Zolang de weefkunst bloeit: zijdeweverijen in Amsterdam en Haarlem, 1585-1750
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When weaving flourishes
Silk weaving in Amsterdam and Haarlem, 1585-1750

Dutch silk weaving originated in the Southern Netherlands, in Antwerp, where a fully developed silk industry existed at the time when its silk weavers left for Amsterdam and Haarlem in the Dutch Republic. The Antwerp silk industry comprised silk throwing, silk dyeing and silk weaving and all three trades were controlled by a guild. There was a regular supply of raw silk and the fabrics were sold on the local and international markets. By the time the silk workers left Antwerp as a result of the political and religious upheavals around 1585, fabrics such as silk grosgrain, bourat, armosin, satin, damask and velvet, as well as kaffa and silk ‘smallen’ had already been woven there for many years.

The fact that representatives of all three trades settled in Amsterdam and Haarlem during the late sixteenth century contributed to the success of the establishment of the silk industry in both cities, as well as financial and commercial factors, craftsmanship and the quality of the designs. As a result Huguenots arriving in the Dutch Republic around 1680 found a well-established industry which they could enrich with new fabrics and techniques, but where there was no room for them to take up leading positions within the industrial organization.

But let us go back to where it all began, the initial question leading to this dissertation: what do we know about silk weaving and its products in Amsterdam and Haarlem between 1585 and 1750? There were only a few publications from the twentieth century indicating that such an industry had existed in both cities. Even less was known about the silk and half silk fabrics woven there, apart from the samples attached to a notarial act in Haarlem from 1678 and the samples ‘Etoffes d’Hollande’ dating from 1736 and 1737 in the Richelieu-collection in Paris. And here we are faced with a problem that is typical for research into clothing and furnishing textiles: they are not marked, which makes it extremely difficult to identify these textiles. Because when designs or documents such as inventories and invoices are missing it is almost impossible to assign textiles to a specific production centre; even more so for our country where we don’t have a reference collection such as the ‘Mobilier National’ in Paris. It thereby also rules them out as a starting point for research into the textile production of a specific textile centre as would have been possible when ceramics or silver objects were concerned. To overcome this problem it has been decided to look at how the Amsterdam and Haarlem silk industry functioned, to look at the economic and social

1 ‘Smal’ in Dutch means narrow, so ‘smallen’ were narrow fabrics. This is not to be confused with the weaving of narrow ware such as ribbons and trimmings.
3 NHA, NA 468, f. 113-114, not. Pieter Baes, 18 augustus 1678; Paris, Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliotheque Nationale, Collection Richelieu, Lh 45b en Lh 45d.
historical context in which the fabrics were woven, in order to find more information about the products this way. But it is not enough to look at the industrial organization, labour relations and regulations alone. Knowledge about weaving techniques and design issues not only helps to understand why certain decisions were made by the manufacturers, but also helps to understand the products. In doing so one has to take into account that woven silks in general were not produced for stock, but to order and in limited quantities. One also has to realise that the market for silk and half silk fabrics was very versatile. It ranged from simple plain coloured fabrics used for linings to heavy brocaded figured silks with metal threads used for court dresses and royal interiors, and everything in between. But it is the costumes worn by royals, nobility, members of the upper classes and the textiles used to make them that we now find in museum collections, which may give a biased view regarding their market share within the total production and trade in silk fabrics in Europe.

Silk weaving firms in Amsterdam and Haarlem varied from a workshop with only one weaver to large silk weaving facilities where a master weaver, his foreman and their journeymen-weavers, apprentices and drawboys were weaving the silk and half silk fabrics. They in turn were assisted by warp-threaders, people preparing the loom, readers of designs and lash makers who each in their own way made it possible to weave plain and figured fabrics. Silk throwsters wound the silk yarns used for warp and weft on reels, which they either did in their own homes or in the weavers’ workshop.

Depending on the kind of fabric weavers were paid by piece-rates or by ell. For example, easy to weave fabrics such as a plain rib weave like silk gorgorain or poudesoy were piecework and paid accordingly. This type of textile in general was longer than a length of heavy figured satin, which took the weaver much more time to weave, and therefore he was paid per ell for his work. When the silk industry was hit by an economic setback wages came under pressure tempting the manufacturers to cut them, which the municipality of Haarlem already in 1666 tried to avoid by publishing a list of prices. From the subsequent adjustments one not only may learn that in Haarlem silk fabrics woven from the last decades of the seventeenth century onwards were becoming technically more complicated, but also that wages could be a compilation of different components. So the use of brocading shuttles and/or shuttles with metal thread while weaving these technically more complicated fabrics was paid extra. And although this ‘bonus’ was mentioned for the first time in the list of prices of 1697, one may assume that similar wages had been paid in the years before.

From the contracts drawn up before an Amsterdam notary in 1650 with a group of kaffa weavers – they were going to set up silk weaving in Stockholm, Sweden – we learn that these ‘compiled wages’ were also paid in Amsterdam where lists of prices are otherwise unknown. In these contracts it was stipulated that the wages for a fabric called toiletten as well as for gold and silver cloth were always set in consultation with the merchants running the firm. This is not surprising because it was they who decided upon the amount of gold and/or silver thread that was to be used in a fabric. Against the compiled wages, advances were paid. In Amsterdam the management of the silk weaving firms lay in the hands of merchant-entrepreneurs (kooplieden-ondernemers) and silk manufacturers (zijdelakenfabrikeurs). It was they who imported raw and thrown silk, had the silk woven by their weavers (putting-out
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system) and finally sold the textiles on the local and international markets. Between the merchant-entrepre neur who at the very most was the owner of a warping mill without having any looms in his house and the silk manufacturer who did have his own workshop(s) there never have been huge differences, as opposed to the situation in France. There may have been conflicts between the two groups but when they arose, as they did in Antwerp and Lyon, they have never been solved through a guild, which did not exist in Amsterdam. In Haarlem, however, where a silk weavers’ guild did exist, guild regulations in 1676 for the first time introduced the rank of manufacturer (fabrikeur) and weaver (loonwerker). This was deeply resented by the weavers because the well-known distinction between those who put out the work and those who received it was now made official.4

In Amsterdam there never had been guilds to organize the different workers in the silk industry, except for the silk-dyers. And it took until 1663 when silk weaving was placed under the supervision of the commissioners of the silk manufacturers (commissarissen van de zijdemanufacturen), a group of eight experienced silk manufacturers and silk cloth merchants, whose task it was to ensure that the silks and half silks were made in the best possible way.5 To further this time limits were set within which the weaver had to warn if he was running out of warp, weft or pile, thus ensuring a smooth transfer of silk and designs from the manufacturer to the weaver. The ordinance at the same time urged the manufacturers and merchants to give their weavers good grade silk thereby enabling them to weave good quality fabrics in time. In contrast with the situation in Haarlem, where in 1701 a similar institution was set up – the so-called geauthoriseerden – no members of the municipal government were involved with the silk industry.

Did the silk workers miss a guild in Amsterdam? So far no indications have been found in written sources that there was a need for a guild. And the fact that the silk weavers from the Southern Netherlands left an already fully developed silk industry not only must have helped them to establish and develop silk weaving in Amsterdam, but also to do this without the organizational framework of a guild. How they actually achieved this, and whether the fact that many of them were mennonites has played an important role, is something to be looked at further.

The situation in Haarlem was completely different. Here silk weavers were first incorporated in the guild of the linen weavers, after which they succeeded in having their own guild in 1597, the so-called smalweversgilde, the guild of the weavers of smallen.6 Although now being two different guilds, this did not mean a radical break between the two groups of weavers, as becomes clear from a conflict in 1612 concerning the sealing of fabrics with designs that were also used for napkins. The big question was which guild was allowed to seal which fabrics. The solution found focused on the use and the colour of the fabrics, resulting in the following division: white fabrics (witwerken) were used for table-linen as opposed to coloured fabrics that were made and used for clothing. The yarns – silk, linen, cotton, wool etc. – used for weaving these fabrics, contrary to what one would expect were not a criterion. This also explains why the lists of prices that were compiled from 1666 onwards also included non-silk fabrics. It also meant that not all weavers were weaving silks or half-silks and, more important, that smallen or ‘narrow fabrics’ were not automatically silks, but just in general

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4 NHA, SA 307. The ordinance of 1697 doesn’t mention the articles concerning the rank of manufacturer and weaver anymore.
5 From 1668 onwards silk throwing was supervised by six experienced silk throwers.
6 See note 2 for the meaning of the word ‘smal’.
fabrics that belonged to the products woven by members of the guild of the ‘narrow weavers’ or the smalnering.

During the first half of the seventeenth century the smalweversgilde – as a result of the growing importance of silk fabrics – gradually developed into a smalredersgilde or a smalnering. A nering was a corporation created by a town government for the purpose of supervising an entire branch of industry according to more or less detailed rules laid down by the municipal authorities. They were governed jointly by appointees of the municipal government, called superintendenten, and representatives of the principal producers. It was the superintendenten who would introduce matters to the city council and as such, in 1701, they advised them to create a college of authorised men, the so-called geauthoriseerden whose task it would be to take over the administration of the lookkamer, the place where all silk and half silk fabrics were inspected and sealed. However, their main task was to mediate in matters that arose between manufacturers, master weavers and journeymen. Furthermore it was the municipalities’ wish that the fabrics were woven in the best possible way and with good materials. This is echoing the Amsterdam ordinance of 1663, which taking into account the growing influence of the manufacturers within the Haarlem guild cannot come as a surprise. We are dealing here with an industrial organization that is characteristic for the silk weaving industry because of its great need of working capital to finance the expensive materials (silk, gold- and silver thread) that were used. The same industrial organization can be seen in Antwerp, Lyon and London. Next to the working capital the international market could be a major influence because the demand for silks and half silks was very susceptible to changes in fashion and political events, such as wars or public mourning. Both influenced the market and enough capital was needed to be able to survive such crises. That public mourning was a serious problem that could greatly affect the employment of the silk weavers is shown by the reports in the Amsterdamse Courant. In the edition of 11 February 1710 it was reported that a few days earlier on February 4th the London silk weavers had handed in a request to the House of Commons complaining about the lengthy mournings at the court and the subsequent negative consequences for their trade. Or, as they had put it nearly a year earlier, the mourning had led to such a decrease in the sale of silk fabrics, that a great many weavers were about to fall into severe poverty.

Comparing Amsterdam and Haarlem one major difference between the two cities is immediately apparent when the initial period, the first half of the seventeenth century is concerned. It is in this period that the Amsterdam weavers concentrated on weaving silk fabrics right from the start and where straight from the beginning silks such as armosin, damask and kaffa were woven. The publication of the ordinance in 1663 was the result of the growing and flourishing of the manufacture and trade of all sorts of silks in Amsterdam such as gold and silver cloth, satin, tabby, damask, brocades, kaffa, velvets, paduasoy, floretten, g Rograin, armosin etc. The situation in Haarlem was quite different because of the yarns the weavers were using, as becomes clear from the presence of eight hundred linen weavers as opposed

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8 Schipper-van Lottum, Advertenties en berichten in de Amsterdamse Courant, deel 6B, nr. 4709, 11 februari 1710. A few days later it was decided to regulate the period for public mourning, nr. 4718, 22 februari 1710. See also Godart, L'Ouvrier en soie, chapter 10 for the different causes that could lead to unemployment for silk weavers, such as public mourning, 214-217.
9 Schipper-van Lottum, Advertenties en berichten in de Amsterdamse Courant, deel 6B, nr. 4433, 16 april 1709. It concerned the public mourning for George, Prince of Denmark and husband of Queen Anne.
10 ‘Goude en Sîveré lakenen, Satijnen, Tabijnen, Dammasten, brocaden, Caffaes, Fluelen, Felpen, Poudesoyen, floretten, Greijnen, Armosijnen, etc. en alles wat daer onder behoort en getrocken kan worden’
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to six hundred silk weavers in the smalweversgilde in 1666.11 This concentration on silk fabrics has given Amsterdam a headstart in relation to Haarlem, a lead that was reflected in the differences in looms used in both cities during that period. From the discussions regarding the Haarlem lists of prices that were published in 1671 and 1676, it becomes clear that in those years the button drawloom was used more often in Haarlem than the drawloom. The choice for one or the other drawloom, which was mainly influenced by the size of the design, had its consequences for wages, because weaving on a drawloom meant earning two stuivers more per ell. It was relatively easier and quicker to weave on a button drawloom than on a drawloom. Next a distinction was made between the ‘heavy’ Amsterdam fabrics – fabrics with a lot of silk in the warp – and the ‘light’ Haarlem fabrics with less silk in the warp. As was stated by three Amsterdam master-weavers in 1677, the so-called heavy silks until a few years ago had only been woven in Amsterdam. At the time of their statement the situation had changed, meaning that these fabrics now were also woven in Haarlem. As an example they mentioned the two- and three-coloured satin and the two- and three-coloured moire with four or six threads in each reed opening. The size of the design or the type of loom in Amsterdam – as compared to Haarlem – did not influence the wages. There was, however, one exception. When a fabric had a loomwidth design, the weaver was paid two stuivers extra per ell.

Figured silks woven in Amsterdam were ¾ ell, twelve taliën or 52 cm wide, which made them slightly narrower than the French figured silks of 54 cm (11/24 aune). On the other hand it coincided more or less with the English ‘half ell’ of somewhere between 48 and 53 cm (19 and 21 inches). Widths in Haarlem, from 1676 onwards, varied from 48 to 56 cm (eleven and 13 taliën), whereby the highest width was known as the ‘French width’.13 This means that the Haarlem widths were compatible with those used in other European silk centres, as opposed to Van Ysselsteyn’s opinion that Haarlem silks were characterized by their narrow widths.14 This is important to know because now a narrow width can no longer be used to identify Dutch silks as has been done in the past.

Widths in Amsterdam and London were free, i.e. they were not put down by any guild or municipal regulations, which gave the manufacturers the freedom to adjust the widths to fill their customers needs or to follow the foreign guilds’ regulations. This also made it possible that in Amsterdam 78 cm wide figured silks with chinoiserie designs, the so-called indien-nes could be woven without any difficulty. This would have been impossible in France where its strict regulations were maintained until the end of the eighteenth century. And because of this extraordinary width, which is copying Chinese widths, it is now possible to identify these fabrics in museum collections as woven in Amsterdam.

Apart from the differences that existed between the European silk centres there is one aspect of the silk industry they all had in common: the protection of designs in order to stop them being copied by others. Imitation as such is not a problem limited to textiles, it is a phenomenon that is present in all fields of the (applied) arts. In silk weaving it was completely accepted that copying was a proper way to add new fabrics to the stock. That is why in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century they imitated French silks, why in Lyon they did the same with Italian silks and why London copied Dutch and French silks. This copying only became a severe problem when seasonal changes in the designs were introduced, which al-

11 NHA, Ingekomen stukken (SA 710), rood 465.
12 The looms mentioned here were also used for weaving linen damask.
13 NHA, SA 281, artikel 12.
14 Van Ysselsteyn, ‘Het Haarlemse smalweversgilde’, 34.
ready had begun during the third quarter of the seventeenth century and by the end of that
century was firmly established within the French silk industry.

Part of the problem were the fabrics themselves, because for an experienced weaver it
was relatively easy to analyse a fabric and reweave it. And it was in the letters send by the
manufacturers to potential buyers to obtain orders that the samples were attached. This was
the day to day practice not only for the figured but also for the plain fabrics. The problem
with the figured fabrics was that the manufacturer had to send a sample showing a full pat-
ttern repeat thus enabling a foreign weaver to copy it. This was why the Haarlem silk ma-
nufacturers (smalreders) already in the first half of the seventeenth century insisted on the
protection of their new fabrics. Their argument was that the industry was characterized by
a constant change in fabrics, designs and colours, as was also the case in Amsterdam. This
was a plea that in 1661 was honoured by allowing them to invent new fabrics, to weave and
sell them without having to show them in the looikamer straight away. The consequences
when new fabrics were copied could be that the manufacturer would lose the headstart he
had – he after all was the first to bring it on the market – when he sold his fabrics, thereby
losing out on his development costs. On the other hand samples were send to manufacturers
as an example for the weavers of what the buyer wanted to have. This was the case in 1679
when Jan van Gestel junior in Amsterdam, received a sample from his foreign customer as
an illustration of how the ordered damask should be made in view of the amount of silk
used, its width, colour and design. Another risk of course was the designers themselves who
sold their designs to others. In this respect it is striking that the Amsterdam manufacturers
on the one hand took all necessary precautions to protect the work of their designers, while
on the other hand they travelled to Paris to buy the latest French designs. All in all it seems
that there was a lively trade in samples and designs to satisfy the constant need for fresh de-
signs.

This dissertation is the result of a combination of economic and social historical research
into the context wherein the Amsterdam and Haarlem silk industry functioned, together
with art-historical research into weaving techniques and design issues. It has shown that
the establishment of a silk industry in Amsterdam and Haarlem was a success. Amsterdam
took the lead and Haarlem followed. After the middle of the seventeenth century both ci-
ties played their role within the European silk industries, next to France and England. The
nature and dimensions of this role may be conjectured, but cannot be decided upon with
certainty yet. Too many questions still need further research.