

**BAROQUE SILK TEXTILES IN THE CHURCHES OF THE WESTERN ITALIAN ALPS: A
HERITAGE TO BE PRESERVED**

Anna Maria Colombo
University of Turin, Italy

In 1989, Pier Paolo Viazzo, anthropologist at the University of Turin, challenged the traditional idea of the isolated, impoverished and old-fashioned alpine society in his book *Upland communities. Environment, population and social structure in the Alps since the sixteenth century*¹. My paper contributes to this stream of research, defined as “revisionist paradigm”. It concerns an aspect of the Alpine artistic culture belonging to the baroque age, which is by no means modest or autochthonous. I refer to the extremely rich collection of liturgical vestments (copes, chasubles, altar frontals, etc.) that are still preserved in the vestries of Alpine churches and chapels. This heritage has been brought to light and documented by the inventories carried out since the 1990’s by the “*Soprintendenza per il Patrimonio Storico, Artistico e Demoetnoantropologico del Piemonte*” (a state authority for the preservation of Piedmont’s artistic heritage).

The textiles in question are mainly those made of precious woven silk textiles (damask, brocade, lampas, velvet), dating from the 16th to the 18th centuries and produced in workshops operating, at that time, in the most important cities.

Woven textiles are those in which the pattern appears due to the binding of the warp and the weft, unlike printed or embroidered fabrics in which the design is made over the surface of the textile. Silk threads, dyed in a wide variety of colours, were combined with gilded and silver yarns.

Woven fabrics were produced by a draw loom; a complex loom whose movements were predetermined by way of a technical drawing known as *messa in carta* or point paper design (fig 1).

¹ Cambridge University Press (1989).

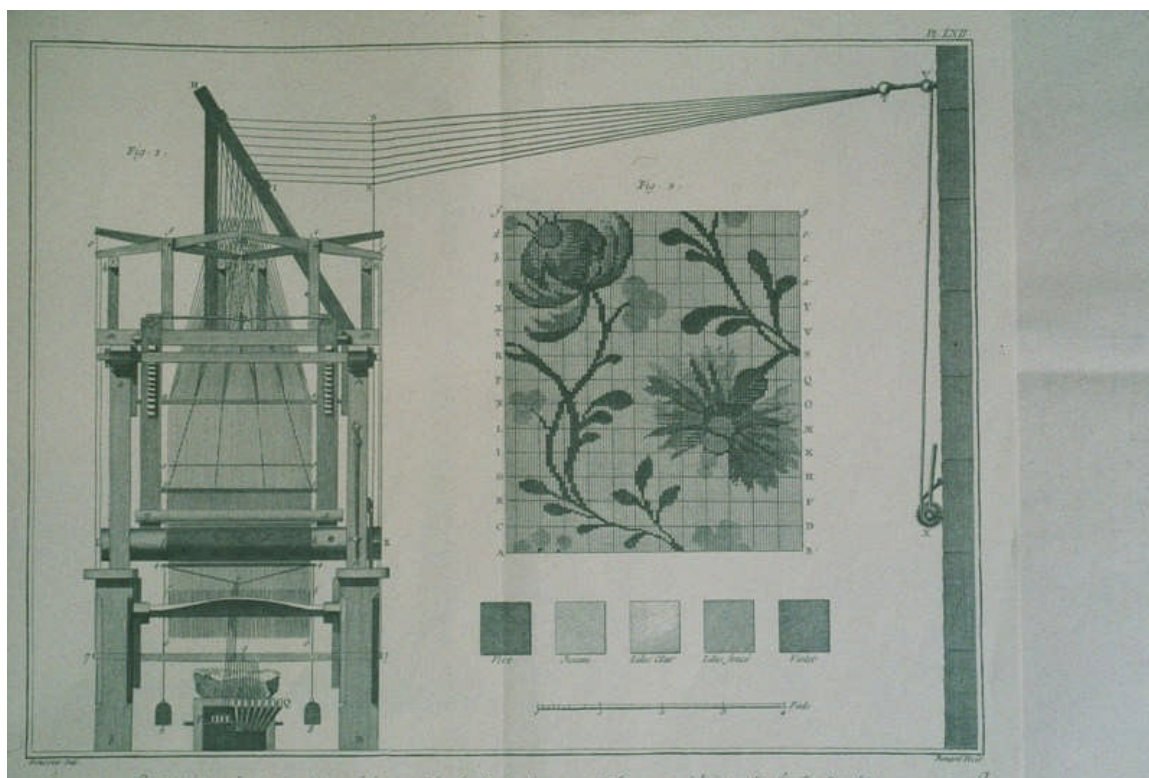


Figure 1. Point paper design and draw loom

(Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers... par M. Diderot et M. D'Alambert, Sonerie, vol. XI, table LXII, Lucca 1758-1771

A weaver's training entailed a long apprenticeship. In fact, in Turin, the capital city of the Duchy of Savoy, *l'Università dei mastri fabbricatori di stoffe di seta, d'oro e d'argento* (a university for master-craftsmen of silk, gold and silver fabrics) was operational during the 18th century.

The quality of the silk, the number of threads used (there are many antique samples containing as many as 120 warp threads per centimetre), the presence of wefts made of precious metals, not to mention the skills required for the production of these fabrics, resulted in them being extremely costly. Parish documents (in particular the *libri dei conti* - accounting books) provide specific evidence of this. In the first half of the 17th century, a damask chasuble complete with accessories (stole and maniple), intended for a chapel of the village's hamlet district, might cost as much as a local artist's painting for the village's principal altar². Additional and significant evidence for the study of parish textiles can be found in the inventories. In these registers, which record the furnishings and fittings found in places of worship, the section related to textiles shows a consistent attention to detail and gives evidence of the thorough knowledge of the types of textiles used.

It is important to mention here that in the 16th–18th centuries, except in certain special cases, no distinction between the uses of the textiles was made. In fact, a flowered silk damask or a sheer velvet might be used indifferently, whether it be for clothing, for furnishings, or for the tailoring of liturgical vestments. However, whilst an enormous quantity of clothing and furnishings has gone missing (few pieces of antique clothing remain today and even fewer are the remaining examples of fittings or furniture with their original upholstery), the ecclesiastic authorities have been able to conserve the majority of their own textile heritage. Not only does this make it possible to trace the history of the liturgical vestments, but also that of artistic textiles in a wider sense.

The assemblage of textile trousseaus in places of worship was a practice connected with orders from the Council of Trent regarding church furnishings and fittings. The reformed liturgy stated that each parish should possess vestments in the five colours of the liturgical calendar: white, red, green, violet and black. During the 17th century the textiles necessary for each parish mainly came from Italian workshops. However, in the following century new types of textiles to enrich and renew the liturgical trousseaus were supplied by French silk factories.

The Alpine valleys of Northern Piedmont belonged to the Duchy of Milan in the 17th century and textiles were purchased from merchants who worked for the capital's silk factories (fig. 2-4)³.



Figure 2. Detail of a damask cope, Milan, Italy, first half of Seventeenth Century

² This has been documented, for example, at the *Madonna della Neve* Chapel at Otrava in *Alta Valstrona* (COLOMBO *Le "ancone adorate" dell'Alta Valstrona*, 1997, p.54).

³ A.M.COLOMBO, *I damaschi tra Cinquecento e Seicento: un'indagine territoriale*, in VENTUROLI, *I tessili nell'età di Carlo Bascapè*, 1994, pp. 54-75. 61-62



Figure 3. Detail of a damask chasuble, Milan, Italy, first half of Seventeenth Century



Figure 4. Detail of a damask brocade chasuble, Milan, Italy, first half of Seventeenth Century

Milanese silk production, a driving sector of the Duchy's economy, was supported by a rigid policy of protectionism.

However, it is not only the Milanese textiles that have been conserved. An equally significant number of textiles derived from the migration of valley-dwellers. Dating from the last decades of the 16th century, documentary sources give evidence of the temporary migration of men from Alpine areas, attracted by the urban labour market. The cities in question (in particular for the Antigorio and Formazza valley-dwellers) were principally the two main cities of the Papal States, Bologna and Rome. The former, having overcome the crisis following the plague of 1630, was undergoing an age of great economic expansion and needed workers. After arriving in the cities and forming brotherhoods— known as a *compagnia* –the emigrants continued to participate in the life of their native community. Evidence of this is seen in their participation in one of the most important social aspects of that time: the upkeep of buildings of worship and the ceremonies that took place therein. The *compagnie* (brotherhoods) did in fact regularly send sums of money to their native parishes to fund building work and frescos, pargeting, wooden furnishings and local works of art: paintings, relics, silver chalices and liturgical vestments. Although absent in person, the benefactors made their presence felt through these works, which held a clear inscription of their origin, the date and their part in the valley community⁴ (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Damask chasuble, Bologna, Italy, first half of Seventeenth Century

Although the inventories have been beneficial in revealing the heritage of antique textiles kept still to this day in Alpine churches, conservation is still an unresolved and pressing issue. This is a heritage that is highly vulnerable, not only as a result of theft, but also due to deterioration caused by misuse. The depopulation of the mountains has led to an almost total closure of hamlet chapels and occasionally of parish churches. The case of Maria Vergine Assunta church in Salecchio (Premia) is typical. In this church, located in the heart of what is today a ghost village, a precious corpus of sacred vestments has been uncovered (fig. 6).

⁴A.M.COLOMBO, *I tessuti di seta degli emigranti ossolani*, in "Cultures Alpines. Alpine Kulturen", 2006/11, Zurigo 2006, pp. 103-112.



Figure 6. Detail of a damask brocade chasuble, Lyon?, France, about 1710

One possible solution to this complex problem might consist in defining a geographical area in terms of its culture and history, and subsequently collecting its textiles together in one unique place (a warehouse, a workshop, a library, an exhibition room). Here, the textiles would not only be conserved according to appropriate criteria, but their value would be enhanced, as a result of their being studied and exhibited. Such criteria is the basis for the project “*Centro Ossolano di Conservazione e Studio dei Tessuti Antichi*” (a centre for the conservation and study of antique textiles), underway in the village of Baceno in the Antigorio valley (Northwest Piedmont). The Centre is to be hosted in the ex-primary school in Croveo (a hamlet district of the village), which has the architectural qualities and characteristics that make it ideal for the purpose. The objective of the Centre would be to promote the cultural and social aspects of the community, creating public meeting and job opportunities by putting to good use the area’s resources and history.

REFERENCES

P.P. VIAZZO, *Upland communities. Environment, population and social structure in the Alps since the sixteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

A.M. COLOMBO, *I damaschi tra Cinquecento e Seicento: un'indagine territoriale*, in VENTUROLI 1994, pp. 54-75.

P. VENTUROLI, *I tessili nell'età di Carlo Bascapè*, Novara, 1994.

A.M. COLOMBO, *Le "ancone adorate" dell'Alta Valstrona*, Novara, 1997.

A.M. COLOMBO, *I tessuti di seta degli emigranti ossolani*, in "*Cultures Alpines. Alpine Kulturen*", 2006/11, Zurich, 2006.