

# THE MAYFAIR

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MAGAZINE

## LONDON CRAFT WEEK

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# FABRIC of TIME

What do Leonardo da Vinci, a Chinese empress and Moscow's Kremlin all have in common? **Hannah Lemon** delves into the archives of Florence's oldest silk mill to find out



Legend has it that Empress Lei-tzu, the young wife of the Chinese Yellow Emperor, discovered silk while sipping a cup of tea. Sitting under the leafy bows of a mulberry tree, a silkworm's cocoon dropped into her cup. The heat of the drink forced the silk to unfold and the young empress watched in awe as the magical thread unravelled, and she immediately determined to weave it. Sure enough, it made the perfect fabric, and soon Lei-tzu taught her ladies-in-waiting how to fashion garments from these fine fibres. Thus, she became known as the Silkworm Mother.

Of course, the more likely story was that Catholic missionaries brought sericulture back from China to Europe in the 12th century. One of their final destinations was Florence, a city that would flourish in the silk trade from the 14th century onwards, bringing enormous wealth to merchants.

Florentine silk continued to prosper during the Renaissance and well into the 18th century. So much so, that during the 1700s, a group of noble families clubbed together to establish a single workshop for their looms, patterns and fabrics located on Via dei Tessitori (the street of weavers). And so, Antico Setificio Fiorentino (Antique Florentine Silk Mill) was born.

In recognition of the importance of this factory and to toast increased silk production, in 1780 the Grand Duke of Tuscany Leopold II donated several looms, which still work today. Thanks to acquisitions by Marquis Emilio Pucci in the 1950s and subsequently Stefano Ricci in 2010, the future of the remarkable handcrafted tradition remains alive, as do the centuries-old Florentine techniques.

Today, Renaissance damasks, brocades and taffetas are woven on 12 looms – six handlooms dating from the 18th century and six semi-mechanical looms from the 19th century. The quality of the fabric is guaranteed by various phases of delicate workmanship: the hand dyeing, the preparation of the antique looms, yarns that are specially prepared for Antico Setificio Fiorentino, no chemical treatments and the lengthy weaving process.

It doesn't stop there. The Antico Setificio Fiorentino uses a unique orditoio (warping

machine), designed by Leonardo da Vinci for embellishments; as well as a loom for silk trimmings and another for custom-made fringes.

As is to be expected of such meticulous creativity, the silk products are sought after by every luxury institution from royal palaces to national museums – the Amalienborg Palace in Denmark, the Royal Palace of Stockholm, Moscow's Kremlin and Villa Medici in Rome, to name a few.

You don't have to be a royal to get a slice of the action though; bed, bath and table linens, bespoke services, and limited edition evening wear can be found on the lower ground floor at the Stefano Ricci menswear store on South Audley Street. And it's all thanks to an imaginative empress and her cup of tea. ■

*Antico Setificio Fiorentino products and services are available through Stefano Ricci, 56 South Audley Street, W1K, stefanoricci.com*



OPPOSITE: THE GUICCIARDINI LOOM (1786), PHOTO CREDIT: STEFANO RICCI/ASF BY BERNARDO CONTI

TOP RIGHT AND INSET: WEAVING THE ICONIC BROCCATELLO MICHELANGELO, MADE OF SILK AND LINEN THREADS. PHOTO CREDIT: STEFANO RICCI/ASF BY EGON IPSE; TEXTILES FROM THE ANTICO SETIFICIO FIORENTINO, PHOTO CREDIT: STEFANO RICCI/ASF BY MARCO CURATOLO

LEFT: SPOOL CHANGING DURING THE PROCESSING OF THE DORIA FABRIC, PHOTO CREDIT: STEFANO RICCI/ASF BY ROSSANO B. MANISCALCHI