

# THREAD OF TIME ~A HISTORY OF SILK

## Part 4: THE ITALIAN SILK INDUSTRY

How the silk industry in Roman Byzantium transferred itself to northern Italy is not clear but it is possible that trade links with Spain may have been influential. The Ottoman Empire, which extended as far as Spain, had brought silk to the country and could have subsequently began exporting silks to Venice and Lucca.

Eventually, Italy established its own sericulture around the city of Bologna, along the valley of the River Po. Once the production of silk thread was established a silk weaving industry developed around cities of Lucca, Venice & Genoa. As the industry grew more & more silk was needed but Italy could not produce enough. The only solution was to import silk thread from China but changes in the fortunes of the Chinese meant that the Silk Road had become even more treacherous. It was only the bravest of merchants who made the journey. Many failed but for those who succeeded, the rewards were huge.

Opportunities to really develop trade with China came following the the expansion of the Mongol empire which began in 1215. The infamous Genghis Khan led his armies into the Far East taking control and bringing back a level of stability that had been in decline for many years. When Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis took over, he established himself as the Great Khan of the Mongolian Empire. He moved his capital to the modern day Beijing where he set about creating order and prosperity. During his reign he managed to improve the empire's infrastructure, encouraged religious tolerance, introduced a system of paper money and most significantly, brought about significant expansion in trade with the west. Key to this was ensuring safe passage for travellers along the Silk Road and so, the next one hundred years were probably to become the most significant in its long history.

Among the many to benefit from the improved safety along the Silk Road were Italian merchants. The Italian silk industry was expanding rapidly. Its reputation for high quality, ornately pattern silks particularly heavy weight, upholstery silks was growing throughout Europe. The Italian silk producers could not keep up with demand and with the improving travel conditions along the Silk Road and Kublai Khan's desire for trade, China was the place to go to get the much needed silk thread.



One family who engaged in this trade and have become famous in history were the Polos of Venice. Nocolò and Maffeo Polo were brothers who had a thriving business in Venice as Jewel merchants. In 1260 they left Venice to embark on a trade mission. They travelled to the Black Sea, onwards to Central Asia where they joined a diplomatic mission that eventually led them to the court of Kublai Khan. Their journey must have been worthwhile because Kublai Khan asked the brothers to return to Venice and persuade the Pope to send scholars to explain Christianity to him. They arrived back in Venice in 1269 undoubtedly laden with jewels, silks and other trade goods.

In 1271, Marco joined his father and uncle on his first voyage to China. They were also accompanied by two missionaries sent by the pope to fulfil Kublai Khan's wish, an indicator perhaps, of the considerable influence and standing of the Polo family in Venice. After a difficult journey lasting almost 4 years, they finally arrived at court of Kublai Khan. The original plan had been to sail to the eastern end of the Mediterranean, travel overland to The Red Sea and then sail to China. However, on arrival at The Red Sea they became fearful of the seaworthiness of the Arab ships so they had to travel across Arabia to join the Silk Road at Seleucia. Marco proved to be very popular with the Khan who sent him on several diplomatic missions around China. He lived in China for 17 years and made a fortune for himself and the family business. On his return journey to Venice, in 1292, Marco offered to accompany a Mongol princess, who was to become a consort of Arghun Khan in Persia. He sailed from a south China port to Sri Lanka, through the Persian Gulf to Iran, where he left the princess with Arghun Khan's family, the man himself having unfortunately died. Marco then travelled overland to Constantinople and onto Venice arriving in 1295.

The Polos, particularly Marco may never have become such well known historical figures if had not been for Marco's capture in 1298 during a naval battle in a war between Venice and Genoa. In prison, Marco told his stories of his time in China. A fellow inmate, an author named Rustichello wrote down the stories, embellishing them to create a book that became a best seller. After being released from prison, Marco spent the rest of his life in Venice and died there in 1324. Not long after his death the Mongol empire came to an end and by the end of the century its collapse and the rise of bubonic plague brought the Silk Road into disuse.

At around the same time, one Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini was born in Lucca. Born into a wealthy merchant family, he was destined to join the family firm and when he was about nineteen he moved to Bruges to manage the family business there, trading silks and other fine goods. He was successful, very successful, amassing a large fortune for himself as well as the family business. In 1426, he married the love of his life Constanza Trenta, also from Lucca. Not much is known about Constanza but it seems that she was also from a well to do family. She and Giovanni knew each other before he left Lucca for Bruges, possibly having been already betrothed. The arrangement may have been that she would stay in Lucca until Giovanni had established himself in Bruges before joining him there.

Giovanni and Constanza are best known for the portrait he commissioned in 1434, painted by Jan Van Eyck. The painting depicts a marriage ceremony set in the lavish home of the couple. It has become a source of puzzlement because although everything in the painting indicates a marriage taking place, it was not painted until after Constanza's death. Whatever the truth behind the painting, after Constanza's death the business began to go into decline and Giovanni's cousin, also named Giovanni Arnolfini was sent to Bruges to avert disaster. Our Giovanni continued to live in Bruges until his death on 11 September 1472.

Since the demise of the Roman era, the regions of Italy had developed as individual states. During the Middle Ages Lombardy grew in importance. With the collapse of the Mongol empire and associated impact on the Silk Road, opportunities arose that would cause a seismic shift in the Italian silk business. By the beginning of the 16th century large numbers of mulberry trees had been planted around Lake Como and in 1510, Pierrot Boldoni established sericulture, the production of viable silk thread from the cocoons of silk moths. Building on the existing design and weaving skills for which Lucca and Venice had already become famous, the area around Lake Como was to become the most famous silk producing area in the world apart from China itself. Over time, as Como grew in importance Lucca and Venice declined. One innovation after another increased Como's fame as the place for magnificent silk designs. During C17, Bologna became the most mechanised city in Europe with over 100 silk weaving factories powered by water. Until the second half of C19, silk was Italy's only major industry. It had a third share of world's silk market with three quarters of all factory workers employed in the silk industry. So important was the industry that after the unification of Italy in 1866, a technical institute to train craftsmen was established and today the area still enjoys a reputation for manufacturing some of most valuable silk in world.