

Overview of linen context in France and Lithuania
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Introduction

It is a herbaceous plant, widely cultivated for its textile fibres and oil seeds. It was one of the first species cultivated and processed into textile fibre. Flax will remain for a long time the textile plant of choice for human use, before the development of cotton.

In 2021 the flax global production goes at 60% in the fashion field, at 30% in decoration and then 10% of it is dedicated to technical uses. Flax production corresponds to only 0.4% of world fibre production. It is mostly seen as high-end fabric and perceived as an environmental friendly fabric¹.

Characteristics

Being a hollow fibre, textile flax dries very quickly and absorbs less moisture than other fibres. For those reasons among others, flax can be used in its entirety.

The sub-products of the flax plant are tow, shives and seeds. Tow is used to make coarse fabrics. Towel, a short fibre, can be used to make tea towels, postal bags and cigarette paper. Crushed straw, called shives, is used in the manufacture of chipboard, doors, partitions, roofing, but also for thermal insulation of buildings. Finally, what remains of the seed is used as animal feed. The seed also exists in culinary form and is used in the preparation of dishes or bread. Flaxseed can also be used to support and coat hair fibres, or as cooking or massage oil. Some artists also use it to clean their brushes.

Process

The linen production is between March and August. It sows during March and April and emerges in May. The plant is uprooted in June and then dried until August. The first step after harvest is to separate both the fibres and the straw from the flax ; it is called scutching. The second industrial stage is the combing of fibres to form a continuous sliver, that becomes a roving then.

Finally it is time for spinning which can have 2 different forms : wet spinning to have high quality thread or dry spinning for thicker thread. After that, the linen is ready for weaving.

Historical and national contexts

The use of linen fibre by humans is particularly ancient and the first human textiles found are believed to be made of linen as demonstrated by archaeological research in the Dzudzuana cave in Georgia, which esti-

1 CELC, Flax/Linen Barometer, 2021 [online] http://news.europeanflax.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/DP_WEB_UK.pdf

mated their use at 30,000 BC. Analysis of these linen remains indicated that the inhabitants of this environment used linen for making ropes, sewing threads and for weaving baskets².

Until the 1st century AD, linen remained the textile plant of choice for human populations³, whether for utilitarian or precious fabrics. Its importance gradually declined with the arrival of cotton production.

In the Carolingian Empire around 800-812, Charlemagne, through his Capitulary of Villis, set out domestic regulations for the production, tooling, keeping, accounting and processing of many French products such as linen, hemp, leather and wool⁴.

Linen History in France

In France at the beginning of the 19th century, Napoleon, anxious to make the most of local fibres, led to the invention of mechanical flax spinning. In 1810, he proposed a competition for the invention of the best flax spinning machine. This proposal was made during the wars of the Empire in order to free himself from the continental blockade which hampered the supply of cotton. After a few months, Philippe de Girard patented the first flax spinning machine⁵.

The patent was taken to the English industries, which reigned supreme over the industry until 1834. There were only 8 spinning mills left in France, but thanks to Antoine Scrive-Labbe's espionage in England, the firm could be revived in Normandy⁶.

In 1841, there were 35 linen spinning mills in France. The Normandy companies were more developed because of their proximity to the raw material, which considerably reduced production costs, the local hydraulic network and relations with Great Britain for machines and technicians.

The profits accumulated during this period were reinvested in cotton production, and linen was gradually abandoned from 1860 onwards because of the cost of production. The spinning mill gradually recovered and in 1938 government laws and administrative orders for French flax enabled production to continue. The Second World War brought the industry to a halt, but in 1963 France was still a major linen producing country thanks to a general modernisation of production, and the country was the second largest producer in the world after the USSR.

Almost all the companies were located, as they are today, in the north of France, which employed 95% of the workforce and produced 95% of French linen yarns⁷.

Linen Industry in France

France is the world's leading producer of flax, and it is in the Normandy region that the majority of production is located, with the Seine-Maritime, Eure and Pas de Calais regions, respectively, as the home of flax farming. The Seine-Maritime alone represents 1/3 of the French flax sown area.

None of the companies involved in flax production in the area employs more than 250 people. More than 40% of these companies are recent and were created or restructured after the year 2000.

France produces 80% of the world's flax but, due to a lack of spinning mills, it has to send 90% of its production to China and India for processing. Approximately 95,846 tonnes of the national production of fibre flax are sent to China for processing into yarns and fabrics, then made up and exported from China, the world's

2 Eliso Kvavadzen Ofer Bar-Yoes and al., " 30,000-year-old wild flax fibers ", in Science, Vol. 325, September – October 2009, p. 1359.

3 Elsa Yvanez, De la fibre à l'étoffe : Archéologie, production et usages des textiles de Nubie et du Soudan anciens à l'époque méroïtique, thesis under the direction of Vincent Rondot et Thelma K. Thomas, supported in 2015, University Charles de Gaulles - Lille III, p.91-97.

4 Benjamin Guérard, " Explication du Capitulaire De Villis ". In: Mémoires de l'Institut national de France, Vol. 21, 1857. pp. 165-309.

5 Bruno CHANETZ, " Machine à filer le lin de Girard ", Encyclopædia Universalis [online] <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/machine-a-filer-le-lin-de-girard/>

6 Alain Gérard, Les grandes heures de Lille, 1991, Librairie Académie de Perrin, p. 326.

7 Jacques Malézieux, " Le lin en France ", in L'information géographique, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1963, pp. 47-59.



leading exporter of processed flax.

France is the world's leading exporter of unspun flax with 263 kt exported; 49% of French exports go to Belgium, which is the main market for unspun flax exported by France ahead of China (34%). It should be noted that a large proportion of the unspun flax exported to Belgium is then re-exported to China.

Scutched flax is destined for Chinese and European spinning mills. Combed flax is mainly sold to European spinning mills.

Linen history of Lithuania

From the oldest times in Lithuania flax was cultivated and processed. As it is known from findings of linen fabric remnants in barrows already in the first ages of Common Era flax fibre was widely used. The plant's life motif was popular in Lithuanian folklore as the „lino mūka“ (flax suffering) tale, also in songs, and there was even a god dedicated to flax in Baltic culture (Vaižgantas).

First buildings for linen processing called stackyards-bathhouses were built in 1890. There linen was broken and retted and the stock was driven to Latvia, Rīga and Daugavpils for spinning.

Flax cultivation was a communal process in which the work was shared. Men were responsible for breaking the flax stalks, while women were responsible for sweeping the stalks and combing the strands. Linen was very important in the girls' lives and accompanied their preparation for womanhood. Lithuanians could hardly imagine courtships, marriages, baptisms or other family celebrations without linen. Linen towels decorated Lithuanian purchases and were given as gifts on important occasions. Linen accompanied Lithuanians not only on happy occasions - funerals were also indispensable without him.

Linen industry in Lithuania

In Lithuania, fibrous flax is a traditional plant, cultivated even 4000 years ago. The largest cultivated area was 96,300 hectares (1940). Before World War II, Lithuania received an average of 38.5 million litas each year for flax raw materials exported abroad. In terms of flax exports, Lithuania ranked third in the world (after Russia and Poland). After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, the flax area decreased significantly. At the end of the 20th century, the Lithuanian textile industry imported 2/3 of the required flax fibre. the last fibre flax farms in Lithuania were closed 20 years ago⁸.

21st century they are sown even less. In 2005, 3,700 ha of fibre and about 600 ha of seeded flax were cultivated, in 2010 - only up to 100 ha of fiber and about 400 ha of seeded lines, in 2019 - about 400 ha of seeded flax⁹

Although the soil of Lithuania is extremely suitable for growing flax, unfortunately, not much of it is currently grown here. However, linen is still important in Lithuanian life, and its revival has recently been observed. Linen products are becoming popular again - from towels or napkins to dresses and shirts. They are associated with naturalness and high quality.

Founded in 1928, the joint-stock company “Siūlas” is the oldest flax mill in Lithuania. Located in the far north of Lithuania, in the suburb of Astravas, outside Biržai, employes 400 people. “Siūlas”, which means a yarn, has 65 customer countries and is member of the European Flax and Hemp Confederation (CELC).

8 Silvija Juozelskytė-Vaičiulienė, 1st textile residency Back to Linen, catalogue edited by editor Virginija Dičiūtė, 2021, p. 3.

9 Petrulis Juvencijus, “Linai”, in [online] Visuotinė Lietuvos enciklopedija <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/linai/>



Silvija Juozelskytė –Vaičiulienė - linen master designer

Born in 1977 in Vilnius (Lithuania), Silvija Juozelskytė –Vaičiulienė is a professional textile artist, designer, art therapist and exhibition curator. She graduated from Vilnius Art Academy in Master's textile studies in 2005-2006 after an Erasmus exchange programme in textile design at National College of Art and Design. In 2016 she graduated in art therapy at Vilnius Art Academy.

She is, among other things, chairperson of the textile artists' section in Lithuanian Artists' Association board, and was granted art creator by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture in 2016.

Her textile interest began in her childhood during holidays at her grandmother's villager. At this time she learned how to card wool, spin, weave and dye threads. Silvija Juozelskytė –Vaičiulienė now lives in the house where her grandmother used to live, near an ancient flax factory.

Lithuania has a strong flax heritage (for instance Vaižgantas was the Lithuanian god of linen and hemp, sutartinės songs have many linen occurrences, swaddling blanket as dowry and shroud were made from linen, and some Lithuanian first names and regional names refer to flax, ...) and has always been famous for high quality of linen products. The last Lithuanian flax factory closed twenty years ago. This is for these many reasons that she began to work with flax.

She is actively exhibited in Lithuania and abroad (Hungary, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Iceland, Poland, France, Sardinia, and will be in Switzerland and in Japan in the next two years) for her flax art and design works. In 2018 and 2020 she participated at art residencies in Iceland and Sardinia for several months and since then wants to organize one in Lithuania.

“ Back to linen ” residency was born from Silvija's initiative and from the wish to revive and continue the tradition of natural flax production in Lithuania in order to implant it in contemporary textile creations. This textile art residency took place in Guntauninkai village (northeastern Lithuania) in 2021, with separated spaces : one for art and weaving and the other for dyeing fabrics and threads. The residency hosted six Lithuanian artists and was a time for manual creation, artistic exchanges, cultural and technical mediation with the public, and its restitution was made at the Mielagenai hospital and in Utena's POKŠT gallery. This residency will have a second part in 2023.



Manually woven linen towel (68x120 cm) and linen samples for interior (24x29 cm), manually spined linen thread, 2021 © Silvija Juozelskytė

Little bird nests 3 pcs., manually spined linen yarn balls, 2021 © Silvija Juozelskytė

