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Como  
Silk town

One of the most prized fabrics sought after by fashion houses each season is silk and for more than a century Italy has been a key supplier. Last year the nation's mills sold nearly €1.4bn worth of the material. And Como, the small city in Lombardy, is undoubtedly the final destination on Italy's silk road.

The natural fibre arrived in the peninsula in the Middle Ages. It had reached Como by the 16th century, when silkworms were introduced. The area's mulberry trees provided ideal growing conditions; in 1850 the Como region had three million of them.

Como began to compete with bigger producers in Lyon towards the end of the 1800s and already boasted 2,000 looms operated by families in their homes. By the 1920s, the area grabbed the spotlight from the French thanks to gifted designers and improved technology, making it the cluster of industry that it remains today.

One example of Como's ongoing dominance in the industry is Mantero. The fourth-generation family firm excels in printing patterns on silk. For foulards and scarves, Mantero converts the raw material (now imported from China) into a finished product, while cloth for haute couture and ready-to-wear is delivered to fashion houses for sewing. Its work has earned it a stable of high-profile clients, including Kenzo, Vivienne Westwood and Christian Lacroix.

Inside its 37,000 sq m factory, designers are busy each day developing new designs and colour schemes. In the factory's atelier, Laura Fedriga oversees a team using modern and time-honoured techniques. "We have prints filed away as references



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so we can scan images and play with them but it's good to try a new pattern by drawing it," says Fedriga, peering over the shoulder of a colleague using watercolours to devise a new flower motif for a leading French fashion brand. To prove the point that Como is the secret weapon for many fashion houses' silk collections, confidentiality is always maintained.

Next door, printers work with rolls of raw silk up to 80 metres in length, pouring dye over cut-out panels laid on top, gauging the correct amount by eye. Centuries of built up know-how has allowed this illustrious textile district to weather wars and recession. "Como is the lone

remaining source for quality silk," says Ester Geraci, curator at the city's Educational Silk Museum.

At Mantero's frescoed villa-cum-headquarters that abuts the city's medieval wall, co-owner Lucia Mantero shows off some of the industry's storied past. It has amassed a 12,000-volume set of fabric swatches – the scarves alone amount to 55,000 – based on previous work and archives acquired from defunct competitors. It's a source of inspiration when creating new designs that they then propose to fashion designers. "We have to be ahead of our clients who themselves have to be ahead of customers," says Mantero. — (AM)



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