

The Basle silk ribbon industry

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THE BASLE SILK RIBBON INDUSTRY

The Basle Silk Ribbon Industry has the well-deserved reputation of being one of the finest in Switzerland ; its products are the fruit of close collaboration with the creative artists of Paris, whose influence on world fashion is traditional and omnipotent.

The sway of fashion is itself all-powerful, and it is for this reason that the ribbon industry in Basle has had a most eventful history. Old portraits and fashion prints show us how, down the ages, extravagant and fanciful caprice has alternated with extreme sobriety and severity in women's fashions. In the years preceding the French Revolution, for instance, the manufacture of the so-called "frisolets" meant prosperity for Swiss handweavers. These "frisolets" were a kind of galloon which fashion demanded every woman should wear, any number of rows from two to five being sewn on her gowns and the colours varying according to her native country, or even district. The Revolution killed traditional costume, and the exaggerated simplicity of styles which was then introduced struck a severe blow at the ribbon industry. The sale of moiré and taffeta ribbons, favours and braids, although greatly in demand, was restricted by law ; the French Government even went so far as to prohibit the importation of Swiss ribbons into France, or other countries under French control, e.g. the Cisalpine Republic, Batavian Republic, Hamburg, Westphalia, Hanover, Baden, Wurtemberg and Bavaria.

These barriers were lifted after the fall of Napoleon. The severe styles of the Empire period were followed by very varied fashions, most of which included richly beribboned hats and gowns. In this wise, the Basle industry entered an era of prosperity which was to last until the first World War, and its reputation was firmly established on all world markets.

Unfortunately, after 1918, the situation changed suddenly, and the next few years brought great anxiety to the manufacturers of Basle. Many factors contributed to this sudden turn of the market. First, a very marked trend towards masculine effects in feminine dress became apparent ; all frivolity was banned, whether in gowns, lingerie or millinery. The simplicity of styles prevailing those years made it difficult to add the ribbons and favours so dear to the pre-war woman. The advent of artificial silk also affected the industry adversely, for this new raw material proved very easy to dye and print. Meanwhile, rival firms had set up in France and Germany, where conditions were much more favourable. In face of all these obstacles, Swiss ribbon manufacture had to put up a bitter struggle, the successful outcome of which is due to the fact that they have always maintained the quality of their products. It is to this high degree of quality that they now owe their firmly established reputation.

The present war overtook the Swiss ribbon industry at a moment when it seemed as though fashions were again to change in its favour. Prospects seemed brighter ; looms were set to work again and preparations were afoot for the manufacture of a most promising assortment of goods — and then the war broke out ! In spite of this fresh blow to their hopes, manufacturers did not lose heart ; just as when times were bad in XVIIIth and XIXth centuries their ancestors set about manufacturing pipings, used mostly for ornamental pipe-strongs and tassels, so today manufacturers are meeting the situation by manufacturing all kinds of accessories for the dressmaking trade, and even for technical and industrial purposes, and this quite apart from their standard products.

Thus, even though the present war put a sudden end to many a brighter prospect, the Basle Silk Ribbon Industry will certainly take new heart and resume the development then begun after the cessation of hostilities.

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