

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

Artikel: Some historical aspects of the wool textile industry
Autor: Deuss, P.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-798758>

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: 25.12.2025

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

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.

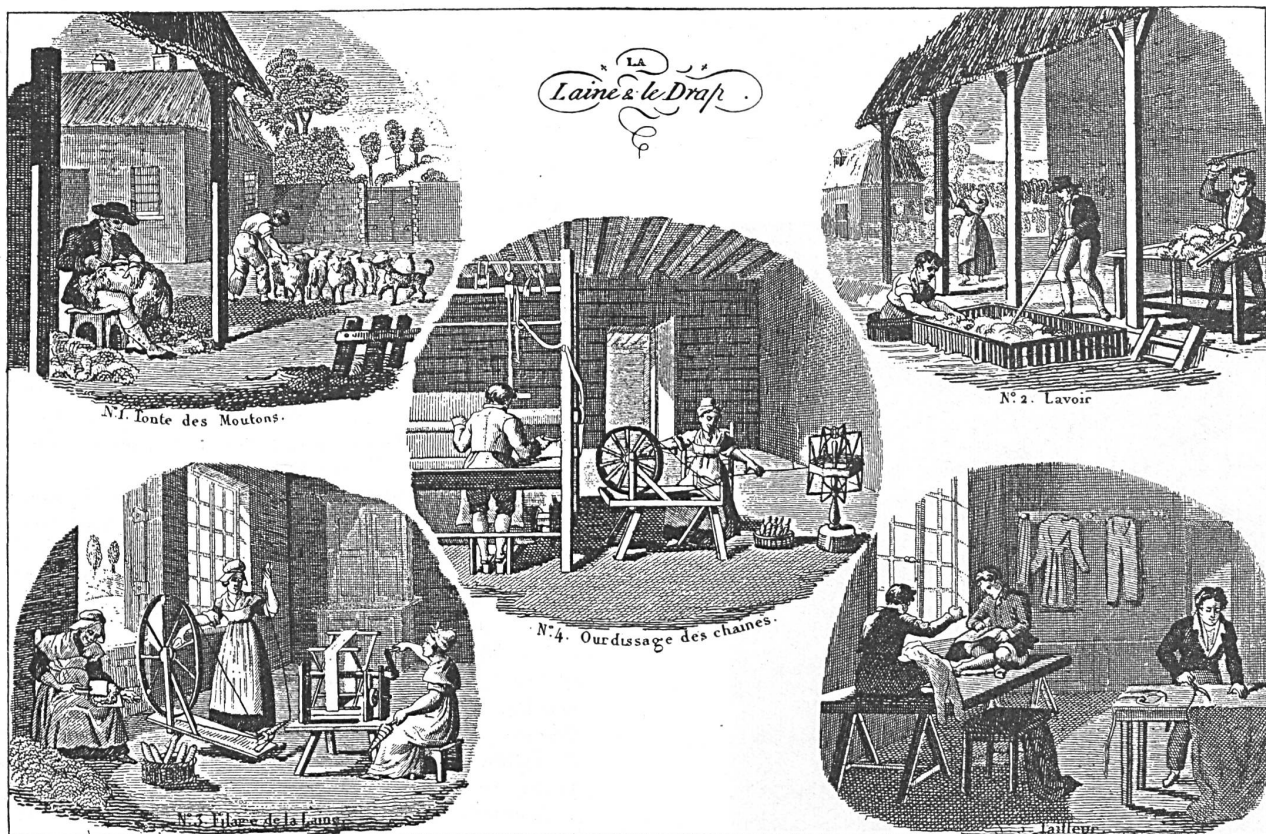
These corporations laid down strict rules and regulations governing the possession of the means of production, the working conditions of the workers and the sale of the finished products. The different operations were carried out separately by specialised craftsmen and there were no concerns which carried 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

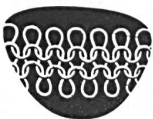
THE TEXTILE INDUSTRIES IN SWITZERLAND



cotton which had lately been introduced into Switzerland and was driving the wool trade from the towns. Only the finishing of fabrics imported from abroad could survive. But the blockade of the continent from 1806 to 1812 reversed the whole situation. The shortage of English woollen fabrics brought about a renewed interest in sheep breeding and soon a great number of small enterprises sprang up — spinning, weaving and cloth mills, and stocking and cap factories.

Many of them ceased their activities at the end of the blockade, others were able to continue until the coming of the railways and, finally, some survived all crises and have to-day become important concerns fully able to hold their own on world markets.

At the present moment Switzerland possesses a very highly developed wool textile industry capable of satisfying the needs of a very exacting clientele. Most of the raw materials it requires have to be imported, but it works mainly for the home market. The prejudice suggesting that foreign wool fabrics, whatever their quality, are better than Swiss products, is fast losing ground. Furthermore, the Swiss wool textile industry, as has already been pointed out (see *Swiss Textiles* No. 2/1950), manufactures a great variety of products. Its manufacturing programme includes all woollen products, hand-knitting wools, woollen and worsted fabrics for men and women's clothing, cloth for uniforms, carpets, upholstery and even felt for hats and all industrial and technical purposes.



THE HOSIERY AND KNITWEAR INDUSTRY

by Dr. W. STÄHELIN, Secretary of the Association of the Swiss Knitwear and Hosiery Manufacturers, Zurich

Weaving and knitting are the two main methods of producing woven or knitted fabrics from threads. While in weaving the material is made by the interlacing of the weft and warp threads, in knitting it is formed by interlocking loops or stitches. Naturally with the passing of time machines have been developed which carry out the interlocking of stitches according to different patterns and produce various types of material, but these technical details are out of place

here. The industry itself is called the « hosiery and knitwear industry ».

The manufacture of knitted fabrics by machine goes back much farther than is generally thought. The first knitting machine was built by the Englishman William Lee as early as 1589. But the real rise of knitting on a professional level dates back to the 19th century. Whereas formerly practically nothing else was manufactured by machine but stockings,