

A Very Speculative but Brief Note on Textiles and Society

Textiles have played a very special role in the history of humanity because of their unique and contradictory dual character: they are at the same time very delicate and vulnerable to the natural elements and human use on the one hand, while on the other hand, they are very rugged, resilient and portable as objects of transport.

This latter characteristic has given textiles a unique place in history, especially silk textiles, in the interwoven history of ornament and the history of trade. The perfect combination of costliness, light weight and durability of silk made it a very profitable object of trade (along with spices, gems and other products which share these physical characteristics), and with this trade, an essential means of communication for motifs, designs, cultural values and ideas, as well as the power behind them. In this sense, the historical ‘durability’ of textiles is very similar to that of architecture, but instead of immutable monumental and heroic remains physically linked to a particular place, we have mobile textile fragments.

Although textiles are often thought of simply in terms of clothing (first for protection from the elements and later, for purposes of adornment), and in terms of interior decoration, it should not be forgotten that they have also been an essential element of housing, in the form of the tent (on which subject there is a remarkably small literature), and for travel itself, in the form of luggage, and especially, for sails for wind-powered water transportation.

The intimate relationship between textiles and society can also be seen in the fundamental role it played in the rise of the capitalist system, as the first large-scale capitalist industry (the production and export of wool in medieval Flanders); in the industrial revolution (the mechanisation of cotton spinning and weaving in eighteenth-century England); in architecture, as the object of the first multi-storied iron frame building (Bage’s flax mill in Shrewsbury, England in 1796); as the subject of the first working-class history (Henson’s history of the framework-knitters in 1831); or as the subject of the first semiotic text (Roland Barthes, *La Mode*, Paris, 1963); not to mention that the French word for loom is the same as the general word for profession or trade (*métier*), and the German word for textiles is the same as the general word for material or matter (*Stoffe*), which is also the case for the Dutch word *stof*, as well as in English, with the word ‘material’.

Perhaps it is by chance that Christopher Columbus, like his father, was first a wool weaver and wool merchant, but it is quite logical that the Jacquard loom in early nineteenth-century France was the inspiration for the work of Charles Babbage in England which lead directly to the invention of the computer in the twentieth century.

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