

Economies of Color: Dye Commerce & Tuscany's Global Textile Industries

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Abstract:

My dissertation research explores the relationship between Italian textile firms and the global commerce in dyes in the pivotal centuries before and after the influx of New World dyes into Europe (ca. 1380-1600). Using the account books of dye and textile firms in Tuscan archives, as well as commercial records in Genoese and Spanish archives, I will reconstruct the changing global flow of dye commodities to one of Europe's key textile centers: Florence. My dissertation collects the data on prices, profits, volumes, tariffs, wages, cargoes, creditors, suppliers, and provenance in these archival sources into a personal database. This will allow me to quickly digest and cross-analyze these factors, revealing otherwise obscured trends in dye commodity markets. My objective in doing so is to understand how Italian textile firms participated in and responded to shifts in dye commerce, including changing supply networks from Eastern to Atlantic to New World dyes. Dyes were the most expensive and (after silk or wool itself) the most critical inputs in all pre-industrial textile production before the advent of synthetic dyes in the 19th century. Thus, changes in global commerce in color would have had a significant impact on the quality, cost-efficiency, and competitiveness of Italian textiles. I am interested in exploring the dye trade's significance in the massive changes taking place in Italian textile industries in the 15th and 16th centuries: their 15th-century reorientation to Levantine markets, the rise of Italian silk industries, and the ultimate decline of the once-prolific Florentine woolen manufacture altogether by the end of the 16th century.

Colorants were also the most inherently international input of textile businesses, with a supply chain extending from the shores of the Mediterranean to South Asia and (after the 1520s) to the Americas. Thus, dyes are some of the best gauges of pre-modern global textile exchange. My talk at the *De-Centering the Global Middle Ages* symposium at the University of Michigan (Feb. 8-9, 2019) will discuss the global nature of the commerce in color and my findings so far. In particular, I will discuss 14th-16th century dye accounts that I have examined in Harvard Business School's "Medici Collection" of manuscripts, in Pisa's *Archivio Salviati*, and in various Florentine archives. These accounts bring together local and global economy, detailing the everyday business and labor of textile dyeing in Florence, as well as the purchase of dyestuffs from a global supply network.

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