothing defined not only as innovative but necessary; fashion's effects are felt yet more widely through knock-offs that it inspires. Not all buyers can attend to or afford high fashion. But it imparts a sense of dynamism to all textiles and, through them, to broader consumption activities.

Since antiquity, formerly separate textile cultures have repeatedly been linked together, giving consumers access to an ever-wider universe of fabric and fashion suppliers. In the eighteenth century cottons, once restricted mainly to Asia, Africa, and parts of South America, achieved worldwide popularity. Initially, new demand benefited traditional producers. But soon the new machines of industrializing Europe massively outproduced and undersold traditional handicraft centers, whose cottons manufactures withered. The global empires of the European states, which opened colonized areas to cheap, factory-made cloth, largely completed the destruction of prior-existing textile industries in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yet the apparent triumph of European cloth and fashion proved short-lived. New textile cultures have constantly emerged around the world, innovating hybrid styles and fabrics subsequently diffused far beyond their birthplaces. Producers continue to seek new efficiencies and reduced costs by moving to low-wage regions. Their success is facilitated by the mobility of ideas, skills, and techniques that has always characterized textiles, not to mention by broader improvements in transport, communications, and finance. The invention of artificial fibers and finishing agents has likewise transformed textile consumption in the last century. Throughout most of human history, textiles were based on natural fibers, dyestuffs, and finishing. But from the nineteenth century, chemists have developed an array of both new ways to process fibers and altogether new fibers, derived from petrochemicals. Often synthetics rapidly supplanted natural materials. In Italy, once a leading silk producer, rayon (originally called "artificial silk") was initially marketed in 1917 as a wartime substitute; by 1925, Italy's rayon industry was the second largest in the world. And the universe of textiles never stops changing. In the past few years environmental concerns have engendered renewed interest in natural products, culminating in the United Nations' proclamation of 2009 as the Year of Natural Fibers. At the same time, constant innovation in materials (glass, ceramics, metal) and in production methods (computerized design and manufacture) assure that cloth will remain significant in technological change in the future as in the past.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have also opened a new phase in textiles' ongoing mobility. Even before 1 January 2005, when the Multi-Fibers Agreement expired and all quotas ended, much production had relocated to low-wage districts in Asia, Oceania, and eastern Europe. Developed nations, where factory production of textiles was born, have become mainly importers of cheap and middling-priced cloth. Their remaining manufacturers focus on niche markets, high-technology design, expensive fashion goods, and products where fast turnaround between design and sale, and nearness of producer to consumer, are paramount. But most of these specializations can be learned relatively quickly. Mobility of production is therefore sure

to continue and textiles to remain at the forefront of globalization, as they have been since the beginnings of recorded trade in consumer goods.

Total words: 1501

See also *Clothing consumption*; *Consumer regulation*; *Fashion*; *Fashion industry*; *Globalization*; *Luxury and luxuries*; *Sumptuary laws*

Robert S. DuPlessis

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