

Zeitschrift: Swiss textiles [English edition]
Herausgeber: Swiss office for the development of trade
Band: - (1951)
Heft: 2

Artikel: 600 years of Zurich silks
Autor: Honegger, Fritz
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-798788>

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>

600 years

OF ZÜRICH SILKS

I. Introduction

The economy and civilisation of the canton of Zurich are very closely bound up with the silk industry and trade; therefore by showing their importance in the economic life of Zurich, the conditions of their production and existence, it is possible at the same time to give a general picture of the State of Zurich, its culture, its technical side, its social politics and, in a word, all the branches of its material and spiritual life. It is not surprising therefore that the government of Zurich should have taken advantage of the festivals celebrating the 600th anniversary of Zurich's entry into the Confederation, to organise an exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Crafts with the theme «600 Years of Zurich Silks». No other sphere of activity offers, or even remotely approaches offering similar possibilities of showing and following down through the centuries the industrious

spirit of Zurich, its eagerness for work, its readiness to accept risks and its spirit of initiative and enterprise.

We shall justify this statement by a retrospective survey which will make it clear that in giving a picture of silk in a special exhibition, it is not merely a sphere of activity that is specifically Zurich's which is being glorified but that, at the same time, it is the most important of Zurich's fields of activity in craftwork, industry and trade that is being evoked.

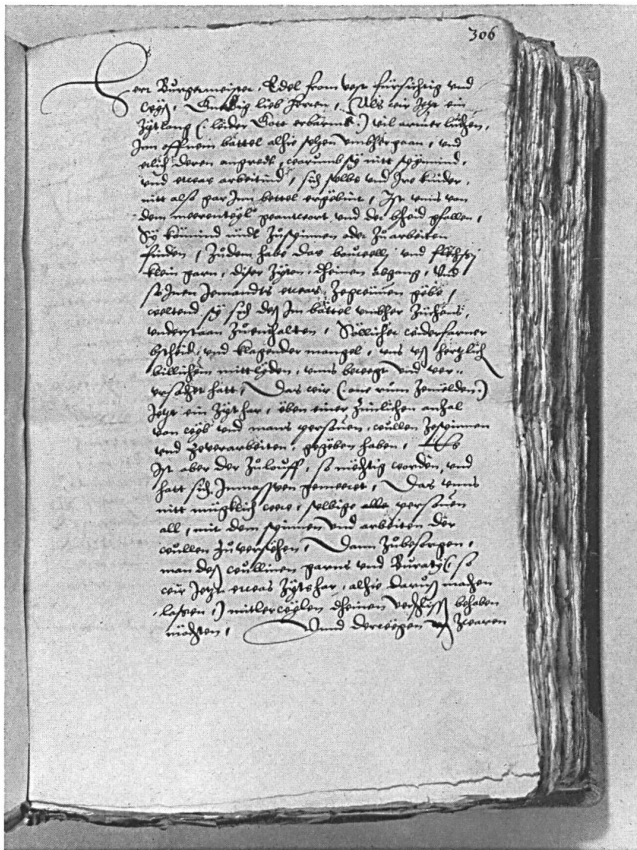
II. Retrospective Survey

It has been discovered that as early as the 13th century, the merchants of Zurich brought back silk threads from Venice and Bologna to Zurich where this precious raw material was woven in numerous convents, at first probably for religious purposes. Later still, the weaving



Rich silk costumes of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Photo Trüb



Werdmüller's petition to the authorities of the town, in 1587, for the introduction of the Schappe industry into Zurich.

of silk was mainly carried out by women who formed a sort of artisanal cooperative guild controlled by supervisory bodies appointed by the authorities. Right from the start the government tried by means of regulations and laws to prevent any lowering of the quality; certain provisions prescribed the length and width of the pieces. The black veils for nuns and the fichus formerly manufactured in Zurich were mainly exported to the Balkans.

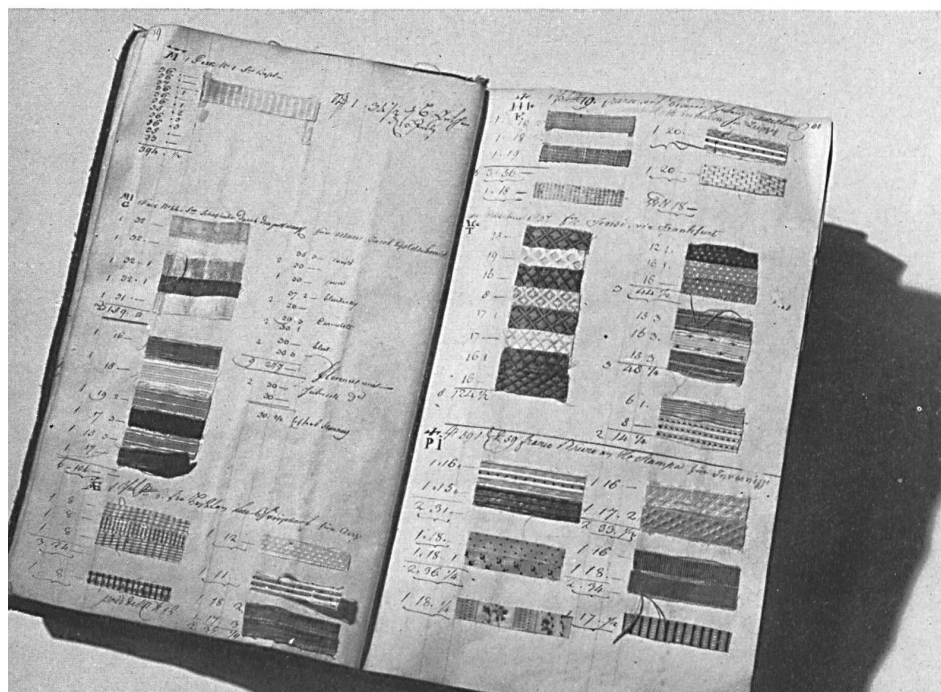
It is interesting to note that in the 18th century the Zurich silk industry still continued to deliver veils of

black crêpe to convents in Poland and Hungary, as had already been done by Zurich weavers in the 13th and 14th centuries. For 500 years technique remained the slave of tradition and veils continued to be woven in the same way, in non-twisted raw silk, dyed and finished in the piece. Moreover the authorities did everything in their power to limit the sale in the country of silk fabrics, considered as luxury articles, to rich clients.

The numerous wars brought about the downfall of the Zurich silk industry towards the end of the 14th century. Its revival dates back to 1555, the year in which the Protestants, driven out of Locarno, again introduced the working of silk into Zurich under the jealous supervision of the guilds, and opened up new opportunities for production. Even at this time it was not possible to raise silk worms rationally and profitably in Switzerland, although official encouragement was not lacking. On the other hand, the construction of the first silk-twisting mill on the Limmat opened up numerous possibilities for the future, as the Protestants from Locarno were not content merely to carry out the weaving but at the same time introduced the spinning and twisting of schappe. Until the outbreak of the Thirty Years War fabrics were exported, mainly to Germany, under the name of «products of Zurich». Later, France became the most important client. As a result of religious persecution in Italy and France, silk specialists came to Zurich where they contributed largely towards the development of silk twisting. The city on the Limmat became the largest supplier of tram for export. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes gave a new stimulus to weaving because it introduced the weaving of taffeta into the programme of manufacture of Zurich, which until then had been somewhat uniform.

The Zurich silk industry owed a further development to the introduction of a new kind of mourning crêpe, Bologna crêpe, which was more difficult and more costly to manufacture. However the industry remained severely handicapped by the strict monopoly exercised by the city of Zurich and by annoying regulations. It was the French Revolution that brought with it the liberty so long desired, but its effects only began to make themselves felt in 1815, when the troubles caused by the Napoleonic Wars were over. Many weaving mills were set up in the country and the far-sighted industrialists of Zurich enriched their traditional manufacturing programme by adding new articles, in particular figured fabrics which, thanks to the use of Jacquard looms,

won world-wide fame. At the end of 1840 there were 12,000 looms weaving annually some 440,000 lbs. of silk; to-day 4500 looms transform 4000 tons of yarns every year, 400 tons of which are silk. This comparison shows the extent of the increase in productivity that took place in one century as a result of the introduction of the mechanical loom in the middle of the 19th century, which brought about great changes in the methods of manufacture used up till then. The weavers of Zurich realised the extraordinary advantages offered by mechanisation and knew how to take advantage more rapidly than their competitors of the new means of production. Zurich enjoyed a world-wide fame at



The book in which the Zurich merchant Martin Usteri noted his purchases and sales of silks in 1785/86.

Photo Trüb

that time for the manufacture of light taffetas which were exported mainly to the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia and the East.

The Zurich silk industry found itself unprepared to meet the crisis which began in 1880. The long run of untroubled business conditions had created a certain feeling of unconcern and caused manufacturers to underestimate foreign competition which was beginning to grow considerably at Lyons, Crefeld, Vienna and Como, sheltered by protectionist tariffs. After a certain delay, the weavers of Zurich brought all their energy and skill

as well as in value, which was made up in the next few years as a result of the general need to replenish stocks. Nevertheless it was not possible to avoid difficulties altogether during this time although a lessening of competition due to rates of exchange and the low price of raw silk enabled the silk industry to extend its outlets and gave it several years of full employment.

In the years immediately after the first World War a great transformation took place in the history of silk. Silk was gradually supplanted by rayon. The manufacturers of Zurich resisted to a certain extent the use of the new



A venerable Zurich silk weaver who still works at home with a handloom.
Photo Wolgensinger

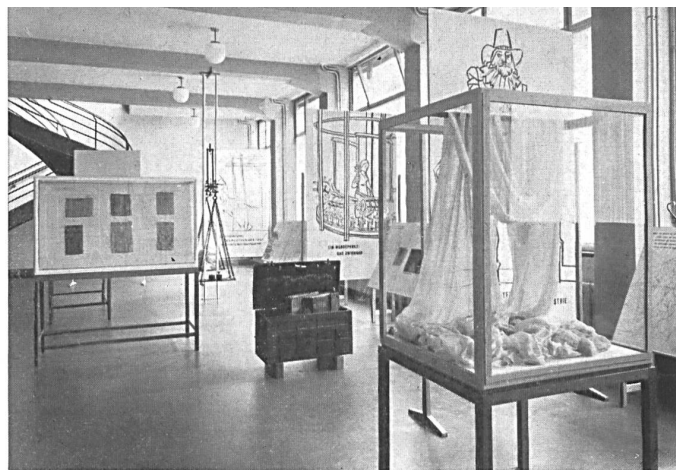
to bear in order to overcome the situation and set up new concerns abroad, so as to make use of the more favourable conditions of manufacture obtaining in other countries and to avoid the payment of customs duties.

At first the 1914 war brought about a considerable reduction in business. Fortunately it was not long before it was possible to re-establish relations which had been broken with other countries. Figures for output and sales then reached remarkable heights due above all to the fact that the silk industries of the belligerents were at a great disadvantage. It was only in 1918 that Swiss exports suffered an appreciable decline in volume

fibre rather longer than their foreign rivals and unfortunately allowed precious time to elapse before adapting themselves to a new situation which could not be avoided. Whereas rayon only supplanted natural silk in Switzerland in the early thirties, this change was made much earlier in other countries. The remarkable success achieved by chemical fibres both from the point of view of volume and quality is mainly due to technical factors and the stability of prices. The purchase of raw materials during the interim period between the two wars lost a great deal of its former primary importance. It was the problem of the technical and administrative organisation of



« 600 Years of Zurich Silks », the modern fabrics.
Photos Trüb



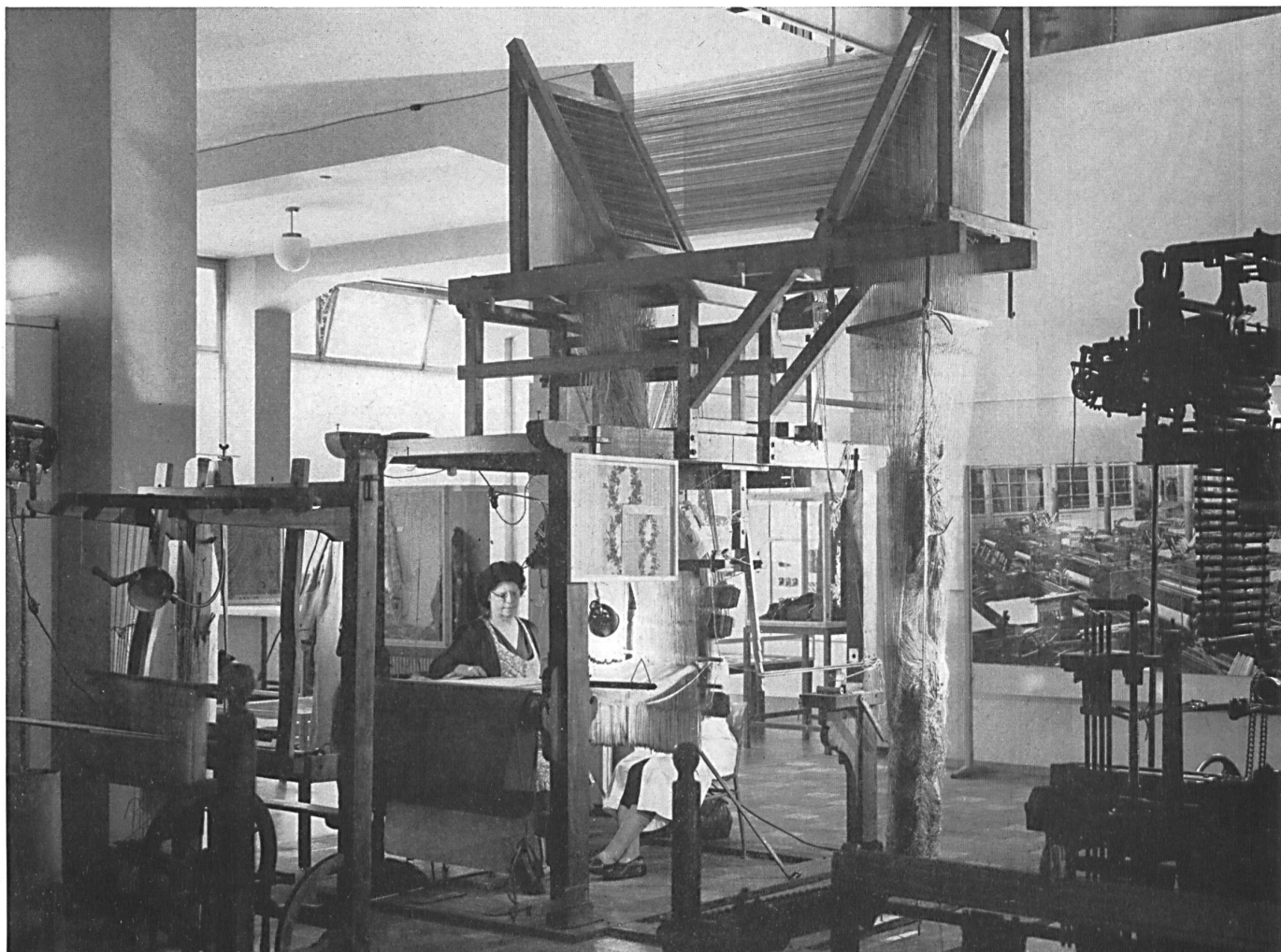
A little history: clearly and simply presented, a picturesque and instructive review of a great industry.

production that was to assume the greater importance. The question of the parity of manpower costs, particularly as compared with those of other countries, gained appreciably in significance. The difficult period of adaptation to a new raw material unfortunately coincided with the decrease in the number of outlets which made itself felt about 1929 and which in time led to disaster, the continued drop in the prices of raw materials inevitably causing the manufacturers great losses. The lack of markets brought about by the numerous devaluations of foreign currencies and increasing protectionism in the form of high customs duties and import quotas led to the dismissal of a great number of workers and the

silencing of hundreds of looms. Many important firms saw themselves faced with liquidation. The lowest point of the curve of this terrible crisis was reached in 1935, as shown by the following figures for export: while in 1919, a prosperous year, exports amounted to 415.5 million Swiss francs, they fell in 1935 to 11 million francs, that is to say to 2.6 % only of the prosperous period mentioned. From 1905 to 1939 the number of workers employed decreased by 5/6. These few details give a good idea of the unbelievable slump in silk weaving in Switzerland and of the almost insurmountable tasks facing this industry in its efforts at readaptation. The devaluation of the Swiss franc in 1936 led to an increase

18th century loom, kindly lent by the Lyons Weaving School.

Photo Heiniger



in the volume of trade. But it was only during the second World War and after, that new record figures were able to be reached. Thus in 1946 and 1947 exports exceeded even in volume the previous record of 1919; when considering this result however, the change in the raw material used must of course be taken into account. In 1948 distinct signs were already felt of a falling off in sales and a considerable drop in exports was also recorded. The ever increasing discrimination between silk and rayon fabrics made by foreign governments again placed the silk weavers and trade up against very considerable problems. The war in Korea together with the efforts towards the liberalisation of trade on the part of O. E. E. C. and the European Payments Union, led to a new recovery.

A history of the commercial policy of the last few centuries would show clearly to what extent Swiss silk weaving and trade depend on possibilities of export, and the harmful effect of increases in customs tariffs, import quotas, obstacles in the way of exchanges of currency and other measures strangling international trade.

Unfortunately space does not permit us to go into all the details of the historical development of the branches allied to that of silk weaving. Suffice it to say that the silk trading firms which are responsible for the buying and importing of raw silk have always played an important economic role. Not only have they ensured for Switzerland the supply of raw silk from Italy and Japan but they are also the principal suppliers of silk for various foreign countries.

The problems of silk twisting are so similar to those of weaving that there is nothing new to be said concerning the historical development of this branch. In both, protectionism on the part of foreign countries and the introduction of rayon have been important factors in the falling off of Swiss exports which has been growing steadily more marked since the first World War.

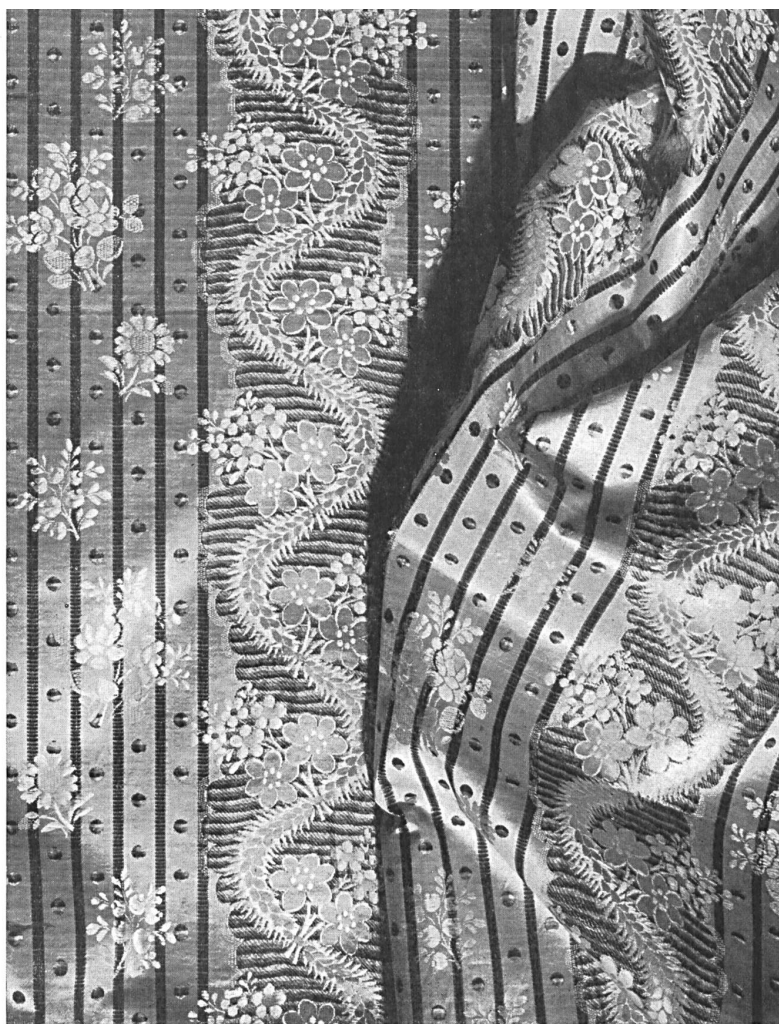
The weaving of bluteau, which has long enjoyed an enviable stability, is a field apart. Silk gauze is used in the milling trade and for other technical purposes. Switzerland has long had a sort of monopoly in this product thanks to the unique quality of her gauze, which is almost always woven on hand looms; this position has been threatened lately by foreign competition.

Naturally silk wholesalers or converters who buy the unfinished fabrics from the factory and have them dressed and finished to order, play a considerable role. The silk industry offers a typical example of the important tasks incumbent on the trader, particularly in order to multiply the possibilities of sale both on the home market and abroad.

The Swiss finishing industry, that is to say the dyers and printers, naturally constitutes an important cog in the silk industry which it would be impossible to imagine without it. The Swiss silk industry owes a good deal of the high standard of its production to a highly developed finishing industry.

III. The Exhibition « 600 Years of Zurich Silks »

An exhibition is being held until August 19th in the halls of the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zurich entitled « 600 Years of Zurich Silks ». The organisers of this exhibition have succeeded in presenting in an attractive, vivid and convincing manner, a period in the development of Zurich in relation to the history of the silk industry. The visitor can first of all see, very clearly presented, the technical side of the silk industry, from its primitive forms to the most modern looms of to-day. A loom from Lyons, some two centuries old, is a special feature of



Zurich creations of the 18th century.

Opulent silks created in Zurich for the Universal Exhibition of 1900 in Paris.





Beautiful modern novelty silks.

Photos Heiniger

this section. A silk weaving loom from Amden, which can actually make a fabric in which there are more than 10,000 different colours, affords an example of the possibilities offered by modern automatic looms.

Further on one sees the different uses to which silk has been put through the ages. Historical costumes, fabrics and fichus are eloquent witnesses of what the silk industry was capable of in those days.

The historical development of the industry is shown in a rationally classified collection of ancient documents, portraits, engravings, drawings, etc. Furthermore much space is devoted to showing the influence of the silk industry on craftwork, trade, politics and culture down through the centuries.

Naturally the importance of rayon yarns in the weaving of silk is duly emphasised. A separate corner is devoted to instruction in the textile arts and there is a very convincing display of the work of the Textile School of Zurich.

But the chief attraction of the exhibition is the « Street of Silk » where, in very beautiful shopwindow displays, there is an extremely rich collection of the most modern silks. The magnificence of the fabrics, the splendour of their colours and the refined technique of their manufacture are the best proof of the results achieved by the Swiss silk industry.

As a textile raw material, silk no longer plays more than a secondary role from the point of view of volume ; nevertheless its reputation is all the greater. An idea of the fairy-like quality of the fabrics with their dazzling colours made of the extraordinary fibre secreted by the silk worm can be obtained by admiring the treasures displayed in the « Street of Silk ».

A visit to the « 600 Years of Zurich Silks » exhibition makes it possible to understand that only great efforts and an extraordinary tenacity of purpose have made it possible to overcome the difficulties that have arisen in the way of the development of the silk industry in the past, difficulties that it will certainly not be spared in the future.

Down through the centuries however the will has remained alive — by its very nature one might almost say — and has been encouraged to achieve ever better results and constantly to perfect its products. The Zurich exhibition admirably shows this pride in work and this power of creation.

Dr. Fritz HONEGGER,
*Zurich Association
of the Silk Industry.*



Modern figured silks of Zurich.
Photo Heiniger