

Luxury process, luxury product.

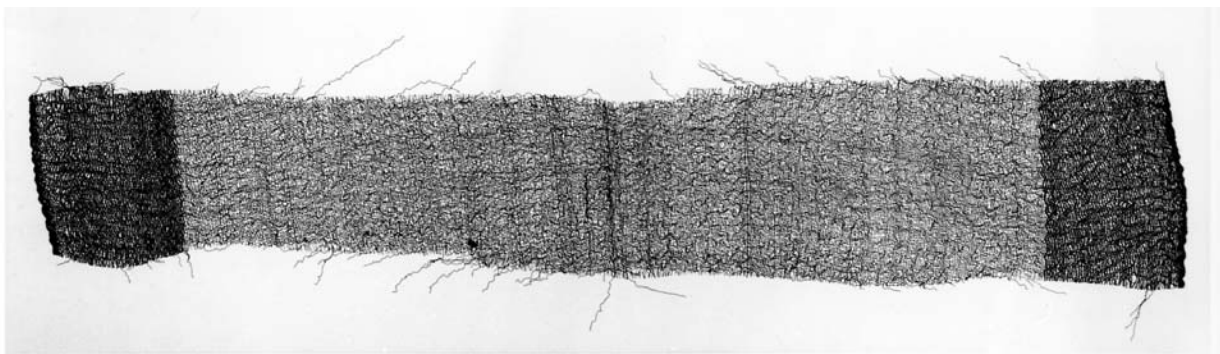
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These pages present a luxury product that managed to hold a strong position on the international market over a long period. We have gone into the reasons for this success, closely analysing both the manufacturing process and the markets for which it was destined. Conscious though we are of the difficulty of arriving at a general definition of luxury, we nonetheless feel that comparative analysis of this and various such cases may help define a paradigm.

The picture that emerges makes it clear how important, and how complex, it is to reconstruct objects by their symbolic value and patterns of use. No doubt not all articles possess the same semantic breadth or have source material available to the researcher – which makes the case in point an interesting yardstick for comparison.

The object under analysis is Bolognese silk voile. Though the lightest of fabrics with a straightforward weave, it is a hard manufacturing feat to bring off owing to the delicacy and fragility of the material. For many centuries the product held its own against overseas competition, only to fade out in the course of the nineteenth century and be expunged from social memory. Even at the end of the eighteenth century when the final crisis is already looming, the French competitors themselves continue to acknowledge the superiority of Bologna voile. Although by this time the Bolognesi are losing ground, the Lyons silk workers go one using the trick of counterfeiting the sender name on their voile consignments. They choose the names of the best-known Bologna merchants in order to enhance the prestige of their own product.¹

Fig.1 Fragment of black crêpe voile enclosed with letter from Giuseppe Grienberger of Straubing, 20 August 1774²



¹ R. DE LA PLATIERE, *Encyclopedie Methodique, Manufactures, Artes et Metiers*, Parigi, 1785, pp. 40-41.

² Fragment of voile 3.2 x 18.5. Selvage 2.3cm. Black crimped taffeta. Warp and woof in single-threaded silk. Selvages 65 and 69 quadruple-threaded. The material has undergone crimping.

Archivio di Stato di Bologna (ASBo), *Negoziato per la fabbrica dei veli, Lettere ricevute, 1774*. For a history of the Bologna silk voile industry, see: F. Giusberti, *Impresa e avventura. L'industria del velo di seta a Bologna nel XVIII secolo*, Milan, 1989. On the voile merchants' guild, see: A. Guenzi, *Un cartello industriale a Bologna nel secondo Settecento: la Società dei Mercanti da velo*, in "Quaderni storici", n.3, dicembre 1997, pp.735-768

A useful point of departure for our analysis is that one and the same name covers a large and varied range of products made from the same textile, but differing in height (see tab.1) and finishing, and hence in the use to which they are put.

Table 1
Bologna voile measurements ³

N° of “schiuma”	Height in cm.	N° of teeth per cm.
6	11.5	39.15
8	15.8	34.81
10	19.6	33.16
12	24.8	32.25
14	29.1	30.92
16	33.6	31.25
18	38.4	31.25
20	45.2	30.97
22	51.1	31.31
26	57.4	33.10
28	62.1	32.20
30	65.9	31.86
32	69.8	31.52
34	74.4	30.91
36	79.3	30.26
38	84.6	29.55
40	90.2	28.82
42	96.3	29.07
45	104.5	31.57

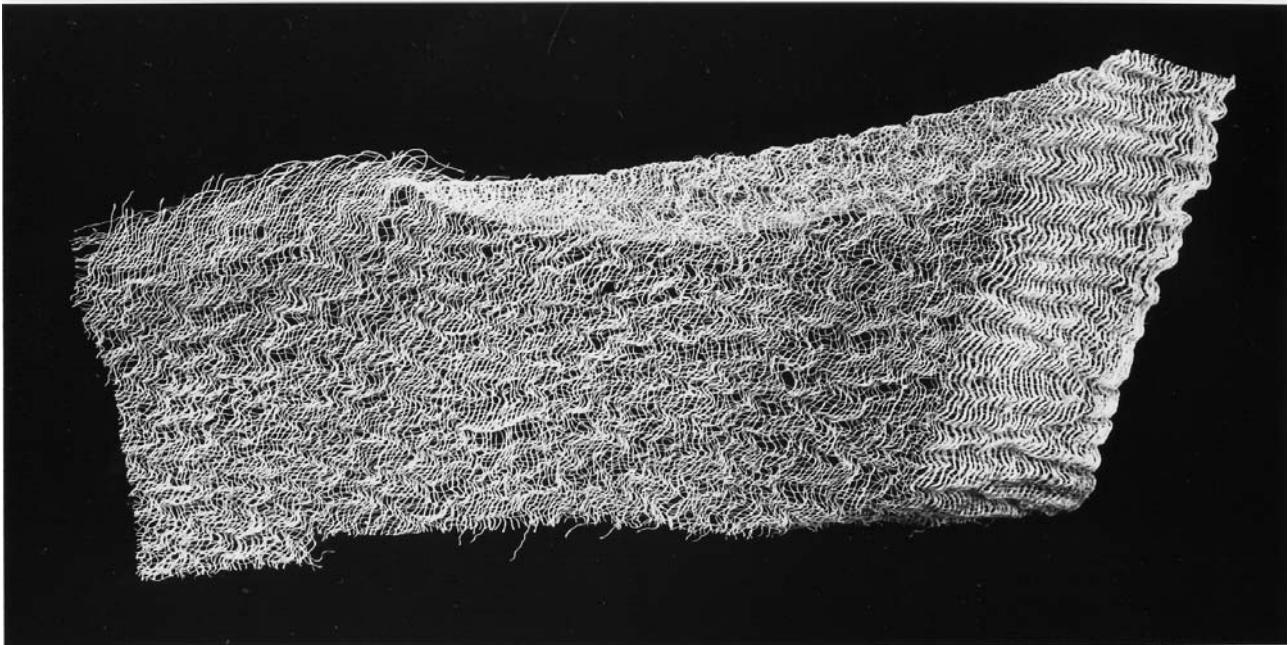
Height is not the only point of difference: the selvages may be broad or narrow, the mesh may be close-weave, extra close-weave, double, single, “open square”, etc.⁴. But the best known and most sought-after Bolognese voile was certainly the “*crêpe*” version. This, as the name implies, is the same material as before but with a crisped appearance. It is not the result of varying the degree of twisting in the warp and woof threads, as was once thought. The operation is a finishing process to the already woven voile, giving it the special effect of crisping. The voile was soaked in a resinous vegetable substance, gall, and then kneaded by hand “as in bread-making”, rolled out on a wooden cylinder and left overnight in the oven to fix the *apprettatura* (or finishing)⁵.

³ *Die 12 maij 1755... censura...pro norma et regula crespatorum*, in ASBo, *Assunteria d’Arti, Miscellanea d’Arti*, vol.XVII, fasc.53.

⁴ *lettera da Foligno di Angelo Rinozzi.*, 19 gennaio 1769, in ASBo, *Negozio per la fabbrica dei veli, Lettere ricevute, 1768-1769*

⁵ ASBo, *Assunteria...cit, Miscellanea d’Arti*, vol.1, fasc.53.

Fig.2 Fragment of ivory-coloured crêpe voile enclosed in a letter from Pasquale Fortini of Forlì, 29 November 1786 "...a norma della qui acclusa mostra..." (as per enclosed sample)⁶



As one reconstructs the crisping process one is struck by the extreme importance attaching to the flexibility factor, in all likelihood one of the product's winning features. There are obvious organisational or managerial advantages when a commodity gains its distinction and commercial success from an end-stage manufacturing operation which leaves earlier phases of the cycle unaltered.

Another secret of the success, if one listens to contemporaries, lay in the diversity of market outlets on which the product was employed. "Use, fashion and death" are the fields in which silk voile reigned supreme. We found concrete evidence of this in leafing through the archives of the Bologna merchant who coined that phrase. As we filed the customer orders relating to twenty years of business, we found hard data as to the various markets in which the material was involved⁷.

The first category is "use", meaning *ordinary* use. This includes orders from rich customers who wanted voile in their bedrooms as mosquito netting. Other references are to "cafés" where the fabric was used to adorn mirrors. There are also several industrial uses: in the tobacco industry as sieves, or the pharmaceutical industry as "filters for quinine"⁸.

⁶ Ivory-coloured crisped taffeta. Warp and woof of single ivory silk thread. Selvage 30-40 triple threads tied as taffeta. The material has undergone crisping.

ASBo, *Negozio...cit*, *Lettere ricevute*, 1785-1786.

⁷ "...con l'eccedenza del prezzo l'uso si indebolisce, la moda si cambia e li corrucci ...vengono ristretti o aboliti..." *Copia della lettera scritta da Bettini al Cardinale Boncompagni a Roma*, (senza data), in ASBo, *Negozio...cit*, *Lettere ricevute*, b.2, 2 gennaio 1770-30 dicembre 1771.

⁸ "...pezza per coprire gli specchij, se la desiderate gialla oppure canda e di quale altezza..." *lettera al sig. Giuliano Carducci*, 5 marzo 1771, in ASBo, *Negozio...cit*, *Copialettere*, 1767-1776. "...vi preghiamo di provvederci e spedirci tanto velo che serva a fare due zanzalieri per letto da due persone..." *lettera di Tomaso Saraf del 17 aprile 1772*, in ASBo, *Negozio...cit*, *Lettere ricevute*, 1772. "...velo giallo schiuma 22 alla Regina doppio dello migliore che sia possibile lo quale mi deve servire per due frolloni da tabacco..." *lettera di Angelo Rinozzi del 4 aprile 1771*, in ASBo, *Negozio...cit*, *Lettere ricevute*, 1770-1771.

"...da un nostro amico...siamo pregati di provvederlo di poche braccia di velo giallo fino doppio, quale deve servire per far passare la china...vorrebbe che fosse...di una tessitura molto più fina della mostra, acichè la china passasse per esso finissima..." *Lettera di Filippo Trevisan & fratelli, Verona*, 25 aprile 1782, in ASBo, *Negozio...cit*, *Lettere ricevute*, 1781-1782.

A wealth of illustration testifies to the use of voile in fashion, including flounces on sleeves and decoration for women's *décolletages*. It is often employed in headwear, serving as a transparent veil for hair-dos, or in the form of ribbons to deck the hair or clothing.

Another market outlet stands conceptually between normal use and fashion. This is the nuns and their demand for voile to adorn their vestments. It is interesting to note how finicky they prove to be in checking the quality of the material.

The chapter on funeral rites and mourning customs forms a most strategic sector. The same merchant archive contains a letter advising the Bolognese merchants to get used to the idea of curbing price rises since "one can hardly expect an Emperor to die every year" and hence it can be foreseen that, once the extraordinary demand created by imperial mourning is over, the market will eventually penalise a product that speculation has over-inflated. Mourning is an important chapter in *Ancien Régime* consumption. It is one of the social rites marking rank and prestige. Funeral ceremonies fix and confirm the areas of social belonging and are subject to the same pressure as other moments that confer prestige. The deceased's rank, the mourner's relationship and degree of participation: such factors are mirrored in their turn by decoration of premises and persons. Black voile is the form mainly used for clothing, hair arrangements, church decoration and *cortège* paraphernalia. Each time Bologna voile is brought out: not the only type, but the most sought-after. It enjoys special prestige, being a chronological "first" linked to a quality culture and keen collective investment in the additional value of "secrecy". For centuries the international market labours under the belief that Bologna is best.⁹

This success story was built around a number of interacting factors. As well as skill in turning out a product, there is also user flexibility, which amounts to something like biodiversity in the vegetable kingdom. A range of alternative placements can be found should one particular market fail. Not only: industrial uses grow up alongside the more obvious needs for a luxury product. A new style of employing luxury goods comes in. Remote from the final consumer, voile finds less visible niches, hidden in the folds of other manufactures.

What brought irreversible crisis upon such a strong and specific luxury article? Naturally there is not one single cause. As often happens, crisis set in slowly and then exploded in the space of a few decades. The Bologna archives bear ample witness to the long debate over the decline of the voile industry and silk as a whole. There were some attempts at innovation to stem the town's waning industrial fortunes. And – somewhat remarkably – when a first bid was made by Giuseppe Pecchio to reconstruct Italy's economic history, the crisis of Bologna voile was viewed as a *national* problem in direct relation with the *fin-de-siècle* military and political tensions¹⁰.

Pecchio's patriotic attitude from his English exile may have influenced the view of history, though his summary of events does seem plausible, well-informed and effective. Bologna voile is there seen as a luxury product with its niche in the international fashion market, a judgment borne out by the information that has come to light so far. Crêpe voile in particular sold well all over the world down to the end of the eighteenth century. According to Pecchio the area of consumption centred in Germany and Saxony especially. Then it extended to "Holland, France, Turkey, the Levant, England and [also, though to] a slightly less marked extent, Russia, Denmark, Prussia, Spain and America": A product destined for the global scene, therefore, and able to find its way onto all the markets of the world "down to the Indies and China".

The decline of that long-held eminence seems linked to serious international market deficiencies in supply, setting in after the Napoleonic wars. Military and political affairs would

⁹ On the connection between clothing and mourning, see L. Taylor's most interesting volume, *Mourning Dress. A Costume and Social History*, London, 1983. On the veil of secrecy surrounding the Bolognese silk industry, see: C. Poni, *Archéologie de la fabrique: la diffusion des moulins à soie "alla bolognese" dans les états vénétiens du XVI au XVIII siècle*, in "Annales E.S.C.", n.6, novembre-décembre 1972, pp. 1475-1496.

¹⁰ G. Pecchio, *Saggio storico sulla Amministrazione finanziaria dell'ex-Regno d'Italia dal 1802 al 1814*, Londra, 1826, pp.139-140.

seem to have played a basic role in the economic defeat. Interruption to business exchanges may have given the competitive edge to international rivals who had all along been hard on Bologna's heels and eager to steal its success ¹¹.

Fig.3 Guido Reni, Portrait of and Old Woman



This gossamer material, which neither cloaks nor warms, is fragile and ephemeral, and holds an important position in *ancien régime* consumption. We are tempted to style it a *plural* product: its strength lies in its versatility and the range of contexts calling for its symbolic and functional qualities. It survived over a long period and can claim to have been the making of one Italian city, though it would eventually succumb to international competition and be cancelled from that town's collective memory, quitting the scene altogether. To unearth traces of it we had to scour the archives, and in due course this led us to recognise the product in artworks. In our view it would be useful to compare it with other commodities and other fields of employment. We also think the dynamics of its decline are worth deciphering to shed light on how usage and taste may be formed. In the case of voile there was no emerging rival product, but in all likelihood a series of specific competitors.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*