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Examining the Socio-Economic Importance of 14th Century Venetian

Silk Textile Production

This vibrant red and gold “Brocade Velvet” textile from the 14th century likely came from the Italian city-state of Venice. A few reasons for this proposition include the pattern of gold encased threading which probably originated in a Persian workshop of Tabriz¹ and its relatively early production before the true heyday of silk textile manufacturing on the Italian peninsula in the 1400s when city-states actually began enacting laws to prevent their best craftsmen from leaving to work for a foreign workshop.² Venice’s maritime trading empire stretched throughout the Mediterranean and the techniques for creating silk textiles flowed out along such trade routes, bringing the craft to Italy; specifically to centers of trading like Venice before other interior or less trade-oriented polities.

As a result, not only did patterns, techniques, and even craftsmen flow into the peninsula through these ports from abroad, but Venetian dominance in naval trade (only rivaled by Genoese shipping) meant these new crafts often cropped up in the Floating City before other locations. In the following I wish to look at two things related to this length of “Brocade Velvet.” First I would like to expand upon how this piece may be representative of the class *parangon* in Venetian silk craft, one of a handful of classifications for Venetian textile production which defines the base cloth as falling in the highest quality category.³ Then I will explain how the materials and techniques required for the production of a *parangon* class textile relate to foreign trade that probably introduced the Black Death into Italian society through a massive port city like Venice.

This *parangon* classification designated a silk textile intended only for local sale to the wealthiest elites. Highly skilled craftsmen presented nominees at Venetian trade fairs where their

masterful creations would be compared to one another, and these occurred frequently (at the request of a potential patron or as decreed by the government) in open squares of the city. Such examples represented “beautiful’ and “good works of the highest possible excellence and perfection,”⁴ In Lucas Molà’s assessment of the Venetian silk industry, he describes the various classifications and speaks at length about the *parangon* class; specifically how it can legally only utilize the highest quality materials and techniques in the production of the base cloth. Three attributes of the “Brocaded Velvet” mark it as within such a high echelon of production; these include the use of gold thread, the complicated production method required to produce piled velvet out of silk thread, and the vibrant and durable red dye needed to make this length of fabric.

The use of brocading, or of silk thread wrapped in precious metals –here gold, is a significant factor in marking this museum piece within the highest order of Venetian production which only utilized *parangon* status silk cloth. Not only is a silk textile already a luxury good, but further increasing its value by weaving gold into its construction placed it within the highest realm of textiles. It’s doubtful that any workshop would spend the money to use such expensive gold wrapped silk thread with other substandard materials. Indeed, the high skill needed to create both the metal wound thread and the velvet itself required the most proficient craftsmen of both trades.

The technique used to create velvet makes this “Brocaded Velvet” an example of the most expensive variety of silk cloths as well. It required building a piled surface filled with thousands of loops of single silk threads which a specialized loom pulls through the base layer of silk. From there the loops are either left intact or cut to make a soft, thick, and plush surface, off which light beautifully reflects and refracts and gives velvet its characteristic sheen.⁵ Not only is

the production method intensive and the machinery required that much more complicated than the average loom, but velvet also requires much more silk than a more simple woven cloth because of the nature of double weaving a base and piled surface. This inevitably makes for a more expensive final product.

Finally, the bright and deep red dye used in making this length of fabric was prohibitively expensive in the 14th century. Since it remained so luscious over the hundreds of years since its creation, the dye used here also undoubtedly came from the highest class of red dyes. Derived from local plants, the cheapest three methods of creating red dyes probably could not hold this wonderful of a color for so long since some of the worst textile dyes easily faded or dulled within the lifetime of the buyer.⁶ Instead, the dye used here probably belonged to one the three higher quality ingredients for red dyes described by Molà; these include Lac, Grain, and Kermes, of which the latter two are consider the best and fall on equal footing so I will only consider them further.⁷

The base ingredient for the Kermes dye came from the parasitic worms of trees that grow throughout the Mediterranean area and its name originates from a Sanskrit word for the worms. Grain consisted of dried insects whose appearance resembled pieces of grain. Varieties of these insects lived in many locations that included parts of Central Europe, the Balkans, and Persia. In both cases, either of these bases was mixed with various other generic dye ingredients in a large vat of boiling water into which the silk cloth would then be repeatedly dipped to create the desired color.⁸ To obtain either of these two critical ingredients for making high quality red dyes as used in the “Brocaded Velvet”, Venetian craftsmen must have bought ingredients that often originated in the Eastern half of the Mediterranean or Persia; places where the plague struck

before travelling to Western Europe. The trade of these materials easily could act as a vector of infection in the first outbreak of the Black Death in 1348 within Venice and throughout Europe.

Altogether, many of the steps Italians took in producing such a textile required interaction and trade with Near Eastern traders, merchants, and expert craftsmen in order to obtain the necessary materials and knowledge. From the eastern techniques used for the production of silk textiles that Italians began using in the 1300s, to the Persian pattern of brocading said to originate from the city of Tabriz,⁹ the Chinese produced silk threading, and the base ingredients for the luxurious and high quality red dye utilized in this “Brocaded Velvet.”¹⁰ As a result, the trade needed to produce this piece in the 1300s easily could have resulted in the spread of the Black Death through contact with someone infected in another port city in the Eastern Mediterranean. Because of the enormous amount of trade passing through Venice each year, frequently luxury goods or resources originating in the Near and Far East, a Venetian vessel easily could have been the epicenter for the plague’s spread throughout Europe.

Not only did trade for luxury goods like silk or dye ingredients increase the likelihood for a European outbreak of the Black Death, but the native job market for the silk industry would prove an important dynamic in urban revitalization after each successive outbreak of the illness. Producing this “Brocaded Velvet” required participation of many social classes in the city-state. From the wealthy elite patrons who bought the product as a sign of their upper-class social status, to the merchant elite which profited in the buying and selling of silk textiles, and finally the working class craftsmen who participated in weaving, dying, or the creation of the metal wound silk thread for brocading. Even with the massive population loss witnessed in 1348 (and the smaller losses witnessed in the subsequent outbreaks), the wealthiest elite still desired to wear the luxurious fabric and consequentially helped buttress the economic systems of Venice

and other Italian city-states producing silk. As Molà points out, “the silk industry crossed social boundaries” and “constituted one of the most important economic activities of Italy” during the later Renaissance period.¹¹

Accordingly, the mass population migration from the countryside to the urban sector seen after each outbreak resulted, in a small part, from the industrial jobs created by silk production. Without this and other similar markets, the rebound of urban populations could never happen as quickly as described by Samuel Cohn in his analysis of the Black Death.¹² Whether or not the “Brocaded Velvet” actually originated from Venice is mostly irrelevant, it simply represents a textile that a Venetian craftsman easily could produce and sale for the luxury good market. The process of its creation and sale holds dual importance as a possible vector for the spread of the Black Death in the 14th century, as well as a key factor in explaining the swift rebound in the population of Venice and other Italian city-states after the deadly first wave of the illness. Furthermore, the fledging production of silk textiles in the 1300s would soon morph into a powerhouse of economic growth during the coming Renaissance period that defines much of early modern Italian history.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ “Brocaded Velvet, 14th century [Probably Italian]” (46.156.72), in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-, last modified August 2011, accessed February 24, 2014, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/46.156.72>

- ² Molà, Luca, *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000),
- 4.
- ³ Although in reference to products in the 15th century, he assumes that the origin of the term is much earlier and from sometime in the 14th century. Quoted from 1457 text in Molà, *Silk Industry*, 101, n.31.
- ⁴ Ibid. 101 n.31.
- ⁵ Watt, Melinda, "Renaissance Velvet Textiles," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-, last modified August 2011, accessed February 24, 2014, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/velv/hd_velv.htm
- ⁶ Ibid, 106.
- ⁷ Ibid, 108-109.
- ⁸ Ibid, 109-110.
- ⁹ Brocaded Velvet, 14th century [Probably Italian]" (46.156.72), in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*.
- ¹⁰ Ferraro, Joanne M., *Venice: History of the Floating City* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012),
- 50.
- ¹¹ Molà, Luca, *Silk Industry*, xiv-xv
- ¹² Samuel Cohn, "The Black Death: End of a Paradigm," *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002).