

Textile Industry in Galicia

This is a long term account of an ancient activity in Galicia, the making of textiles and clothing, focusing on the factors that led to a deep decline in the mid 19th century and trying to depict a new setting that led to a rebirth at the end of the 20th century and a success at the beginning of the 21st century.

In the 18th century in Galicia, textile activities were oriented to the processing of certain fibres: wool, linen and in less quantity hemp- for ropes, canvas, etc.

Two remarks are relevant to be made. Firstly, urban industry organized in guilds was not important. Therefore, and throughout the next century, the manufacturing activity was mainly rural, carried out by peasants and out of the guild regulations.

Secondly, the production of wool fabrics was extended, but the economic value was less important than the production of linen, wool fabrics being rough and sold in the district markets.

Therefore, we have an industrial activity at domestic level in rural areas that produced mainly linen. As a raw material the flax in mid 19th century was local, but as it was not enough to provide spinners and weavers, since the 1770s linen began to be imported from the Baltic.

The techniques used here were similar to other European regions, except for the whitening process. Whereas in other areas the fabric was whitened at the end of the production, in Galicia the linen thread was whitened before being woven. In this way, less lawn was necessary for drying, and the whitening could be made in a common domestic saucepan that was used for cooking by adding ashes to the boiling water, and it took less time. But this peculiarity in the whitening process prevented the final product from having the quality reached in other places.

In the mid 18th century the sector gave employment through a part of the year to a minimum 15,000 weavers and 60,000 spinners and other people who took part in the preparation of linen.

The period of highest growth in the sector spanned between 1750 and 1830, thanks to the expansion of potential markets for Galician linen and favourable conditions for more production as a response to a higher demand, due to a growth in population.

The model of growth was based on low production and distribution costs, for products of medium-low quality destined to not very wealthy customers. Among the reasons for the growth we find that the raw material was local and later on imported from the Baltic. Secondly is the growth in rural population, who could supplement their income at low cost with textile production. And finally, we have

the informal distribution system, that even resorted to travelling peasants, contributing to the low cost.

The inability to introduce technical and organizational advances in the 19th century to compete with the cotton and linen products of other regions and countries that produced at lower prices, caused the Galician textile unstoppable loss of market.

Galician textile was displaced from the traditional markets. At first, the American market was lost, as a result of the independence of Latin American countries in the 1820s, by the loss of privileges and above all the inability to compete neither with the cotton products nor the fine linen sent there from other European regions at a lower cost.

And the Spanish market was also lost, including Galicia, first to British cotton smuggled since the 1820s, and later on to the modern textile from Catalonia, which also took advantage of the improvements in coastal navigation and the railway system to reach areas previously supplied more easily from Galicia, and also favoured by a protectionist policy.

What were the obstacles that prevented the success of Galician textile? Firstly, the technical conditions of production made it very difficult for the linen to have a certain quality and standard. The whitening process was harmful for the final quality and diversity of the product. Additionally, the size and quality was varied according to the area of procedence, which made it really necessary to arbitrate a way to standardize these aspects. This was not possible in Galicia, whereas in other regions it was fundamental to give a guarantee to distributors and customers of the product they were buying.

It was not easy to convince the small rural manufacturers that they should change the production methods or adjust to certain standards of size and quality, when many of them considered textile activities as a supplement, as one among many alternatives to earn a living.

Apart from this, and contrary to what had happened in other European regions, a social group linked to the sector had not been created, which could intervene in terms of techniques and production organization, in order to adjust to the demands of the new times.

We must conclude that in the 19th century the techniques of production and the marketing of Galician textile prevented the progress of a business network that could lead to transformation.

The sector went through difficult times of mere survival during most part of the 20th century, unable to compete with the consolidated textile industry of Catalonia, until the 1980s when it reached unexpected protagonism. (...)

By means of the interviews, students will write in the English class about designer brands from Ourense and the Galician shop brands of the Inditex group (Zara, etc.)

A couple of questions for the questionnaire of previous knowledge:

What was traditionally used to whiten linen in Galicia?

- a. Chalk
- b. Ashes**
- c. Chlorine

Where are the brands Adolfo Domínguez, Roberto Verino and Zara from?

- a. Madrid in Spain
- b. Lombardy in Italy
- c. Galicia in Spain**

Firms that could be interviewed:

[Adolfo Domínguez](#), Ourense

[Roberto Verino](#), Verín in the Ourense province

[Purificación García](#), and [Carolina Herrera](#), (Textil Lonia) Ourense

[Bimba & Lola](#), Ourense

[Inditex](#), A Coruña, Galicia

5. Textile and Fashion Studies in Galicia.

We have opted for an interactive map which is still under construction. We still don't have a full license to the app, which will allow some improvements in a few weeks.

The red points in Ourense are wooden looms or traditional textiles.

<https://www.thinglink.com/scene/753191232036929536>