Book Review


*The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* is a two-volume collection of essays that sets out to provide the reader with an authoritative account of the production and consumption of textiles covering three thousand years. This has been a huge undertaking and the gestation period has been long. The resulting publication has brought together contributions from a range of experts, including economic and industrial historians, archaeologists, museum curators, dress and textile historians. As one would expect, the essays are immensely varied in approach and include technological, stylistic, economic and industrial histories and provide fairly concise introductions to a range of topics. This is a history to dip into and, as the publishers explain, its intention is to be approachable to readers with little background knowledge of textiles.

The well-illustrated publication is organized into five sections, each with its own brief introduction: Textile Industries of the Ancient World to AD1000; The Medieval Period; The Early Modern Period; The Nineteenth Century; and The Twentieth Century. A couple of themes recur throughout: the vital importance of textiles to countries’ economies and their end-use as signifiers of status, particularly in the form of dress and elaborate house furnishings. For example, the chapter on “Furnishings, c. 1500–1780” explains the importance of textiles for display around the home, particularly in the form of bed hangings. The authors describe how the best bed was the most costly item of furniture in the house, and textiles its most expensive component.

Although the tendency is for contributions that focus on one approach to their subject, from this writer’s perspective, the most stimulating essays are those that combine discussion of industrial/technological developments with a social/cultural context and that discuss end-use. In particular, I would single out the second of two essays by Stanley Chapman. In “Hosiery and knitwear in the twentieth century” he plots cultural, economic and technological developments together providing a full picture of the industry in the twentieth century. He explains how changes
in fashion, with rising hemlines, lead to an emphasis on the female leg and that women's increasing emancipation and the growth of leisure and sporting activities increased the demand for more informal and comfortable clothing. Such factors were significant in the increasing prosperity enjoyed by the hosiery and knitwear industries in the twentieth century.

While some of the chapters include discussion of the end-uses of textiles, more often this aspect is dealt with separately, so we have chapters, for example, on "The uses of textiles c. 1000–1500," "Early modern tapestries and carpets, c. 1500–1780" (a particularly useful and comprehensive introduction to the subject) as well as a number of contributions on dress. The majority of these describe changes in style of fashionable dress of the elite (items that survive in museum collections and are represented in painting). The emphasis on description means that the significance of change is not always considered, for example, in Byrde's essay on "Dress: industrial revolution and after", we learn of the appearance of informal jackets in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, but there is no indication of why they appeared; some social context would have been helpful.

It is not until one reaches the twentieth century that we see comment on the diffusion of fashionable style to a mass audience and what certain styles of clothing mean. For example, Taylor and Anderson focus on sexuality and gender and dissident dress. However, this contribution seems to miss the opportunity of discussing the role of textiles in the make-up of clothing—surely the key to the publication as a whole.

The long gestation of this publication perhaps explains why recent developments such as the rise of Asia in a global economy is mentioned rather than fully developed. While it is acknowledged that this is a history of "Western" textiles, this concept is quite a difficult one in the twenty-first century. Apart from a couple of essays that mention the USA, the focus seems to be on production and consumption in Europe, hence, this volume may have been more appropriately titled a History of European Textiles.

The editor explains that the intention of the book is a "review of the state of knowledge" rather than a "comprehensive history of textiles." He acknowledges that although each essay can stand alone, a wholeness is created in "the breadth, complexity and far-reaching implications of textiles in the economies and societies" provided in this collection. However, I suspect The Cambridge History of Textiles will be valued by readers for the individual stand-alone contributions, which provide valuable introductions to the major textile industries. At a price tag of £250, one assumes its main audience will be students in university libraries beginning research on particular aspects of western production and consumption.