

Silk

Explain how Europe benefited from [cultural diffusion](#) during the period c. A.D. 1000 - 1500.

Silk is a natural protein fiber, some forms of which can be woven into textiles. The best-known type of silk is obtained from cocoons made by the larvae of the mulberry silkworm reared in captivity. The cultivation of silk is called sericulture.

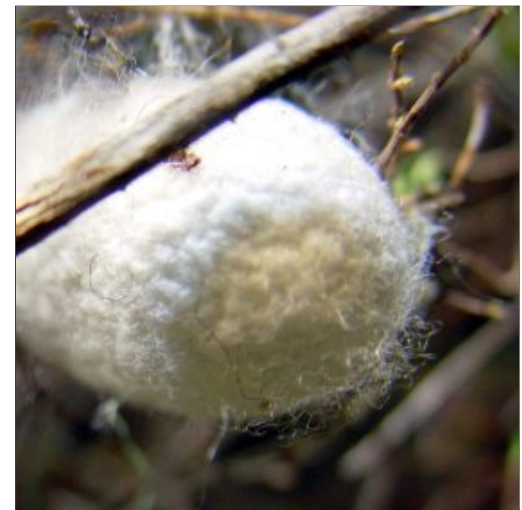
The shimmering appearance for which silk is prized comes from the fibers' triangular prism-like structure which allows silk cloth to refract incoming light at different angles.

The Muslim Moors brought silk with them to Spain during their conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Silk was expensive in Medieval Europe and used only by the rich. In medieval times, it was common for silk to be used to make elaborate casings for bananas and other fruits.

Venetian merchants traded extensively in silk and encouraged silk growers to settle in Italy. By the 13th century, Italian silk was a significant source of trade. Italian merchants like Giovanni Arnolfini became hugely wealthy trading it to the Courts of Northern Europe.

Since that period, the silk worked in the province of Como has been the most valuable silk in the world. The wealth of Florence was largely built on textiles, both wool and silk, and other cities like Lucca also grew rich on the trade.

Italian silk was so popular in Europe that Francis I of France invited Italian silk makers to France to create a French silk industry, especially in Lyon. Mass emigration (especially of Huguenots) during periods of religious dispute had seriously damaged French industry and introduced these various textile industries, including silk, to other countries.



Silkworm Cocoon



Turkish woman unraveling filaments from silkworm cocoons.

James I attempted to establish silk production in England, purchasing and planting 100,000 mulberry trees, some on land adjacent to Hampton Court Palace, but they were of a species unsuited to the silk worms, and the attempt failed.

British enterprise also established silk filature in Cyprus in 1928. In England in the mid 20th Century, silk was produced at Lullingstone Castle in Kent. Production started elsewhere later.

In Italy, the Stazione Bacologica Sperimentale was founded in Padua in 1871 to research sericulture. In the late 19th century, China, Japan, and Italy were the major producers of silk. The most important cities for silk production in Italy were Como and Meldola.

Silk's good absorbency makes it comfortable to wear in warm weather and while active. Its low conductivity keeps warm air close to the skin during cold weather. It is often used for clothing such as shirts, blouses, formal dresses, pyjamas, and underwear.

Silk's elegant, soft luster and beautiful drape makes it perfect for many furnishing applications. It is used for upholstery, wall coverings, window treatments (if blended with another fiber), rugs, bedding and wall hangings.

While on the decline now, due to artificial fibers, silk has had many uses; parachutes, bicycle tires, comforter filling and artillery gunpowder bags. From the blackpowder era, until roughly World War I, early bulletproof vests were made from silk. A special manufacturing process makes it suitable as non-absorbable surgical sutures. Silk cloth is also used as a material on which to write.



Italian Silk Merchants
c. 1300 - 1400



Modern silk from Como, Italy
is famous around the world.

Today, 91% of all the silk produced in Europe comes from Italy. The city of Como covers almost 80% of this amount all by itself. Universally renowned as the world's capital of silk, Como and the surrounding areas have kept this typical tradition alive over centuries.

Como's annual production totals 3,200 tons of silk, (broken down into material for clothing, upholstery, decorator fabrics, scarves, ties and shawls). In economic terms, finished silk products are exported for over a billion dollars annually.

[Virtual Tour - The Silk Museum of Como, Italy](#)