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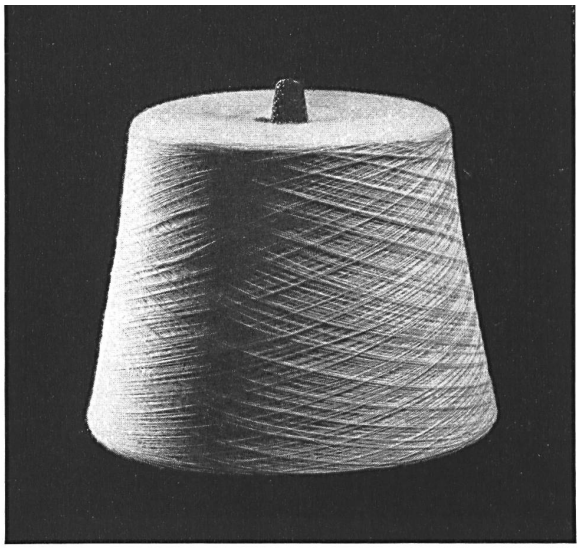
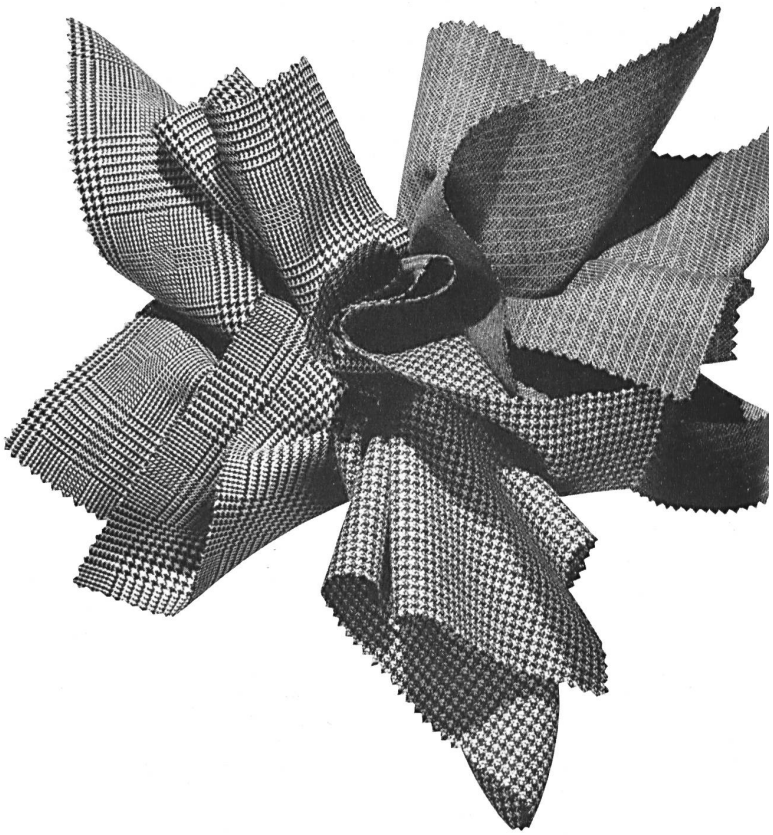
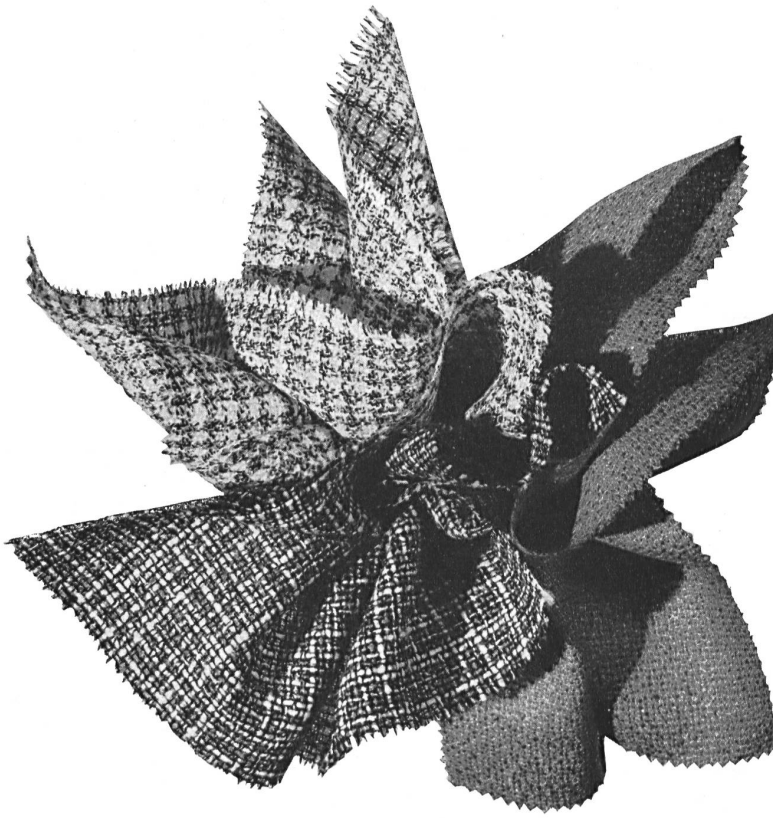


THE WOOL TEXTILE INDUSTRY



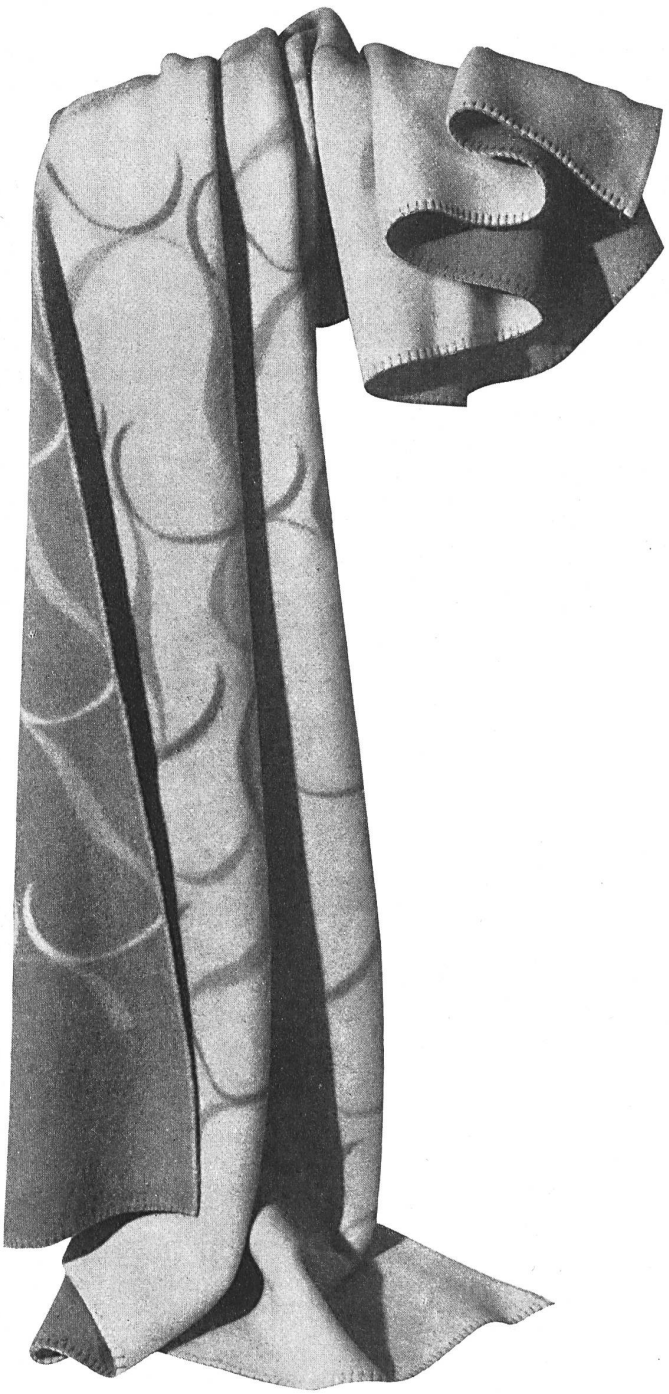


The Swiss wool textile industry is both modern and yet steeped in tradition. Every year it consumes approximately 140 to 150 million Swiss francs' worth of raw materials, i.e. wool almost entirely of foreign origin. Naturally it also uses all sorts of artificial and synthetic fibres. It employs about 11,000 men and women in some 80 factories. The total annual turnover of Swiss wool textile firms lies between 500 and 550 million Swiss francs. The manufacturing programme of these firms includes every article imaginable, i.e. mainly carded and combed yarns down to the finest counts, for weaving and the knitting and hosiery industries; yarns for hand-knitting, prepared for retail sales; carded and worsted fabrics for all uses, from the heaviest coatings to extra-light, tropical-type materials; plain, colour-woven and printed scarves, squares, etc.; furnishing fabrics (furniture and curtains), travelling rugs and blankets; carpets of all kinds; fabrics for slippers and industrial fabrics for all uses; felt cloth and fabrics for filters; all types of other articles in felt.

The strength of the Swiss wool textile industry lies in the great emphasis placed on high quality production. Its products are sold in 50 countries; it exports a quarter of its output of yarns and fabrics. In 1963, its exports totalled a value of 103 million Swiss francs.

Customs discrimination between EEC and EFTA has become more marked since the tariff reductions within each of the two groups have been increased to as much as 50 %. If no agreement is reached between the two groups and if this customs discrimination continues, changes in the structure of the foreign trade in wool products will probably be inevitable during the next few years. At any rate, the Swiss wool textile industries that go in for export are making great efforts not only to increase their exports to EFTA countries but also to establish and at the same time develop relations with countries belonging to neither of the two big European economic blocs.

In any case, the outcome of the negotiations of GATT, which began in May 1964 in Geneva, will be of great importance for the Swiss wool textile industry (which has endeavoured right from the start to have all the wool textile industries represented at the present negotiations). The Common Market countries and the United States



are at present the biggest foreign clients of the Swiss wool textile industry.

A few years ago the Swiss Association of the Wool Textile Industry created a guarantee label for high quality products in pure virgin wool. This label is used for hand-knitting yarns, fabrics, blankets and carpets and, thanks to a large-scale joint advertising campaign, it is already well established in Switzerland and abroad. Naturally the Swiss wool textile industry will also adopt the international label recently created by the International Wool Secretariat.

In Switzerland, great attention has always been paid to the problem of rationalizing production in the wool textile industry. Comparative studies of factories, carried out during the last ten years in certain sectors, indicate the steps to be taken from the technical point of view. But in the wool textile industry understanding between concerns does not stop there; a gratifying cooperation between certain groups, starting four years ago, has led for example to a unification of programmes of production, manufacture and exports.

The revolutionary progress achieved in the construction of textile machinery during the past few years has led to fewer and fewer unskilled workers being taken on in the textile sector. With a view to training the labour force of tomorrow, the wool textile industry has drawn up a programme designed to meet modern needs. It does not require greater numbers of workers but is seeking to raise their standard and to use the smallest possible number of unskilled workers. In the process of modernizing and rationalizing firms, a great number of interesting jobs are being created in the upper ranks and managing staff; after two years of systematic practice a capable worker, but without any real apprenticeship, can obtain the certificate of a skilled wool textile worker awarded by the Swiss Association of the Wool Textile Industry. A generous system of scholarships enables young men who have finished their apprenticeship to complete their training in Swiss and foreign textile schools.

The real future of the Swiss wool textile industry lies in the thorough and continual modernization of firms, in a production that meets the most exacting demands from the point of view of fashion and quality, as well as in the systematic and selective recruiting and training of a young labour force fired with enthusiasm for this varied branch.