

# THREAD OF TIME

## ~A HISTORY OF SILK

### Part 5: THE FRENCH SILK INDUSTRY

The success of the Italian silk industry did not go unnoticed in other countries, particularly France. Louis XI of France came to the throne in 1461. Much of his reign was dedicated to unifying France following the 100 Years War. It took a lot of scheming, forming alliances, negotiation and warring. Such machinations require funding and Louis XI needed to increase the Royal coffers. He saw the growing wealth of Italy, a dis-unified, embattled country and decided that the Italian silk industry success should be replicated in France, so in 1466 he decided to establish a French silk industry. His original intention was to establish the industry in the city of Tours but after encountering considerable local opposition the plan was changed and Lyon became the centre, mainly because it already had a strong weaving tradition.

There was no sericulture in France and in fact all attempts to produce silk failed with the exception of a small area in Provence. However, this region could not supply anywhere near the needs of the French silk weaving industry, so imports from China were always needed.

Around 1520, Martin Luther began to put forward his ideas that led to the formation of Protestantism. The Lutheran reformation played a significant role in the history of silk because many of these non-conformists were the very people who became silk weavers. Although it is not clear where the name Huguenot derives, it was probably a derisory term given to the followers of this new faith. An equally derisory name often used in France at this time was Canut. It was a jibe at their poverty as much as their religion and although the origin of the term is unknown it could have been a reference that Protestants did not follow the fashion for decorating their canes and so were known as "Cannes nueet" meaning bare canes. Alternatively, the name Canut could have been a derivative of the word for a spool of thread "Canetti".

In 1535, King Francis I granted Royal Charter to two merchants to develop silk trade in Lyon. The merchants were Etienne Turquet and Barthélemy Naris. Sadly, almost nothing is known about these two entrepreneurs but they must have been successful because in 1540, the King granted a monopoly on silk production to the City of Lyon. Just as the silk weaving industry in Lyon was beginning to thrive, there began a series of eight civil wars in France between 1562 and 1598. These became known as the Wars of Religion as Catholics and Protestants fought for control of France. During this period, in 1589, the Protestant Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre became king of France, following the deaths of his three "Valois" cousins. The wars continued and in 1593 Henri converted to Catholicism in an attempt to bring about peace but it took another five years before the wars ended. Henri rewarded his Protestant, Huguenot supporters by issuing the Edict of Nantes. This immensely important document gave the Huguenots considerable privileges, including religious freedom. In return they provided loyal support to the monarch. As a result the Huguenots grew in wealth and power.

Italy remained the centre for heavier weight furnishing fabrics & the intensity of colour produced in Italy could not be beaten but France became famous for lighter weight silks ideal for use in the garment industry. Fashion, especially haute couture was the way forward. The French silk industry flourished for over a hundred years and could have been unstoppable, but.....

In 1685, King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, outlawing the practice of Protestantism. He had become increasingly concerned that the power and influence of the Huguenots represented a threat to the absolute power of the monarch. Canuts were banned from holding religious services, pastors were exiled, churches were torn down. All children were required to be raised as Catholics. In addition, it became illegal to leave the country. Men were executed or sentenced to serve as galley slaves and women were imprisoned. Nevertheless, 200,000 French Protestants fled abroad in straw bales, empty beer barrels or wine vats. Presumably, the barrels and vats were empty before the escapees climbed in.

Some fifty to eighty thousand refugees fled to Britain where its own form of Protestantism had been practiced for some time. Many settled in London, mainly in Soho or Spitalfields but some went to places like Macclesfield, Congleton and Leek because weaving traditions were already in operation. In fact, Huguenots settled in all parts of Britain and in many towns and villages there are clues in street names that hint of past associations with silk weaving. The silk industry in France continued in spite of Louis XIV's persecution but he had unwittingly provided one of his nation's greatest enemies with a secret weapon.