

RIBBON MANUFACTURING AT ST. ETIENNE.

THE ribbon industry of France is in a flourishing condition, and it may be said that it has never enjoyed such activity as was witnessed during the four years preceding 1890, when the production exceeded in a notable manner the figures attained hitherto, even in the most brilliant years. However, it cannot be said that the benefits realized were in proportion to the amount and importance of business done, because the ribbon industry, engaged essentially in the foreign trade, was obliged to sell its product at very reduced prices in order to compete with foreign production. The happy situation was destined to come shortly to a close, as a complete change came over the transactions of this industry owing to fluctuations in fashion.

Fashions have always had a preponderating influence on the production of St. Etienne. The development of the general comfort and of the national prosperity permits the masses of France to use articles which hitherto were considered as luxuries reserved to the well-to-do classes alone.

COTTON IN VELVET.

It was in 1860 that cotton entered into the texture of velvet ribbons and a thousand other articles of the ribbon industry, which permitted a considerable development of its exportation. This development would have been much more important if, by the treaties, exaggerated duties had not been maintained on cotton and silk threads. The treaties of 1860 were made on the eve of the war of the Rebellion in the United States. That country, which used to place at St. Etienne orders amounting to 30,000,000 fr. yearly, discontinued all at once its orders.

The exportations from St. Etienne were stopped for two or three years to the United States on account of the duty there. England, by the treaty of 1860, suppressed the duty of 15 per cent. on silks and ribbons, and thus a market was found which compensated in a great part for the decrease in American orders.

It is difficult to give a correct estimate of the development of the export trade in St. Etienne tissues, for, by reason of a strange error of the Custom house, the statistics concerning their exportation before that date are absolutely erroneous. A comparison of the French exports in 1860 and 1866 shows, however, that the treaties of 1860 had a real influence on the production of ribbons. In the former years France exported to England silk and velvet ribbons, silk braids and, mixed braids, to the value of 43,450,100 fr.; in the latter year 70,402,309 fr.

The manufactures of St. Etienne are exported over the entire world. The exportation is effected by French and foreign commission houses established in this place, and by the manufacturers directly, as well as indirectly by Paris firms. Until late years the exportation was chiefly in the hands of commission houses, but within the last few years the course of business has been modified, thanks to the increased facilities of communication. There still exist at St. Etienne numerous commission merchants, French and foreign, but their importance has diminished, as well as the amount of business transacted by them.

HOW MUCH BUSINESS IS DONE.

A great deal of business is also done through the medium of Parisian commission houses and houses dealing in articles of fashion. To-day manufacturers go themselves abroad, organise agencies, and treat directly with their foreign customers. Many foreign buyers, instead of coming directly to St. Etienne, stop at Paris, where they find a general assortment of all the various

articles of fashion they may need, and may make their choice as to quantity not less than quality. When they address themselves to St. Etienne directly, they are obliged to give orders of a certain importance, and to grant a delay of from two to three months to fill their orders. Some St. Etienne firms have begun, however, to manufacture beforehand, so as to have a stock of goods ready for buyers.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the proportion of goods exported from St. Etienne to that of goods manufactured, because of the indirect exportation effected by the Paris houses. However, it may be confidently asserted that 75 per cent. of the goods manufactured find their way abroad, while the remainder, or 25 per cent., are destined for home consumption. The exportation from St. Etienne direct represents about 50 per cent. The houses of the latter place have to-day travelers among all the nations of Europe, and even in America, thus finding the means of exporting to a considerable amount articles destined to serve the fashions of the day.

The value of the silk used by the manufacturers during the year 1889 may be estimated at 61,000,000 francs; cotton and indiarubber, 5,000,000 francs; total, 66,000,000 francs. Considering the present prices of silk and cotton, the cost of the raw material may be estimated as constituting 64 per cent. of the cost of production of the ribbons. From this it results that the entire value of the ribbons produced during the year 1889 amounts to about 103,000,000 francs. The principal material employed in the manufacture of ribbons at St. Etienne is silk, cotton and indiarubber entering into it, but in feeble proportions.

THE SILK USED.

The silk is almost entirely of foreign production, as statistics show that within the last 29 years only 10 per cent. of home-raised silk has been used, and the average has even fallen to 6 per cent. within the last ten years. The great perfection to which China and Japan have brought silk cultivation, and the low prices of the silk, account for this increase in the consumption of the foreign products to the detriment of the home article, the role of which may be said to be almost effaced. The Chamber of Commerce thinks that to interfere with the present rates of import duties on foreign silks would be productive of the gravest results.

The slightest increase of these duties would cause a displacement of the silk market from Lyons to London and Milan, and probably also benefit some German town. The St. Etienne manufacturer, obliged to compete in other countries with foreign manufacturers, has been forced to be satisfied with so small a profit that the slightest additional duty on silk would make such competition impossible.

Concerning the organization of the ribbon industry of St. Etienne, it may be said that it employs 21,000 looms, of which 17,000 are the property of the workmen, on which they work at their own homes, surrounded by their families, and transmitting to their children the technical and artistic qualities acquired by themselves.

The 17,000 looms represent a capital of from 25,000,000 to 28,000,000 francs. The number of men and women employed on these 17,000 looms exceeds 63,000. At the side of the weaver there is a complete organization of artisans, without which the ribbon industry could not exist, such as dyers, silk dressers of various kinds, manufacturers of looms, etc.—Textile Mercury.