Silk: a natural fibre yet an unnatural process

SUSTAINABLE FASHION | Businesses must keep up with growing demands for ethical behaviour and transparency

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Dr. Mathias Langer, Seidenraum

Seidenraum distribute textile goods with the focus on silk and sustainable products. Their vision is the enhancement of organic and non-violent silk. Seidenraum is also a wholesale partner for B2B clients.

Eva Power, The Ethical Silk Company

The Ethical Silk Company produce and sell 100% eco-friendly and ethically made mulberry silk products where no silkworms are harmed or killed in the production process.

If today’s customers were aware about the killing of silkworms and using silk fabrics as much as they are about animal cruelty in the angora fur market, the textile industry would be in a totally different position, wouldn’t it?

Silk manufacturing is an interesting topic to write about for several reasons. First of all, it is one of the most ancient fabric processes and it is an important part of our history. Secondly, because nowadays its production process keeps its steps mostly unaltered while, on the other hand, green fashion has been hugely growing its popularity over the past few years and has been urging a drastic revision of traditional manufacturing. Looking at 2005 London Fashion Week, where less than 5% of all designers were engaged sustainably, in 2013 there has been an incredible shift and one third of all designers participating were eco-focused. Lastly, because different sustainable organisations, such as Made-by and SAC - Sustainable Apparel Coalition, benchmark the fibre on different ranking positions: the farmer sees silk production relatively low at environmental impact while the latter ranks silk under Undeclassified. This leads us to ask ourselves why there is such little knowledge on silk and what causes this.

To begin with, since the earth has evolved and the human race has developed, we have been producing natural and artificial fibres. ‘Silk’ immediately comes to our minds when talking about natural fibres. Everywhere in the world, silk is considered a luxury item and it gives form to beautiful shawls and dresses for special occasions. However, many are not aware of the cruel process through which silk is obtained. What happens to the tiny silkworms that produce soft and lustrous silk material is disheartening. The silk is obtained in a way that kills the silkworms. The most vastly cultivated silkworms are the Bombyx Mori, they are kept in baskets and fed Mulberry leaves. After 35 days and 4 moltings they are ready to spin a cocoon. In just a couple of days, the caterpillars will have produced 1km of filament and the supplier, in order to get a single, unbroken thread of silk, prevents them to exit the cocoon inserting them in boiling water.

Have objections been raised against the killing of silkworms or the use of silk fabrics? Several companies in the textile and fashion industry are obviously against this and are promoting the use of silk which is made ethically and do not require harm to any living being. Ahimsa silk, also called peace silk, involves a manufacturing technique with no cruelty done to the silkworms. Ahimsa silk is eco-friendly: it allows the moths to exit the cocoons and fly away. It is soft and comfortable to wear and it has the same qualities as regular silk, except that it does not have the sheen that silk is most valued for. Moreover, uncultivated silk is also called ahimsa silk. Silks such as Tussor and Muga come from empty cocoons collected in the wild in India. This is the most natural process existing, since it allows the moths to live its complete life cycle without any human intervention.

For now, peace silk may remain a luxury for a few. Nevertheless, the coming years will bring big changes - Eva tells us: “With transparency along the production line ever increasing, people like to know how and where their products are being made, and by whom. As the digital age continues, and access to information grows, companies are starting to be held responsible for their production line”. Technology is, in fact, the key to dealing with the challenges created by consumerism. Groundbreaking technologies enable transparency in supply chains and open data, social networks and mobile tech could change the game and empower businesses to take further steps to being open.

Silvia Vianello

Fig. 1 silk moths coming out the cocoons

Credit: The Ethical Silk Company

Unfortunately, there are diverse reasons that hold these silks from being widely spread and accepted in the market. Eva Power, founder of The Ethical Silk Company, affirms: “Firstly, the fact that sustainable silk is more expensive”. Dr Mathias Langer, founder of Seidenraum, confirms her statement saying: “Handwork and handicraft products are more expensive than conventionally produced silk fabrics”. In a world where fast fashion giants are ruthlessly growing and increasing their profit, the path of producing garments which can be defined ethically-made often ends up being a struggle, mostly for small brands which have just started their business and find themselves in an ocean of sharks. The costumer’s lack of education on the topic, together with the fact that concern does not always translate into buying decisions, also play a big part. However, direct selling, being a model that allows brands to control cost and price, could be the one solution for younger labels to keep prices competitive with regular silk companies and internationally established brands. Moreover, direct sales give a small business the ability to manage its own personal relationships with its consumers, which therefore become more personal, meaningful and memorable and will help the brand to better understand and adapt to the needs of their customer.