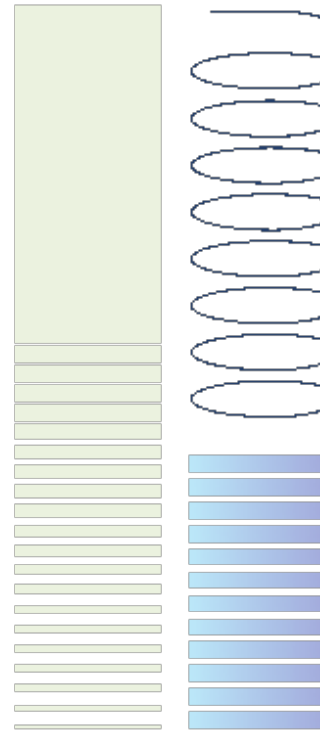
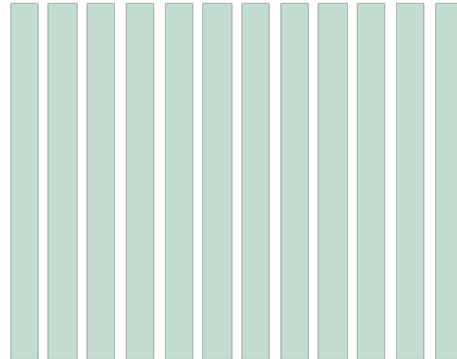


# SILKNOW: weaving our past into the future

Actions needed to  
protect textile heritage

## Policy Brief

June 2019



### Why silk? Why now?

Silk has traced the world, and especially the Europe we live in today. The commercial silk routes boosted some of the biggest cities and established significant connections among them. Ideas, designs, crafts, materials, people, travelled throughout the continent along these networks. It is a living heritage, very active in artisans, traditional and new techniques, lifestyles, fashions, etc.

However, silk textiles are seriously endangered heritage. Not only in its very material condition, but also its embedded intangible heritage –i.e. artisan weaving techniques- which are at risk of fading away. Institutions in charge of its conservation need to face soaring challenges. At the same time, however, textiles and fashion are sparking a growing interest such as both a cultural phenomenon and a creative industry, generating income and preserving identity, culture and values.

This Policy Brief examines the relevance of silk heritage at the European plane, the reasons for its current fragility, the chances which aroused because of the introduction of new technologies, and their potential impact. It also outlines some needy policies to make the most of these new opportunities.

*Valencian espolín, a traditional silk textile.*



### Key points

- Silk is a living heritage, but it also faces some serious threats.
- New technologies can aid in preserving it.
- An international declaration should address the protection of textile heritage, both tangible and intangible.
- The historical archives of textile companies are a key resource, that requires protection and research.
- Policy makers can champion and nurture a philosophy of open access to historical information among GLAMs.

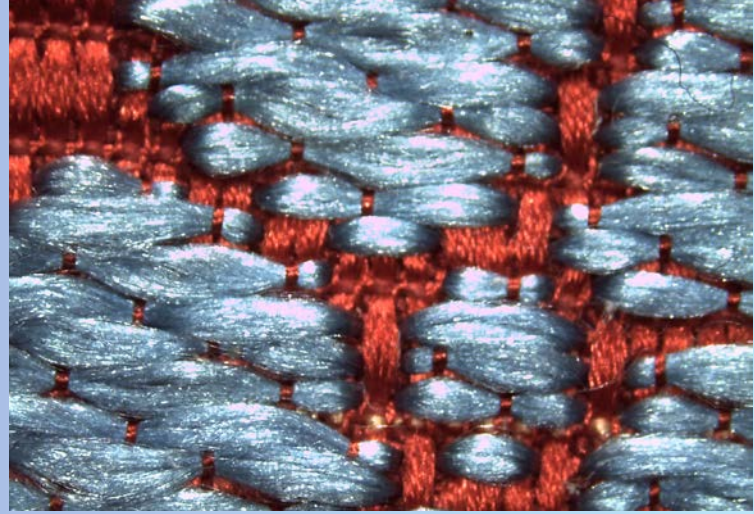
**SILKNOW. Silk heritage in the Knowledge Society: from punched cards to big data, deep learning and visual / tangible simulations.**

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## European history is woven in silk

Few materials have had such economic, technical, functional, cultural and symbolic presence throughout our past and present as silk has had. From flags to canopies, tapestries to furniture, fans to sword sheathes, wedding gowns to traditional costumes, we find silk in countless contexts for the most of the last 2,000 years. Luxury, craftsmanship, beauty and comfort have been -and still are- associated with it. Most often, common knowledge about the Silk Road is limited to its Asian origins, thereby ignoring the importance of its later European ramifications. The Western Silk Road, a production network and market centres, spread and encompassed, over many European countries, diverse aspects as trade, science, craft, art, diplomacy and culture.

Today, this legacy is not alien to us. The European textile industry has a key role in our society. According to EURATEX, EU clothing and textile production is predominantly carried out by SMEs, directly employing 1.69 million people, 70% of whom are women, anticipating more than half a million-job openings in this sector until 2025 [1]. The Commission has recognised that fashion industries -textiles among them- are at the heart of the creative economy, generating huge economic wealth and preserving European identity, culture and values. In 2012 the EC officially promoted the cultural and creative sectors [2] and in 2014 published the Action Plan for Fashion and High-end Industries [3] stressing the relevant contribution of this sector to the EU economy, with an annual turnover of €169 billion (€525 billion for the entire fashion value chain).

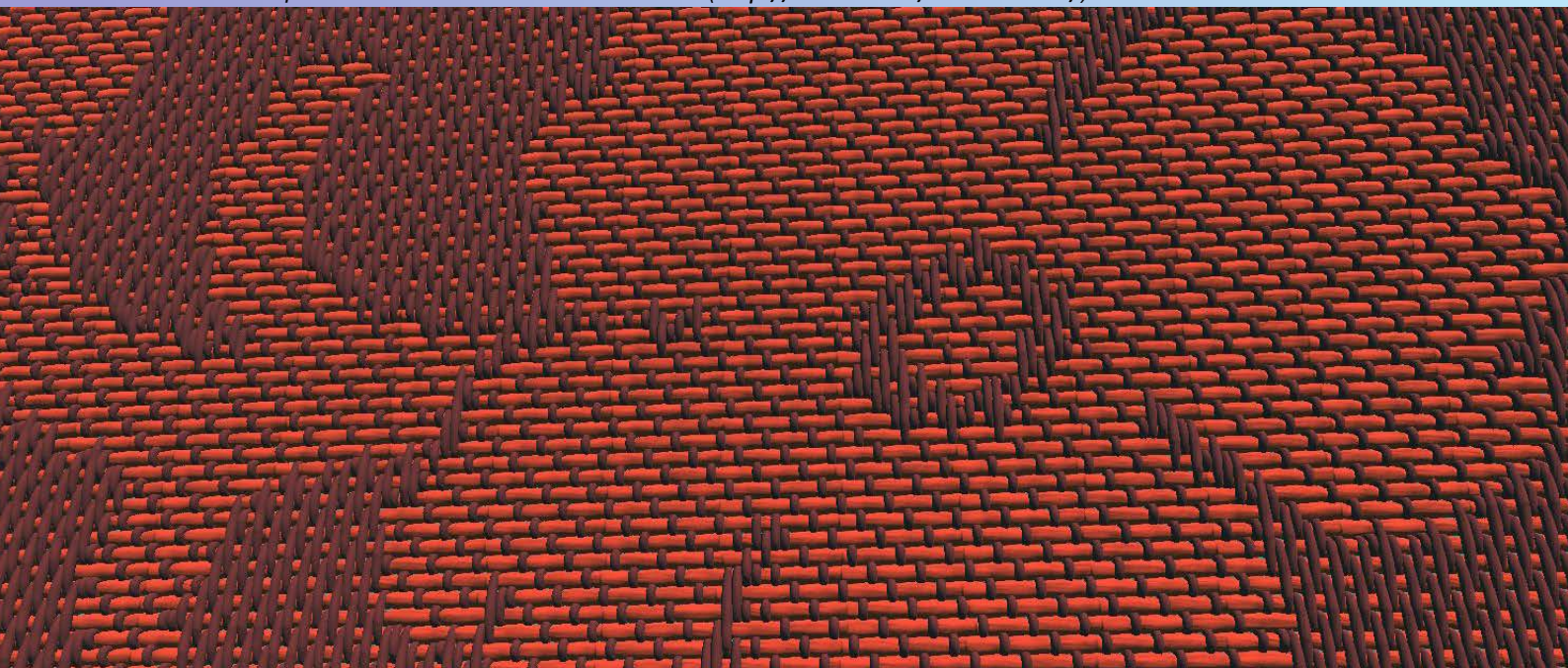


*Image of a historical textile, with microscopic detail.*

### **Despite its importance, silk heritage is under serious threat**

One reason lies in its very physical nature, more fragile than other conventional cultural assets (painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.). Although many European specialized institutions are in operation, they usually are small or medium size, and they lack of resources to develop state-of-the-art digital resources. Their very survival as public institutions is facing major threats, as attested by the egregious case of the Musée des Tissus in Lyon, the best European collection of its kind, that was on the verge of closing after 153 years in existence, due to chronic funding shortage [4]. Additionally, an intangible heritage such as the old weaving techniques is in danger of disappearing with the imminent closure of the very few companies that still make use of traditional looms. Nonetheless, their holdings are linked to many life stories and collective narratives, and remain relevant for audiences that experience vivid, personal and social connections to them. They are also silent witnesses to the many anonymous workers, women in their majority, who lived on spinning and weaving before and after the Industrial Revolution.

*A damask reproduced with SILKNOW's Virtual Loom (<http://silknow.eu/virtualLoom/>).*



## **Information lies in siloes, away from users, behind language barriers**

Institutions preserving silk heritage have been producing large amounts of digital data, which in some cases are poorly tagged, variously formatted, in different languages, of random quality and usually inaccessible for the wider public. Additionally, catalogues often include questionable records, which are very difficult to detect if the data among different collections remain disconnected. New methods and tools are available to extract automatically meaning or sense from these huge and heterogeneous digital databases and to establish connections among them, in order to preserve this fragile cultural heritage, what would allow its reuse for the future generations. Furthermore, improved access to these data is required to make them more meaningful for prospective end-users.

## **What can new technologies do to help preserving this heritage?**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provide researchers with powerful tools in order to preserve, analyse and tap into digital information. Cultural Heritage (CH) is not far away of this reality. Every day, new initiatives embody this symbiosis between ICT and Humanities. The connection between ICT and silk textiles is also evident from the very beginning: 19th century Jacquard looms are reportedly the most direct ancestors of modern computers [5]. In a similar way, state-of-the-art computing can now help to keep alive the tangible and intangible heritage associated with silk textiles. Thus, creative industries can benefit from this wealth of heritage, and provide European designers and manufacturers with elements of great added value in today's competitive, global economy. "Creating new products and services requires an increased number of high-quality jobs - both on the supply side and on the demand side" [6].

## **Public policy implications**

Recent Chinese plans to revive the ancient Silk Road as a trade and cultural route receive great public attention, and deservedly so [7]. Some less ambitious actions can be implemented, in addition, that will help to preserve European silk heritage, making it again a valuable contribution to global exchanges.



*Posterized image (plain colors) of a damask textile.*

## **Support the proposal of an international declaration for the protection of textile heritage, both tangible and intangible**

In the past, culture professionals and their associations have pushed governments and international bodies to adopt or endorse variously binding documents, such as conventions, recommendations, declarations or charters. They have focused on the defense of specific kinds of heritage; for instance, Underwater Cultural Heritage [8], Historic Urban Landscape [9], or Traditional Culture and Folklore [10], to name but a few. However, no document addresses the specific challenges posed to textile heritage, in spite of its past and present importance. The SILKNOW project is working towards a first declaration of this kind, to be taken up initially by academic and professional organizations. National and European legislative bodies should commit to carrying these recommendations forward, making them a legal grounding for urgently needed policies in favor of textile heritage.

## Foster conservation and research of textile companies' historical archives

With few exceptions, textile companies throughout Europe fell under the pressure of globalized trade and production during the 1990s, if not before. A wealth European historical memory is still kept in their archives (e.g. [11]), in many cases thanks to the personal commitment of aging owners, workers or their heirs. These processes have often happened in history, but in this case we are still in time to protect the products and the information generated by these companies, before its dispersion or mere disappearance. Supporting measures from policymakers can facilitate the study and preservation of this heritage by museums, archives and the academia.



3D printed damask (detail).

## Champion and nurture a philosophy of open access to historical information among Galleries, Libraries and Museums (GLAMs)

Most European textile heritage entered the public domain long time ago. There is no legal reason to hide it from citizens, tourists, researchers, designers or anyone willing to have access to it for any reason. Sometimes, nonetheless, heritage institutions still maintain a condescending attitude towards users, considering themselves as owners of a treasure, and rightly so, but not as facilitators of its utilisation by as many people as possible. These old-fashioned attitudes must and will be overcome, but help is also needed to support small and medium GLAMs in improving their technical resources and ICT skills. For instance, adopting data standards and semantic web technologies, which are the building blocks that make data interoperability possible. Open access to digital information offers the promise of unfettered contact with global culture [12].



Silk yarns.

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### More info:

www.silknow.eu | silknow@uv.es | silknow\_eu | silknow | silknow.eu

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