

Smooth transition

The prestige of Italian silk has been synonymous with the northern city of Como which has been involved in the production of these luxury textiles for over 600 years and today its mills supply designer names such as Chanel, Yves St Laurent, Karl Lagerfeld, Armani, Hermes, Ferré, Valentino, Versace and Ungaro, to name but a few.

Silkworms and the mulberry trees on which they feed were first introduced into the wool textile region by the Duke of Milan in the 15th Century, and the city's rise as a silk producing area continued for the next 500 years.

Yet times change. In anticipation of the China's accession to the WTO in December 2001, and the expected surge of cheap imports, large parts of the European and North American textile industries collapsed. Yet certain textile clusters that produced specialised, high-value fabrics survived. These mills had unique know-how and design expertise that Chinese suppliers could not replicate – and the Italian silk sector is a rare example of a textile cluster in Europe that has continued to prosper.

Although the current value of textile

exports from Como alone are worth an estimated €1.4 billion to its economy every year, the industry cannot stand still. Since the end of the second world war it has managed to fend off the advance of synthetic fibres such as polyester and cellulose-based fibres such as viscose in key end-uses for silk. But now a different challenge has emerged – and these are driven not by the brands but by the consumer.

"A major challenge is that formalwear is now in decline with the younger generation," said Michele Canepa, the owner of Taroni SpA, which is one of the oldest silk weaving mills in Como. "Fast fashion and casualwear have become the dominant trends. Very few people want to – or need to – wear silk ties to work these days," he said, "A silk tie, often of

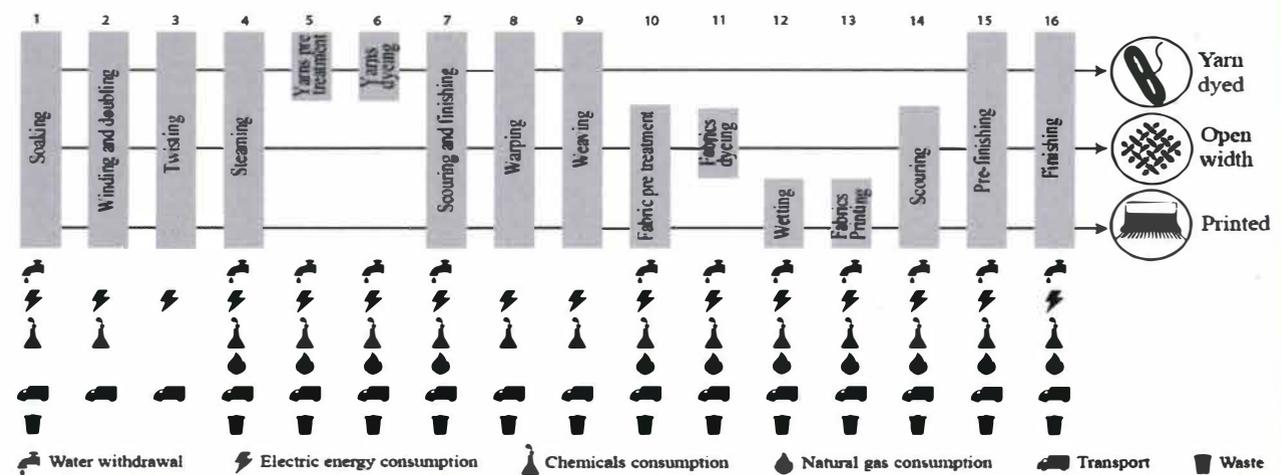
Italian origin, was once obligatory in the professional work place."

Not only is formal business attire in decline, many retailers are also looking to substitute 100 per cent silk fabrics with blends of polyester, viscose or other fibres to lower price points and improve margins in the face of the fast fashion onslaught.

"But Italian silk players have been able to deal successfully with always changing expectations of their customers" Sergio Tamborini, Chief Executive Officer of Ratti SpA told Ecotextile News in a visit to Como in late September 2018.

With suppliers now forced to deal in price points not normally associated with the silk sector, further problems for Italian silk have included finger pointing from environmental organi-

IMPACTS



sations about the nature of the silk fibre itself. With issues on sustainability being embedded within the corporate strategies of key luxury groups such as Kering and LVMH, that buy most of their silk from Italy, it's a concern for Como manufacturers that several environmental standards give silk a 'less than average' rating due both to the practice of sericulture and because resources used in degumming, dyeing and finishing can be intensive.

Yet despite this growing concern, very few analyses have been carried out on the sustainability of mulberry silk that is imported from China and widely used in high-end Italian silk fabrics – although there have been some studies on silk varieties from India and Brazil.

"Silk is a natural fibre and we know how sustainable it is, but we had to demonstrate it. The Italian silk industry, for this reason, has promoted an analysis of the environmental impact of the silk chain" said Stefano Vitali, F.lli Vitali SpA, President of Ufficio Italiano Seta, the branch of Sistema Moda Italia which comprises the most important silk mills in Italy. "In addition to this we are also very active in supporting our textile mills and in making them sensitive to the environmental aspects of products and manufacturing."

"Studies on the environmental impact of current silk production in Italy using a standardised methodological framework such as LCA, or a supply-chain lifecycle inventory (LCI) has never been performed," said Silvio Faragò, Head of Silk Division at Innovhub, which operates as part of the Milan Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "The few examples available in literature focus on the assessment of raw silk production. Partial investigations have been also performed for some silk manufacturing steps, but they have a limited focus on single technologies or products."

That is why the Italian industry has recently published a new study to assess the environmental credentials of mulberry silk used in Italian silk yarns and fabrics, "in order to plug the gap which currently exists regarding field data and life cycle assessments (LCAs) in this niche area of the industry," he told us.

Silk currently accounts for less than 0.2 per cent of the global textile market, despite its production base being spread across more than 60 countries.

The newly released joint study was undertaken by University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland and Innovhub Stazioni Sperimentali per l'Industria, partially funded by the SIMPLER European consortium.

