



Woven from Dreams

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By the 14th century, silk, which had long clothed the emperors of the Far East, became popular among Florentine nobility, enriching the economy of their city and garnering for it a reputation for exquisite craftsmanship. Each noble family—the Corsini, della Gherardesca and Pucci among them—not only had its own crest, but also its own in-house looms, patterns and fabrics. By the late 18th century, these families consolidated production into a single atelier in the heart of Florence.

There, skilled artisans washed, combed and spun silkworm cocoon filaments into threads. They dyed them into the rich colors of the Renaissance: amber golds, shimmering blues, rosy pinks and emerald greens. Using an ingenious revolving wooden machine, built in 1786 according to a design by Leonardo da Vinci, workers warped the threads. The weavers toiled before the large wooden manual handlooms of the day; during the 19th century, they also incorporated some of the new, semi-mechanical looms. The atelier produced some of the finest silk damasks, brocades and taffetas in the world.

This bit of history is relevant because while the location of the atelier has changed, the silk mill otherwise carries on much as always, quietly and busily, off a small Florentine street. On any given day at the Antico Setificio Fiorentino, weavers—mostly women, wearing lab coats similar to those of *petits mains* in a couture house—toil at six of the founding families' original handlooms, as well as at six of those later, Industrial-era ones. (The dyeing of the silk, while still done naturally, now takes place outside of the city to preserve the Arno from harmful runoff). Slowly, slowly, on these ancient machines, the artisans produce just 15 to 30 feet of fabric a day.

It is hard not to feel romantic about this anachronism, especially if you've ever seen a modern weaving factory, laboratory-sterile and denuded of humans. Mahogany bookshelves hold an archive of thousands of trims; the ancient looms are beautiful skeletons of softly patinated wood. There is a rhythmic clacking to the work. Weaving is a whole-body experience: feet pumping pedals to control the warp threads, torsos rocking backward and forward, arms bringing down the batten to tighten the weave, and of course, the balletic fingers—feeding spinners, lifting threads, sending bobbins sliding across the warp.

And the fabrics! Velvety chenille brocades woven atop plain linen; damasks made of contrasting silks, shimmering and matte. Even the most brazenly luxurious of fabrics, the thick iridescent taffetas known as shot silk—two lustrous hues woven together in opposition, creating an effect of light that recalls the robes in Pontormo's paintings—are free of decoration. Often what passes for "luxury" today, lacks the restraint inherent in these glorious old designs.

But the world has moved on, as have our demands. A high-tech factory loom can perform up to 2,000 weft insertions per minute—producing many more thousands of feet per day than 15—and thus we are kept affordably clothed.

Nonetheless, the actual technique of weaving remains unchanged: "the intricate interlocking of two sets of threads at right angles," according to Bauhaus artist Anni Albers. Simple as that. And yet, weaving was one of our earliest alchemical acts. The Greek goddess Athena turned Arachne into a spider out of jealousy for her god-like ability to weave. It is a remarkable bit of human ingenuity to cajole the raw stuff of nature into continuous linear threads, and then to join these threads into a textile with which we can wrap ourselves. The Antico Setificio Fiorentino rekindles the magic once perceived in the ability to create cloth.

Such magic does not simply inhere in these silks' delicacy and traditional patterning. For weavings of great beauty can be made from the most basic materials, whether in the mountains, bush or pueblo. What is crucial is the intercession of human inventiveness, which Albers described as turning the "NO" of the material into a "YES." It is in this intimate back and forth—a relationship lost to modern weaving—that craft becomes art. It is why a humble rug made of rags, or a quilt stitched and patched over generations, can be seen as a thing of true beauty.

It is also why the atelier's most luxurious and costly fabric—lampas, a kind of damask so labor-intensive that only eight inches of it can be produced in a day, and which costs more than \$2,000 a yard—embodies great humility. That is the magic woven every day at the Antico Setificio Fiorentino.











