

History

History tells us that Silk originated in the Far East over 4,500 years ago. The Chinese Empress, Hsi Ling Shi, is credited with discovering in 2640 BC, that the cocoons on her mulberry trees could be unwound to produce a fine fibre, Silk, which could be woven into cloth. Recent archaelogical finds prove in fact that Silk was being woven into fabric at a far earlier date.

The secret of sericulture (the production of Silk) was jealously guarded by the Chinese and it was only when the first great merchant caravans made the long journey over the mountains and across deserts from China, that Silk was brought to the West.

Silk was treated by the early merchant explorers as a valuable trading commodity, on a par with gold and precious stones. The fine clothes and furnishings of the noblest families of Europe and the Mediterranean lands were made of Silk, which had been carried along the "Silk Road" from the East to Venice and other busy trading ports.

Indeed so fine was the workmanship, that many examples from these times still exist, on display in museums and palaces. Ancient documents such as lists of clothing of Queen Elizabeth I compiled in the year 1600, detail the items of 'Silke' in her wardrobe. Much of the silk used nowadays comes from China and other Far Eastern countries, where sericulture is still a major industry. Although the modern day methods of transportation are less romantic, they are considerably faster and can ensure constant supplies of raw silk for dyeing, weaving and printing by famous fabric companies of Britain and Europe.

In addition, considerable quantities of Far Eastern fabrics, both finished and unfinished and made up goods are imported into Europe.

From the fabric companies, the Silk is bought by fashion designers and manufacturers to be made into clothes and accessories for men and women, which are sold to shops and stores throughout the world. Much Silk fabric is also sold by the piece to dressmakers and furnishing experts.



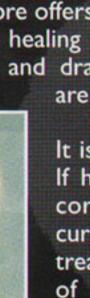
Characteristics

Silk is produced by various insects, but by far the largest quantity comes from the silkworm 'Bombyx Mori', which feeds on mulberry leaves and forms a cocoon of Silk before pupating. The threads from several cocoons are subsequently wound together to form a single strand of raw silk.

This fine thread is the basic component of all Silk yarn and fabric and is generally too fine for most weaving. Thicker yarn is created by twisting a certain number of threads together - a process called throwing. Yarn used for warps (the vertical thread) have a higher twist and are called organzine, trame is of a lower twist and is used for weft (the horizontal thread). Yarn with an extrahigh twist is called crepe yarn.

Silk is an amazingly versatile fibre. It is soft, highly elastic and resilient, but at the same time stronger than steel. Of all the textile fibres it has the closest affinity to human skin, giving comfort that no other fibre offers. In China it is thought to have healing properties. Its beautiful lustre and draping qualities

are well known.



It is naturally flame retardant. If held in a flame it forms a core of black ash, but a curtain of Silk, especially if treated, will slow the progress of a fire, unlike most synthetics. Silk during burning has a similar smell to that of

burning hair. This can be a good test in establishing whether a thread is Silk or not.

Silk accepts colour easily and can be dyed to the most subtle and deepests of shades. It prints in fine detail in many colours. Silk must be treated with care as not all dyes are fast to water or sunlight.

Most Silk fabrics are produced from continuous filament yarn, but there are two exceptions, spun Silk and noil Silk. Both are produced from waste Silk that results from Silk reeling. Spun Silk has a smooth texture, while noil Silk is knobbly, often with minute dark pieces, fragments of the chrysalis twisted into the yarn. Silk can be successfully blended or spun

with other fibres to enhance their qualities. It has been argued that Silk is the most ecologically acceptable of all textile fibres and is produced from a renewable resource (mulberry leaves).





Caring for Silk

Some Silks are washable, for others dry cleaning is recommended. If in doubt check with the store where you bought the fabric or garment. Do not wash Silk goods if the colours are not fast. Keep Silk out of strong sunlight. Before washing test for colour fastness.

Wet a small piece of the fabric in cool water and then lay it on a piece of white material. Press with a warm iron. If it leaves no colour or hardly any mark on the white fabric, then you can safely wash it. Normally Silk is best washed by hand with a mild detergent such as

Lux or Tenestar in lukewarm water. Rinse well, squeeze out surplus moisture by rolling in a towel and hang out to dry.



Never soak, boil, bleach or wring Silk or leave it crumpled in a towel. Do not let Silk become too dirty before washing, as hard rubbing damages the fibres.

These days washing machines often have a programme for washing delicate articles at a temperature of 40°. Provided great care is taken and the above recommendations are followed, many Silk articles can be successfully washed by machine.

Marks should be rubbed lightly with a sponge or brush. Dry Silk away from the sun or direct heat. Press on the wrong side with a warm iron.

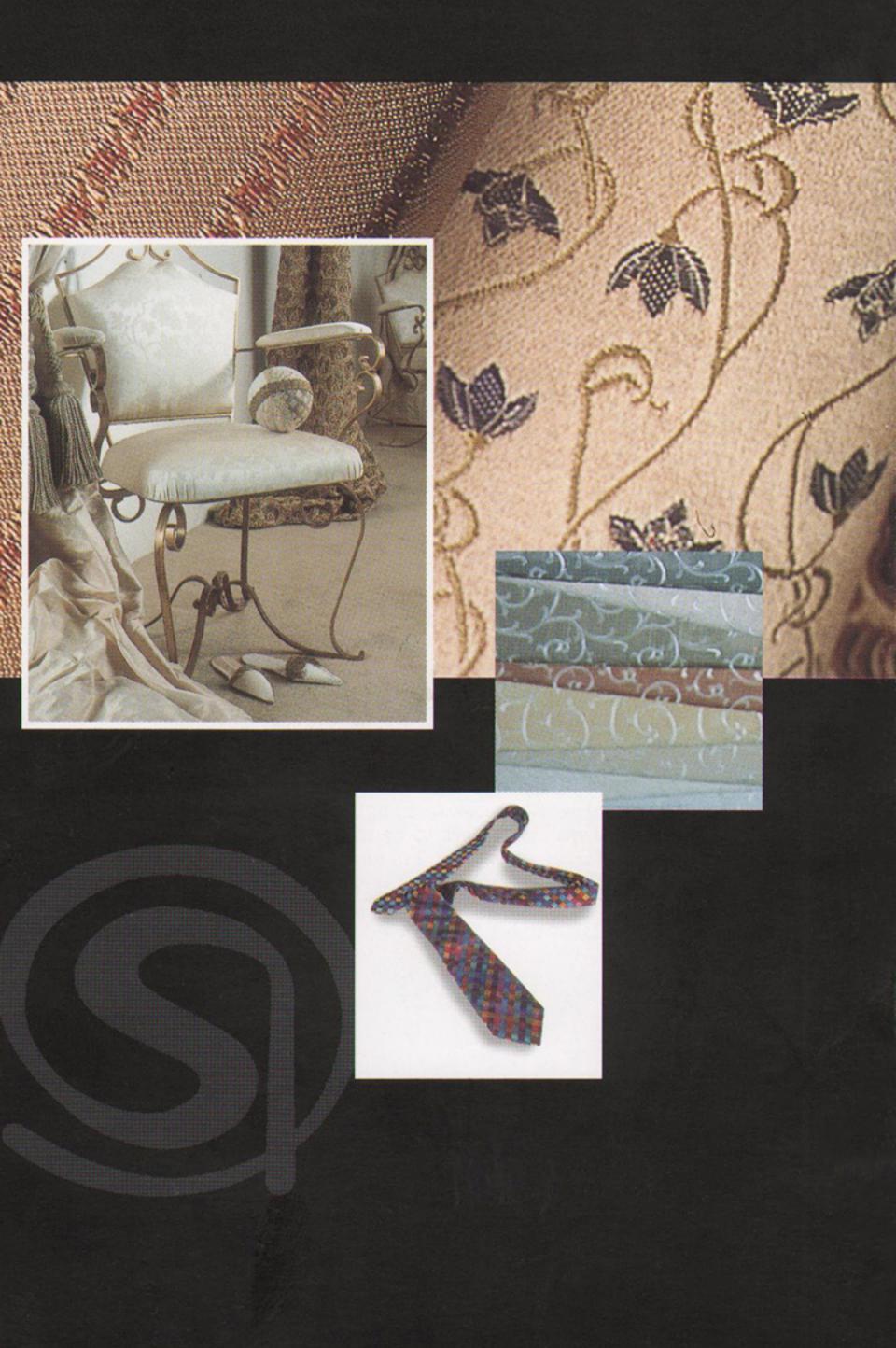
Slubbed and crepes and most wild Silks should be pressed when dry and others when slightly (and evenly) damp. Finish off lightly on the right side. When pressing Silk with a rib or slub, use a pressing cloth otherwise the Silk may become fluffy. Do not press with steam or re damp the Silk locally, as water staining may occur. If the Silk water stains, then dip the garment in warm water for 2-3 minutes, dry and re-iron.

It is important to avoid soaking Silk if it has a flame resistant finish.

Dry Cleaning

Badly stained garments should be dry-cleaned. Do not try to remove stains with a stain remover at home; tell the dry-cleaner what caused them. Choose your dry-cleaner carefully. Make sure that they can clean Silk properly.

Use a dry-cleaner, whom you have used for Silk or who has been recommended to you. Silk that should be dry-cleaned includes taffetas, chiffons, brocades, many multi coloured prints, dressing gown fabrics, ties and scarves.



Sewing with Silk

Sewing with Silk may take a little more effort and care, but in the end the results will be well worth it. Always remember that Silk is a very delicate fibre and should be treated as such. These notes are a guide for home dressmakers who may be using Silk for the first time. If you treat Silk with care, it will repay you with its hardwearing and longlasting qualities.

Use Silk thread for sewing Silk, when available.

If it is necessary to iron the Silk before cutting out a pattern, use a cool iron with a cloth over the Silk to protect it. Do not spray water on to Silk fabric, as it could become watermarked.

Use very fine dressmaking pins, large pins leave holes in the Silk.

Use a finer needle in your machine such as No II (Continental No 70).

When sewing fine Silk, such as chiffon, tack the Silk onto tissue paper and sew through the two layers. The paper will stabilise the fabric during sewing.

Use a cool iron for pressing each part of the garment as it is stitched and when it is finished.





Buying Silk

Look for the SILK MARK, or for the SILK MARK Hanging Ticket, which ensures that Silk has been supplied by a member of the Silk Association of Great Britain. Otherwise look for the fibre content label, OR ASK! Only Silk is kind to the skin, warm in winter and cool in summer and has graceful drape and brilliant sheen. You have to care for Silk, but it is worth it.

Remember not only to look for Silk blouses and lingerie but shirts, ties, socks, nightwear, dressing gowns and sportswear, not forgetting that Silk upholstery, cushion covers, lampshades, curtains and wall coverings give that extra grace demanded by the connoisseur.



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