

CALL FOR PAPERS

Textiles and the texture of ideas in early modern Europe (1589–1801): How the craft and its products interacted with philosophy, literature and the visual arts

**Joint project: University of Naples L'Orientale - Université de Haute-Alsace, Mulhouse.
Two joint conferences will be organized:**

- 1. Conference 1: *Textiles: The texture of ideas in early modern Europe (1589-1801).
Designs, patterns, craftsmanship and the early modern imagination* – Will be Held
at Procida Island (University of Naples L'Orientale), 8-14 September 2025.**
- 2. Conference 2: *The circulation of textile designs, patterns, skills and representations
in early modern Europe* – Will be held at Université de Haute Alsace – Mulhouse,
June 2026.**

The Virgin's chemise at Chartres Cathedral (9th century), the fabrics used as support for his paintings by Luca Pignatelli (1962-) or employed by Ann Hamilton (1956-) in her installations, and textile architecture are only a few examples of how fabrics can step out of their typical functions (*e.g.* as daily clothing, drapery, etc.) to enter the arts and the collective imagination in rather unique ways. Evidence of textile technology dates back to the Palaeolithic (Bender Jørgensen et al., 2023) and, according to Leonardo da Vinci, it was a craft 'second [only] to the printing of letters' and 'more beautiful and subtle in invention'. If artifice has traditionally aimed at producing something 'rare' as opposed to 'common' (at least until the advent of plastic according to Roland Barthes [1972: 98]), textiles are among the artifacts through which the aspiration to create rarity has been best expressed throughout the centuries. The invention of weave patterns and dyeing techniques as well as printing pattern design prove that in the production of textiles — as indeed in all crafts according to Richard Sennett — "thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making" (Sennett 2008: 7).

For these joint interdisciplinary conferences we invite papers with a focus on the interaction between the material and the immaterial aspects of the craft of weaving, approached from various angles, in the early modern period. The aim is to explore aspects of the interactions between textile manufacturing and its products *and* the individual or collective imagination, intellectual life as well as the 'world picture' and mental representations in the early modern period. Those interactions, although sometimes acknowledged, appear to have been understudied so far. How did the immaterial life of ideas as well as the cultural context impact on the creation of fabric designs? And, vice versa, how did textile manufacturing, in either its pre-industrial or early industrial stage, impact on the personal or collective imagination? How were early modern textile artefacts, alongside the material conditions and early modern technologies of their production, perceived by contemporaries? Were they perceived as 'symbolic capital', in Pierre Bourdieu's acceptance (1979)? Can the study of representations, descriptions, references or even allusions to textiles and the textile manufacture, but also of the metaphorical usage of textile-related vocabulary in various texts – from poetry to

philosophical essays – or of references to the textile world in the early modern visual arts – paintings, sketches, illustrations, plates – add to our knowledge of the early modern episteme?

The dates 1589-1801 have been chosen for their significance in the progress of textile manufacturing, but papers focusing on any period of time from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century are welcome. 1589 was the year when William Lee invented the stocking frame knitting machine in England; only a few years later, at the beginning of the 17th century in Paris, the Gobelins manufactory was established. 1801 was the year when the Jacquard loom was first introduced; Charles Babbage's 'difference engine', the early calculating machine designed and partially built during the 1820s and 1830s, was inspired by the use of punched cards in the Jacquard loom (see Essinger 2004), which testifies to the potential of textile-related creativity. Could there be more, still unknown, regions of cross-fertilisation between textile manufacturing and other realms of knowledge?

We welcome interdisciplinary papers at the crossroads of, but not limited to, any ones of the following: cultural history, social history, microhistory, history of ideas or intellectual history, the history of technology, philosophy, linguistics, literary studies, material studies, visual arts studies, crafts, aesthetics, memorial studies, intermedial studies. We especially welcome papers based on archival research and adopting a microhistorical approach — recalling here Carlo Ginzburg's statement that 'the prefix "micro" is related to the microscope, so to an analytic approach to history' (Carlo Ginzburg 2015). Such analytical approach we would like to extend to the study of different texts, also for a cultural analysis of the impact of the textile world on the early modern intellectual imagination. For both conferences, we therefore invite papers aiming at uncovering references to the textile world in famous and less known, or even overlooked, written texts — for example ballads, poems and emblems, plays, diaries, commonplace books, essays, philosophical texts, pamphlets and newspapers — which may be revealing of the cross-fertilisations between material and immaterial culture in the early modern period. Another space of investigation will be the visual: were there drawings, sketches or paintings representing textile manufactures and their workers as well as the manufacturing process? Were there early modern manuals or handbooks about textile production? Did they include illustrations (of the patterns, the weaving techniques, the acts and process of making fabrics)? And, if so, how much could a study of those different texts contribute to the history of early modern culture and ideas (about the human, ingenuity, nature and technology, and so on)? Could such a study be relevant in the same way as, for example, the study of plates in early modern anatomical books has proved to be? Another area of research we invite to explore is the possible connections between textiles and book-making in early modern Europe, for example the intersection between textile manufacturing and book-printing. Textile metaphors have been extensively used by philosophers and writers alike, with the textile operating at once 'as language, concept and matter' (Dormor 2020: 1); they have sometimes been used by critics too, who have suggested that in early modernity 'texts could be, and were, read like tapestries' (Olson 2013: 2). We also welcome papers that look at the dissemination and uses of textile vocabulary in the early modern intellectual and philosophical spheres, the collective imagination, the literary imagination as found in individual texts and that offer analyses of their implications for the history of ideas.

More specific questions may be: how did the workers of early modern textile manufactures relate to their activity and their products? In their humdrum routine work, was there any space for relating to it in imaginative and creative ways? Were they mere *animalia laborantia*, to adapt Hannah Arendt's definition? Alternatively, assuming that thinking was involved at all levels of textile production — in actual manufacturing as well as in pattern designing and/or textile printing — are there traces left of that? Did early modern workers or designers in textile craftsmanship and the textile industry leave any impressions, thoughts (in the form of

written notes or sketches or other) about their craft, or which may be related to it (either inspiring or being inspired by it)? Did any of the workers keep notebooks? Is there any way one could contribute further to the history of ideas ‘from below’ beginning with archival research and looking for extant traces left by those involved at different levels in textile production — the designers, the workers, the investors, the customers and the patrons? Taking inspiration from Ginzburg (1980), we ask: would something else, atypical with respect to our present knowledge of the times, emerge? With respect to the designs, patterns or prints in the weaving craft and the textile industry, would a study of possible points of contact between technical inventions and manufacturing processes, on the one hand, and the historical — global, local and even personal — moment, on the other, add to our knowledge of the wider ideas circulating in early modern Europe? Is there any such thing as a philosophy of textile technology and design? Our aim is to relate these material aspects of the craft with the imagination and the history of ideas.

Finally, in both conferences, a special section will be site-specific: around the same years in the second half of the eighteenth century, textile manufacturing flourished in the Belvedere of San Leucio in Caserta and in Mulhouse. The hunting Lodge of San Leucio became home to the silk factory by will of Ferdinand of Bourbon; the idea and choice of place for the factory started in the 1760s, after completion of the Royal Palace in Caserta. San Leucio has been a UNESCO world heritage site since 1997 and today it hosts a museum of the textile craft of the old days. The textile industry in Mulhouse began in 1747, when the first “indiennerie” – a cotton printing manufacture – was set up. The industry flourished to such an extent that Mulhouse became known as the “French Manchester”. Today the city’s Musée de l’Impression sur Etoffes (Printed Textiles Museum) bears testimony to that significant past activity. For both conferences we welcome papers on the respective local histories of textile manufacturing.

Conference 1: *Textiles: The texture of ideas in early modern Europe (1589-1801). Textile designs, patterns and craftsmanship and the early modern imagination – Will be Held at Procida Island (University of Naples L’Orientale), 8-14 September 2025* (the location is the suggestive 17th-century ‘Conservatorio delle Orfanelle’ in Terra Murata, Procida: <https://www.unior.it/it/valorizzazione/terza-missione/public-engagement/patrimonio-culturale/conservatorio-delle-orfanelle>)

Possible topics may include but are by no means limited to:

- Cultural history, social history, microhistories:
 - The production of textiles 1589-1801: a cultural history
 - The issue of ‘authorship’ in pattern and printing designs
 - Textile design and patterns in Europe
 - Ends of textiles: recycling long-lasting and short-lived fabrics in early modernity
 - Designing textiles: inventiveness and the cultural imagination in early modernity
 - Cloth merchants and drapers’ shops in early modern Europe
 - Textile workers as readers
 - A cultural and/or social history of the perception of the work and its products
 - Memoirs of textile workers 1589-1801 and object biography: fabrics, textiles, cloth
 - Museums today and heritage tourism: the history of textiles as cultural history
- The literary imagination and beyond:
 - Textiles, tapestries and weaving, weavers and drapers in early modern literary texts and visual arts

- Representations of early modern textiles and/or textile workers in literary texts and the visual arts
 Recurring patterns: damasquinerie, ceramic decorations and textile decorations
 A cultural analysis of figurative patterns in tapestries
- Textiles and book-making in early modern Europe:
 - Books and textile practical knowledge
 - Intersections between textile manufacturing and book-printing
 - The woven book: early modern printing on fabric
 - Disseminating the craft: early modern books about fabrics, patterns and techniques
 - Special section on San Leucio and Mulhouse: the impact of the textile industry on everyday life and the collective imagination:
 - What impact did the textile industry have on the collective imagination? How did the workers feel about their jobs?
 - Literacy among textile workers: did they (have time to) read? What kind of books or texts, if any, did they read? Practical texts? Others? Is it possible to trace a social history of reading among textile workers? Did they read more or less than other workers?
 - San Leucio and Mulhouse in the literary imagination: are there references in then-contemporary literary texts – also ballads, songs, and so on – to the Bourbon experiment in San Leucio or the Mulhouse textile industry?
 - The cultural impact of the decline of the textile tradition in San Leucio and Mulhouse
 - The memory of the textile industry in San Leucio and Mulhouse today: museums, cultural activities and outreach. Is the textile industry of the past perceived as ‘cultural capital’ today?

References

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- Bordieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, 1979), translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U.P., 1984
- Dormor, Catherine, *A Philosophy of Textile: Between Practice and Theory*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020
- Essinger, James, *Jacquard’s Web: How a Hand-loom Led to the Birth of the Information Age*, Oxford, Oxford U. P., 2004
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- Ginzburg, Carlo, ‘Microhistory’, *Serious Science*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFh1DdXTToyE>, uploaded 25 June 2015, accessed 26 April 2024
- Olson, Rebecca, *Arras Hanging: The Textile That Determined Early Modern Literature and Drama*, Newark, Univ. of Delaware P., 2013
- Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman*, New Haven and London, Yale U. P., 2008

Please send your paper proposals in English (300 words approximately) as well as a short biography to Anna Maria Cimitile (amcimitile@unior.it) and Laurent Curelly (laurent.curelly@uha.fr) by **31 January 2025**.

Responses to paper proposals will be given by 15 February 2025. Details about the conference (location, registration fees, travel information, etc.) will be provided before then.