

Zeitschrift: Swiss textiles [English edition]
Herausgeber: Swiss office for the development of trade
Band: - (1951)
Heft: [1]: 25th anniversary of Textile suisses

Artikel: The linen industry
Autor: Brand, W.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-798757>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.09.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

stage in manufacture — are rarely handed over to the trade, a field already dependent on fashion, in the unfinished state in which they leave the looms. The finishing and transformation of these fabrics is the main task of the finishing industry.

Textile finishing consists of a great variety of treatments, chemical processes, mechanical transformations and manipulations that the layman, when he is not completely unaware of their existence, only knows of by hearsay. In most cases finishing is carried out to order. The tasks of this industry are not only those of finishing in the ordinary sense of the word, the effects of which are naturally the most visible, such as the bleaching, dyeing and printing of fabrics. Far from it. Before the fabrics reach their final state and are ready for sale, in all their beauty, they have been submitted either before or after bleaching, dyeing or printing, to a whole series of operations, depending on the use for which they are intended. In fabrics made from vegetable fibres — to quote but one example — certain characteristics of the fabric, its appearance for instance, can be appreciably improved by mercerisation. In fine cotton fabrics which have been submitted to the operations of finishing, the improvement in quality is even more marked. These processes depend on the property possessed by cotton fibres of swelling under the action of certain alkalis or acids, which gives the cotton fibres a transparent or opalescent

appearance, or a starched stiffness resistant to washing; these effects are very often combined with the printing processes. It is among other things these finishing operations, the fruit of the research and ingenuity of Swiss specialists, that have won fine cotton fabrics their world-wide reputation.

But to-day as yesterday, finishing and processing establishments are in constant need of new ideas and new scientific and technical discoveries in order to be able to satisfy the continual flow of new demands on the part of fashion and the consumer. Thus it is largely to finishing that we owe the great variety of textile products resulting from its processes, from the old form of finishing and certain mechanical operations such as the raising, glazing and diapering of fabrics, to the numerous more modern techniques such as proofing by impregnation, the treatments making fabrics uncrushable, unshrinkable, etc. The finishing and processing of textiles does not only refer to yarns and fabrics, but to other textile products such as ribbons, hosiery, knitwear, embroidery, lace and tulle.

Finishing, if we may be allowed to make this striking comparison, is a form of beauty treatment applied to textiles and based on scientific research, in which semi-finished products are submitted, under the constant supervision of laboratories, to the effects and action of different processes and different machines in order to be transformed into goods ready for sale.



THE LINEN INDUSTRY

by W. BRAND, *Manufacturer, Langenthal*

Switzerland's linen industry is the outcome of a very old tradition. It was in 1162 that the first craftsmen in this field came to St. Gall from Milan. In the neighbourhood of Constance, the monasteries encouraged the growing and working of flax, which they harvested and prepared for export. St. Gall took over the working of flax from Constance and in the 15th century developed it to a very high degree of prosperity. This economic activity, the most important of all, spread from Eastern Switzerland as far as Upper Aargau where the government of the canton of Berne took it under its protection in 1600. The linen trade was at its height about the year 1787. In all, some 15,000 bolts of officially checked linen were despatched to the great European fairs. During the first quarter of the 19th century, wars lowered the output and in 1830 it amounted to only 7,000 bales. It was only when cotton became extremely expensive as a result of the American War of Secession that the linen industry recovered a little of its importance, and a few tenacious manufacturers succeeded in maintaining their production and adapting their programme of manufacture to the requirements of the day. Up till the year 1890 pure linen was woven exclusively by hand, while the half-linen qualities had already been woven on mechanical looms for some years. In 1929 the number of people employed in the Swiss linen industry amounted to 2,000, with an output valued



at 10 million Swiss francs of the period (gold francs).

From 1920 onwards exports of high quality linens increased appreciably. Certain firms were able to export to as many as 20 different countries. In 1939 this progress was again checked, and the linen industry fell back with a few exceptions on the home market. Its importance in the national economy is obvious from the figures for imports of linen and hempen yarns, which in 1949 were valued at 5.9 million Swiss francs. It must be added that this industry also uses a certain amount of home-produced linen and hempen yarns as well as cotton yarns. In spite of great difficulties, exports of linens in 1949 amounted to 1.4 million Swiss francs, which represented about 5 to 7 % of sales on the home market. Exports of special linen

yarns to different countries amounted to more than 2 million Swiss francs. To-day Switzerland's linen industry possesses modern, up-to-date mechanical equipment in almost all its establishments. It produces hotel, hospital and household linens of excellent quality, supplies various industries with industrial fabrics and also manufactures specialities for the fashion industries. Many foreign tourists greatly admire these linens in Switzerland and would like to be able to buy them in their own countries. We hope that sooner or later the liberalisation of trade will make it possible for their wishes to be met, for the Swiss linen industry to-day is in a position to compete with foreign competition wherever high quality goods are demanded.



SOME HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF THE WOOL TEXTILE INDUSTRY

by Dr. P. DEUSS, Secretary of the Swiss Association of the Wool Textile industry, Zurich

At the dawn of civilisation, man had already discovered the advantages of wool for covering his nakedness as is proved by a fragment of woollen cloth dating back to the Stone Age, probably woven some twenty-five centuries before our own era and now preserved in the British Museum. Coming to the historic period, we find the spinning and weaving of wool for the first time in the Babylonian Empire, about 3000 B. C. Some weavers' accounts dating back to the year 2200 B. C. have been found inscribed on bricks in the ruins of the town of Ur. Even in those early days there was a difference in technique which corresponds to the distinction we make to-day between carded wool and combed wool.

In Ancient Greece, Pallas Athene was credited with having invented the art of spinning and weaving, whose protectress she was, and which Homer mentions in the Odyssey. The Romans, who themselves went in for sheep breeding and the wool industry, also came across these two activities in a number of other countries which they conquered and from which they obtained woollen products.

Sheep breeding had reached a very high level under the Roman Empire but was in a very bad way at the time of its fall, except in Spain where it has survived without interruption right up to the present day. Merino sheep which are to-day the most highly prized breed are thus called from the name of the officials responsible for assigning pasture-lands to the shepherds. The export of live merino sheep from Spain was forbidden until the reign of Philip V. In 1789 they were introduced into South Africa from where Captain MacArthur, a pioneer of sheep breeding, took some to Australia in 1797.

The first sale by auction of a clip of Australian merino wool took place in London in 1804. Crossbred wools are less fine but stronger than merino wools; they come from English sheep and a cross between these and merinos. These two kinds of wool together form almost 4/5 of the world's total wool output.

In the Middle Ages not much was done in Switzerland to improve the different breeds of sheep. The first

moves in this direction were only taken towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. From 1870 onwards, the Swiss herd which numbered some 450,000 head decreased and at the present moment does not number more than 180,000 head.

In the towns of Switzerland, the wool industry was practised quite early in an independent form, as here and there the names of streets and squares testify. The drapers were among the richest and most highly respected citizens and were probably already organised into corporations in the 12th century.

These corporations laid down strict rules and regulations governing the possession of the means of production, the working conditions of the workers and the sale of the finished products. The different operations were carried out separately by specialised craftsmen and there were no concerns which carried out the whole manufacturing process. The only exception to this rule was perhaps the monasteries, where the cloth and materials necessary to the needs of the community were completely manufactured from beginning to end.

At the time of the Reformation, the urban wool industry began to make great progress and here, as in other fields, exchanges began to take place between Switzerland and other countries, both as regards raw materials and finished products. In 1587 for example, a beginning was made in Zurich with the manufacture of burat and crêpe which thanks to their quality were exported only a few years later to Italy, France, Germany and England. At this period attempts were already being made to protect the home industry against large-scale imports from abroad by bringing in certain restrictive measures.

The Swiss wool textile industry knew a particularly prosperous period during the Thirty Years War, when many merchants from Alsace came and settled in Switzerland in order to be able to continue in this neutral country their trade with France and Germany.

In the 18th century this industry suffered an eclipse for it had to cope with the dangerous competition of