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Relations between France and Switzerland

St. Gall seen from Paris

A few months ago, merchantmen offering laces, nets and embroideries were regarded by non-professionals as the distributors of highly fancy wares purchased by an infinitely small minority. Since last autumn, however, one need only mention organdie, marquisette, featherstitching, voile, eyelet or guipure, to see the eyes of smart women sparkle with envy at the thought of long and bouffant gowns, delicious hats, embroidered, ornate and glamorous lingerie. The wheel of Fashion has revolved through a complete circle and late XIXth century plates no longer make us smile... they tell us what the future holds in store!

Up to now, St. Gall was considered as having specialized in summer goods. The vogue for lawn, batiste, fine cotton petticoats embellished like blouses with lace or embroidery, the apparition of lace or tulle millinery, all mean that St. Gall's industry is no longer a seasonal one. In winter as in summer, these fabrics and embroideries are now an indispensable accessory of the feminine wardrobe.

The revolution in dress which has just been accomplished could scarcely have been more favourable than it is to the St. Gall mills. Embroidery looms do, of course, exist elsewhere than in Switzerland, but the mere fact that they are currently called «Swiss looms» shows conclusively that in no place other than St. Gall is such delicacy, such crisp freshness, such perfection achieved... in brief, that St. Gall holds the monopoly of quality for the fine cotton fabrics so popular today.

Paris has a strong attraction for Swiss manufacturers, because it is the centre where fashions are launched and it is there that the success of an haute couture model will enhance the repute of the producer of the fabric and secure for him considerable sales on world markets. Even Swiss fashion houses decide in Paris where to obtain their fabrics. Thus it is to the interest of both Paris and St. Gall that they should co-operate harmoniously; by the quality of their efforts they can secure their mutual prosperity.

Other factors besides the change in the price level operated since the recent monetary reform in France are working against the common interests of Swiss manufacturers and those who, in France, employ their products.

Nevertheless, there is always a dark side to every picture and today, when the embroiderers of St. Gall are more highly favoured by the whim of fashion than they have been for the past thirty years, trade conditions are less auspicious.

It is difficult just now to secure delivery of repeat orders; sometimes the quota is exhausted and, even if it is not, import permits take a long time to obtain.

More than ever before, manufacturers, wholesalers and couturiers must become fully conscious of the close interdependence and community of their interests. If, on the one hand, Parisian dressmakers must have Swiss fabrics if they want to satisfy the exigencies of fashion and their customers' requirements, Swiss manufacturers, the diligent suppliers of Parisian fashion houses, have no interest in neglecting distributors who have fully proved the utility, even the necessity, of their action.

The wholesaler is a particularly useful factor in haute couture circles, where those who employ the fabrics are more often artists than business-men, subjected as they are to the hard laws of artistic creation and feminine caprice. The wholesaler's duty to the couturier is to advise, to secure stocks and immediate delivery of the required qualities, to help in the commercial launching and advertising. Towards the manufacturer also, the wholesaler has an essential role to play: grouping orders, guaranteeing their quality and continuity, limiting manufacturing risks and directing production towards the lines most in demand.

And so, by the co-operation of all concerned, the St. Gall textile industry and Parisian haute couture will be in a position to assure their mutual prosperity, adapting output and creation to the needs of the moment, without losing sight of their more permanent interests.