

SILK, MOHAIR, CASHMERE AND OTHER LUXURY FIBRES

EDITED BY ROBERT R FRANCK



The Textile Institute



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Silk, mohair, cashmere and other luxury fibres

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Preface

When The Textile Institute and Woodhead Publishing Limited decided to produce a book on luxury textile fibres, we immediately came across the problem of which fibres to include. What makes a fibre luxurious – its softness, its rarity and therefore its price, its ‘image’ (no doubt a consequence of the previous two factors)? If this is so, then why did we not include Sea Island cotton and flax? There was no good reason on the basis of image or for the other reasons mentioned. It really came down to the fact that, in the series of books on various textile fibres of which the present one forms a part, cotton and the other vegetable fibres will each have their own coverage, and we believe that it would be more appropriate to include Sea Island cotton and flax in these.

None of the fibres covered in this book are produced in large quantities. Even silk, with an annual production of approximately 70 000 tonnes, is not a major fibre. The total annual production of all the luxury fibres discussed in this book, of the order of 100 000 tonnes, is negligible in comparison with the world’s total textile fibre production of 50 000 000 tonnes. Their production and harvesting are difficult and labour intensive, they often come from remote areas of the world where access and transport are difficult, and their prices are high to very high. Nonetheless, their fineness, softness, warmth and pleasurable handle have secured them a firm place in the niche areas of luxury apparel and furnishing fabrics. Were these fibres to disappear, many thousands of people in developing countries would suffer from a loss of an income which, if small by developed country standards, contributes in an appreciable way to their financial security.

As the quantities produced are so limited, the prices of all these luxury fibres can be subject to wide fluctuations. A sudden drop in demand from a major market or a diminution in production for one reason or another can lead to prices increasing or decreasing by 50 % or more in a period of a few weeks. It is striking that certain general basic marketing concepts emerge, and when these are ignored problems arise.

One of these basic concepts is to match, as far as is possible, supply and demand. Concerning demand, basic statistical techniques exist which

permit the forecasting of demand over a period of two to three years with considerable accuracy and these are used by the synthetic fibre industry and their raw material suppliers as a matter of routine, so why not for silk and luxury hair fibres. Regarding supply, the problem is more difficult because in the case of silk and luxury hair fibres this depends on the number of animals in existence and this cannot be rapidly increased or decreased. However the knowledge of future demand would enable the trade associations concerned to pass on this information to producers who would then, over time, be able to adjust their own activities to suit their individual interests. At the moment all, in this respect, are operating in the dark!

Being expensive, the fibres necessarily have a market which is limited to wealthy consumers who buy luxury goods not only for their intrinsic qualities of appearance, softness, warmth, handle and comfort but also simply because they *are* rare and expensive. It is the sum of such objective and perceived qualities which creates the image of the clothing and furnishing fabrics made from luxury fibres and which persuades the consumer to spend considerable sums of money in their purchase. In this respect, a cashmere garment is the textile equivalent of a Rolls Royce, a diamond necklace or a holiday home in the Caribbean! However, such status carries an inherent risk for goods of this kind because if, for any reason, their image is lowered, perhaps because of a genuine decrease in quality or of over-supply causing a drop in price, their attraction for wealthy consumers will fall and they will spend their disposable dollars elsewhere.

Should the damage to the product's image be serious it may have difficulty in recovering its market, and two examples of events which have damaged a fibre's image are included in the book. Although difficult to prove direct cause and effect, these two cases (sand washed silk and poor quality cashmere knitwear) probably led to a decrease in consumer acceptance for a few years. In both cases, the poor quality of the product led to its own demise and luckily, the damage done to the reputation of the fibres concerned was not permanent.

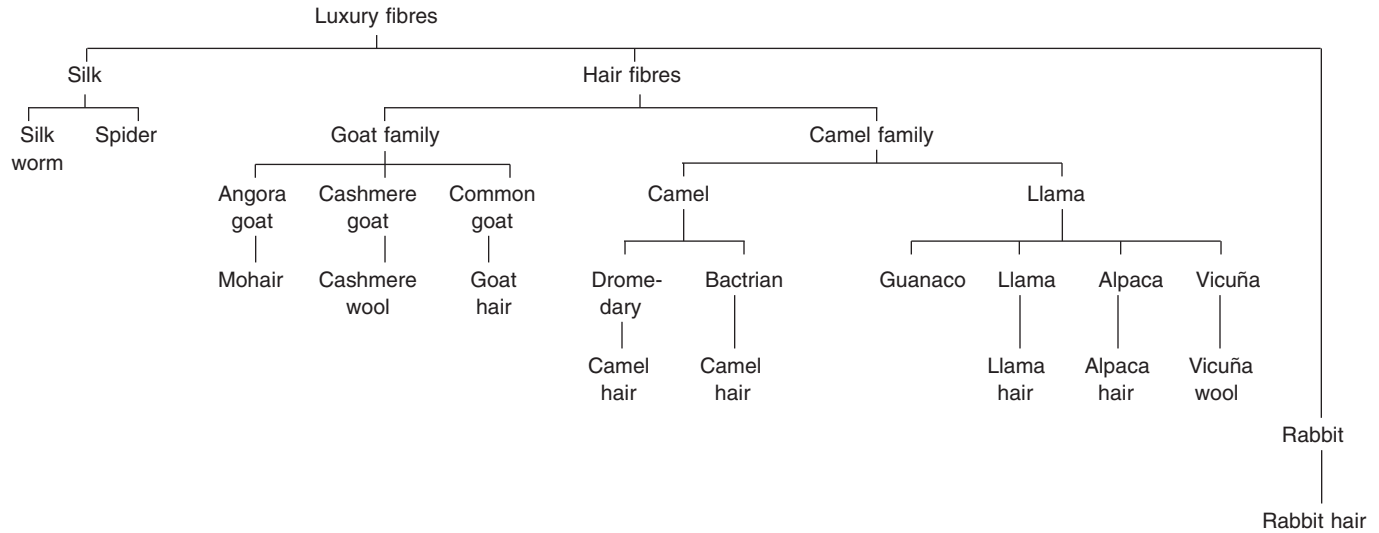
Whilst it is very difficult for Trade Associations and others concerned to prevent all such occurrences, remedial and preventative measures are possible, from regulatory action to more effective marketing and promotion. However, these require unity of purpose, adequate marketing budgets, and the co-operation of all concerned. These are not always forthcoming.

Finally, although spider silk is not a luxury fibre in our general sense of the term, we have included it in this book because very little has been published about it. We do believe that the subject will be of sufficient interest to textile professionals to warrant its inclusion and so provide a wider circulation of information concerning this recent development in textiles.

Bob Franck

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Animal and insect producers of luxury fibres (after W Von Bergen).