

## Book Reviews

**Buss, Chiara (coord.), *Seta. Dizionario delle mezzetinte 1628-1939. Da Avinato a Zizzolino*, Milano, Silvana Editoriale, 2013**

**Carlos González Reyes\***

In this mature work, Chiara Buss - along with a large group of researchers in the field of cultural transfers and materials in the Early Modern age - emphasises the need to examine previously undervalued sources in order to further advance our knowledge of the Milanese economy during the second half of the seventeenth century.

The main objective of the book, according to its author, is to continue to shed light on the process of “desindustrializzazione della Lombardia” during that period, thanks to unpublished sources, such as *1628. Mostre de drappi che si tovano presso mercanti*, found in the *Archivio di Stato di Milano*. Through this unique document - a compendium of fabrics corresponding to all of the silk colour variants sold in Milan at that time - the author brings us closer not only to the process of settlement and expansion of the techniques and use of this material in the capital of northern Italy, but also to learn of its subsequent fading at the dawn of the seventeenth century. In this sense, *Dizionario delle mezzetinte* can be seen as having started as a volume borne under the umbrella of the author’s *La Produzione Serica in Lombardia* initiative, which she has run since 2007 and which unites a diverse group of international experts with significant background in the study of tissues, pigments and, as one would expect, economic history and social anthropology.

The book can be divided into two parts. The first consists of a theoretical introduction, by Paola Cairoli, director of the *Archivio di Stato di Milano* and *alma mater* of the work. Four subsequent chapters examine the history of silk in Lombardy and the fifth is the core of the work, focusing on the emergence of new

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colours used for dyeing silk in the seventeenth century as a response to the evolving tastes and whims of the bourgeois and aristocratic elites.

These central chapters are organized in a very structured way, beginning with a summary of the development of the art of silk and trade in fifteenth century Milan, and continuing with an analysis of the economic and social situation in seventeenth century Lombardy, sketching an image of the particularities of the cloth trade and its use in society at the time. The images that featured on the materials bearing them permit the author to discuss cultural transfers, how through a curious document which dates from 1628 and contains 113 pieces of stain and silk cloth of intermediate shades we can address the process of the creation of the *mezzetinte*, invented in the different centres of Italian silk as Milan, Genoa, Florence, Naples and what they represented. This invaluable source details the name and colour of the fabric beside each piece of cloth allowing us to know unmistakably the tones spoken of in documents of all kinds, such as the treaties of Giovanni Rinaldi in 1559. From there, the sixth chapter is a 1628 colour index and fibre composition inventory. This provides us with an overview of silk, addressing not only the process of fabric creation and dyeing but also its subsequent sale and use; a snapshot of a very specific economic and social moment in the north of the Italian peninsula.

*El Raso di veronigro*, a fabric of extremely high quality in terms of its dyeing and processing, represented the capacity of nobility and oligarchy to buy luxury textiles. We begin with an analysis of its sewing and the symbolic significance of wearing a garment of this colour. That colour, along with crimson or green, defined a class; however, from the first third of the seventeenth century the society began to adopt new fabrics whose colours were far from those traditionally linked to status (smoothed, de-inked and displaying a wide range of colours). A desire for new trends linked to the economic elites that sought to demonstrate their economic dynamism and to break with the recalcitrant monochrome led to the creation of the *mezzetinte*, a new aesthetic definition of colour; colour as a status symbol. *Il celeste*, blue, less rich than the *anticoturchino*, associated with an inking tissue, but named in an enhancing way, evoking the colour of the sky, created a new fashion colour and represented a move to a new conception of the chromatic palette.

This trend paralleled art history, where painting adopted new colours on the clothing of saints, martyrs and virgins. However, official portraiture continued to

maintain the traditional colours of hierarchical difference. Thus, the advancement of staining techniques and search for new colours in Italy speaks about the sixteenth century commercial dynamism, the desire to innovate, to use new techniques so that a high amount of precious hues is no longer necessary, with a constant effort to create new formulas. The book also speaks of the concept of exclusivity, of the Lombard cities that by striving to create these new *mezzetinte* retained the exclusiveness of them. Consequently, the central theme of these chapters is to show how the colour reflects an emerging sociocultural climate. The changing environment of the seventeenth century in economics, social issues and commercial crisis, which is also evident in the use of dyes, pointing indirectly to a transition from the Renaissance world, imbued with classical culture, to the discovery of a new world capable of surviving violent crises of the kind they tend to be.

The second part of the book is organized like a dictionary, illustrating the *mezzetintef* rom historical, artistic and technical perspectives. This is complemented by studies of Marten van Bommel and Irene Joosten on techniques for dyeing silk in various Italian centres, the pigments used and their geographical origin. The numerous forms of weaving, with their variants and a final cast of the *mezzetinte*, which references the origin of its hue from the fifteenth century and throughout the modern age, with its symbolic significance, its transformations in different territories and what they represented in the areas of society in which they were used, until the present. To this we must add that the techniques used to analyse the substance of colour - a study of textiles made in Milan conducted in the RCE of Amsterdam - are addressed in the final pages of the volume. Therefore, there has been a significant effort to trace other documentation that provides information on the subject. Art historians and anthropologists tend to reject documents of a political nature, especially for the early modern period, thereby often losing valuable sources of information relating to the appearances, fashion and material culture of a territory in a given period.

The book tells of a long process of cataloguing the disorganised items in the inventory, and of the need for alternative sources to conduct a proper cataloguing. Consequently, *Dizionario delle mezzetinte* speaks thus of documents of a personal (inventories, records of merchants, etc.) and economic (imports and exports of materials related to the physical appearance and image) nature. These are some of the main sources with which we have to write the history and

evolution of fashion, appearance and dress in modern times. Therefore, it should be understood that its publication in a time when historiography resorts more frequently to the use of diverse sources to approach the study of a subject shows a falling in line with John Elliot's invitation in his *Making History* (2012) to deepen the comparative history. Seen in this way, this book can be considered in parallel with other works such as those by members of the research group *Centre de Recherches Historiques de l'Ouest* in Reims, cultural transfers and materials such as *Poder & Representacions* in Barcelona and, as you would expect, on the Milanese economy, the members of the *Dipartimento di Storia dell'economia e Scienze della società Il costume e la moda nella società italiana*, (1995); that of Rosalba Ragosta and her *Napoli, città della seta* (2009), and, more recently Aldo Caterino (2010). Although all have served to form a panorama of both the evolution of fashion and the social representation of it and, more importantly, are complemented by the works of Buss or Pinchera, which also address technological developments and trade associated with certain tissues, in the turbulent context of change of the seventeenth century.

Accordingly, this approach of Chiara Buss to a specific text as is the *campionario* no longer witness to the diversity of sources, often associated with the history of the economy essentially provides an informative reef of great interest to the forms of writing fashion history, the changing tastes and world trade, in this case in northern Italy. Synthesized, thus a new form of story based on multidisciplinary research, integrating not only visions of different materials but also technical fields such as chemistry, initially, largely away from the traditional way of making history. Precisely the aim of the author and his collaborators has been put on the table a larger sample of this type of texts historians we're bumping along our research in the archives. Almost all of them, to show the *campionario* can help less subject matter experts, to a greater or lesser extent, closer to the dress code of an era, its powers of persuasion and its power to reflect both collective identities as well as individual.

In short, *Dizionario delle mezzetinte* is a well-written and well-documented book that demonstrates the mastery of remarkable sources - both Italian and foreign - by those involved, perfectly fulfilling the objectives of the authors, and I think it should be a compulsory read. Only through knowing these kinds of studies can we continue to expand our horizons in the investigation of a

topic that is always open and perfectible, such as the history of trade and cultural transfers in the early modern age.

Chiara Buss, Professor at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. She has devoted her research to the subject of silk and history of material culture, as witnessed by her extensive bibliography and conferences as *L'industria del lusso e il concetto di moda come strumenti di affermazione politica, commerciale e culturale* (2007), as part of their research project, lines quoted above. In addition, she has conducted the coordination of international seminars like *Collezionare tessuti* (2012). Among her most notable works, besides *Seta. Dizionario delle mezzetinte* (2012), include, among others, as highlighted *Silk, Gold and Crimson: Opulence in the Workshops of the Courts of the Visconti and the Sforza* (2009).