



silk

The aristocrat of fibers makes every man a king, every woman a queen

From the Silk Road to the racetrack, an air of mystery clings to this regal fiber, said to have been discovered by a Chinese empress when she accidentally dropped some silk cocoons into her tea. In China, silk was as valuable as gold, and bolts of silk were exchanged as gifts and used to pay taxes. As an exotic import, Chinese silk was so expensive in the West that it was reserved for royalty and people of substantial means.

Eddie Arcaro, the first American jockey to ride Five Kentucky Derby winners and two U.S. Triple Crown champions and who presumably knew a thing or two about the glory of wearing silk to work, quipped that "once a guy starts wearing silk pajamas, it's hard to get up early."

Any fabric that has the power to transform someone into either a ruler or a slacker deserves our respect.

What is silk?

It takes about 1,000 silkworms eating 48 pounds of mulberry leaves to produce enough silk fiber for one silk shirt. Since the silkworm, which isn't a worm at all but a caterpillar of the *Bombyx mori* moth, lives only about a month, it can be said to give its life for silk. Each worm eats as many mulberry leaves as it can in its short life, bulking up to 10,000 times its hatched weight before it sets to work spinning its cocoon, from which it intends to emerge as a moth.

Instead, its cocoon gets harvested and unwound, yielding a fiber as strong as steel, as supple as a hair, ready to accept bright dye, and more comfortable to wear than any other. Most silk comes from domesticated silkworms that have been selected for their extraordinary ability to produce long, strong threads.

The price of silk reflects the fact that it takes approximately 5,500 silkworms to produce a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of raw silk. Because most silk is produced from domesticated moths, fabrics from silk derived from wild silkworms are usually clearly identified on a garment's label. The price of garments from the cocoons of wild silkworms is usually high, reflecting the rarity of silk processed from wild species.

Signs of quality: The reel deal

Reeled silk, in which the cocoons have been unrolled, consists of fibers more than a mile long. The filament from as many as 10 cocoons are reeled together to give one long, strong strand. It's that smooth, uninterrupted thread that gives silk its strength and makes it so comfortable to wear.

But not all silk is created equal. Cheaper silks can be manufactured from cocoons that have been damaged by emerging silk moths, which have to dissolve sections of the cocoon to emerge because they have no teeth. The filaments from broken cocoons can be spun into thread, sometimes using a synthetic binding thread, as are the silk fibers shed during the spinning process.

When silk suits

Fabrics that result from reeled silk of cultivated *Bombyx mori* have a natural luster, drape, and durability suitable for everything from neckwear to shirts and suits. In combination with other fibers, silk offers comfort with wrinkle-resistance and long wear. Most terms for silk fabrics define both the weight of the fabric and the origins of the silk.

Cultivated silk from China, Japan, Thailand, India, and South America is used for everything from undergarments to outerwear.

Chiffon, today used primarily for scarves and sheer blouses, is a very light, almost transparent fabric. Delicate charmeuse, used for underwear and blouses, is a lightweight fabric that drapes well and has a semi-lustrous surface on one side and a dull finish on the other. Habutai, or China silk, means "soft as down" in Japanese and identifies a fabric that is soft, lightweight, lustrous, and has a smooth surface. Dupioni describes a shimmering, moderately crisp fabric made from "double" silk threads drawn from double cocoons spun side-by-side, sometimes of two slightly different colors.

For suits and jackets, designers favor heavier silk fabrics and silk blended with other fibers, such as wool. Silk shantung, once woven of wild silk from Shantung, China, now identifies a fabric popular for summer dresses and suits. Organdy and organza are stiff, plain-weave silk fabrics used to stiffen constructed garments because they retain their crispness through repeated washings. Tussah, made from wild silk, is usually more uneven, coarser, and stronger than cultivated silk; comes in a variety of naturally off-white to brown shades; and is usually blended with other fibers to increase the natural filament lengths. Silk noil—an uneven, nubby fabric—is a byproduct of spun silk. Because the fibers aren't suitable for even, lustrous yarns, they are spun, sometimes with other fibers, to produce novelty yarns.

Silk care

Avoid spot cleaning silk with water. Applying water causes a ring to form when it comes in contact with sericin, a gummy substance occurring naturally in silk.

For best results, follow the manufacturer's care label sewn into each garment. Manufacturers usually recommend dry cleaning silk garments. But don't overdo it; harsh chemicals can damage the natural silk fibers and reduce garment life.