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# Resurrecting a Nation Through Silk and Diplomacy: American Material Culture and Foreign Relations During the Reconstruction Era

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RESURRECTING A NATION THROUGH SILK AND DIPLOMACY: AMERICAN  
MATERIAL CULTURE AND FOREIGN RELATIONS DURING THE  
RECONSTRUCTION ERA

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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## DEDICATION

To my mother, who is my rock, and my father, who instilled in me a love of the past. Both have and always will be my greatest supporters, through all the highs and lows.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, whose constant encouragement and unwavering support have allowed me to follow my dreams. Thank you both for always listening, imparting words of wisdom, sharing lots of laughs, and having confidence in me. Also, thank you for reading all of my drafts and sharing in my enthusiasm for history.

Additionally, I thank Dr. Allison Marsh, who enthusiastically helped advise me in my work and find inspiration in material culture. Thank you to Dr. Mark Smith as well, who encouraged me to pursue diplomatic history. More generally, thank you to all faculty and colleagues in the History Department at the University of South Carolina who have helped me refine my research and grow as a historian.

## ABSTRACT

The Reconstruction Era, a time of immense change in American culture and society, is often conceptualized as a wholly domestic affair; however, a closer analysis of the work of American diplomats scattered throughout the world reveals the impact of foreign policies and relationships on the development of the nation state, as well as cultural values. With this broadened perspective, Reconstruction becomes a more complicated period of entangled international concerns and influences in a globally connected world.

This thesis argues that intricate international relations and complex foreign policies helped shape American identity and values at home. Diplomats abroad in countries such as Japan, Italy, and Switzerland became extensively involved with silk, a commodity of particular significance in global commerce. Correspondence between diplomats stationed abroad and the Department of State is juxtaposed with material culture to serve as the main complimentary primary sources for this study. Objects such as silk dresses, vests and jackets, parasols, folding fans, and quilts, are examined in order to underscore some of the major themes of Reconstruction. Such matters include the rise of the nation state, industrialization, and the democratization of luxury goods that were once exclusive to the upper class. Therefore, the effects of foreign affairs on American material culture are reconsidered as quintessential to the advancement of the burgeoning nation state at home. This thesis ultimately contends that in order to highlight and fully understand the complexities of Reconstruction, it is essential to contextualize progress at

home with the intricacies of diplomacy and gauge the formation of national identity through material culture.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, silk has largely been considered a luxury item, a textile that was flaunted by the upper classes and well-to-do members of society. During the Reconstruction Era, its production and trade throughout the world had significant political and economic repercussions that caused American diplomats to take notice.<sup>1</sup> Regardless if the crises involving silk that diplomats feared actually came to fruition, their perceptions of international events and ordeals had an impact on material culture at home. Diplomats were aware of how instrumental even a single commodity such as silk could be to preserving peace among different countries, but also to advancing American interests. An analysis of both diplomatic correspondence and material culture reveals significant insight into how silk was considered and used during Reconstruction. It also reveals how silk impacted American society and economics in addition to helping propel the country into becoming a global power.

The production of silk begins with the cultivation of silkworms on the leaves of mulberry trees, which is their source of sustenance. Silkworms are very sensitive to their climate, which can dramatically affect their growth, and they require multiple daily

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<sup>1</sup> The diplomatic correspondence analyzed in this thesis come from the Foreign Relations of the United States series, which is published by the Office of the Historian in the United States Department of State. The written communications consist of letters from American diplomats stationed in foreign countries providing reports to the Secretary of State, as well as dispatches from the State Department to these same diplomats.

feedings. After the silkworms have matured, they spin cocoons made of a single fibroin filament and a sericin gum that holds it together. After cocoons are harvested, they are placed in hot boiling water in order to remove the sericin and free the fibroin filament. Individual filaments are felled and combined together to form raw silk thread. It takes about ten filaments to make a single thread, and approximately three thousand cocoons are required to produce a pound of silk. Thus, due to the volatility of raising silkworms and the complex, tedious manufacture of silk thread, coupled with the sensual luxury of the material, for much of history it has been associated with wealth and high status.

Silk has a long and global history, first cultivated in ancient China, where the material was so highly valued that it was reserved exclusively for royalty. The luxury of silk was kept from the rest of the world for thousands of years until it eventually spread to other Asian countries, and from there on to Europe. The English, hoping to rival other European competitors in the production of silk, looked across the Atlantic for a better climate to raise silkworms. Thus, Americans have been cultivating silk in various areas along the east coast since the English first colonized the continent, becoming an especially successful and booming business in New England. By the mid-1840s, however, blight and economic downturn facilitated the end of substantial silk production in the United States. The actual farming of silkworms in the United States after this time became rare, and those who raised domestic silkworms were faced with mounting competition from foreign competitors. Some American textile mills and garment factories remained open, however, and worked with imported silk. Throughout the Reconstruction Era, the importation of foreign silk significantly expanded, despite several different

international crises involving the material, and thus American production of finished silk goods likewise grew to meet the demand of a fashionable and evolving culture.

The Reconstruction Era in the United States, which spanned from 1865 to 1877, is a period of singular importance in American history as a time in which the newly unified nation began to rebuild itself after the Civil War, attempting to assimilate millions of freed slaves into society and come to grips with national identity. However, the United States was not the only country to undergo substantial cultural, social, political, and economic changes during this time. Countries around the world, specifically Japan, Italy, and Switzerland, were experiencing their own internal developments, transformations, and crises, which significantly impacted the fate of the United States as a developing nation and dramatically influenced the international silk trade.

Japan, for instance, had only recently begun to engage in international trade when the Reconstruction Era commenced. After Commodore Matthew Perry negotiated the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854, which opened Japanese ports to Western nations, conflict arose in the country among competing factions as the once isolated society became exposed to foreign ideas and commerce. By 1868, revolution resulted in the overthrow of the old government, which was replaced by an emperor and an oligarchy comprised of samurai. The new Japanese government of the Meiji Period strove to achieve equality with the West, and as a result, they adopted various aspects of Western industrialization, trade, economics, and political systems over time.

Unlike the Japanese, who were integrating foreign influences into their society, Italians were engaged in a passionate movement to unify the peninsula. Nationalist sentiments had slowly been growing in Italy for years, but revolutions in 1848 sparked

widespread support for Italian unity. The Kingdom of Italy was officially declared in 1861, with the incorporation of Venetia following in 1866 and finally Rome in 1870. After the Italian capital was officially moved from Florence to Rome in 1871, the government set out to expand its military, direct the economy, and promote nationalism.

Meanwhile, Switzerland experienced internal revolutions earlier in the nineteenth century, allowing liberals to establish a new federal constitution in 1848, and the country enjoyed relative political stability and peace throughout the rest of the century. The country expanded economically and began to industrialize in the decades to follow, although the economic depression of the 1870s notably diminished the country's prominent textile industry. Switzerland maintained generally smooth foreign relations in the 1860s and 1870s, but the country struggled with domestic conflicts, exemplified through labor unrest and demands for a more democratic government.

The period that coincides with the Reconstruction Era in the United States was a time of great change around the world. While this time characterizes issues and themes that are unique to American development, it also frames how other countries, such as Japan, Italy, and Switzerland, were experiencing their own challenges as emerging nation states grappling with cultural identity.

Silk, when spun into a fine fabric, can be conceptualized and studied as material culture. Juxtaposed with correspondence from American diplomats abroad, important insight is gained about how a single material helped shape international relations and influenced society at home. Americans made many different things with imported raw silk for a variety of purposes, but its transition from use in high-end fashion to

widespread availability is particularly notable for what it reveals about the values and culture of society during the Reconstruction Era.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A SERIOUS THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: THE IMPENDING JAPANESE SILK MONOPOLY

Before the Civil War had even officially concluded, diplomats abroad were engaged in a potentially catastrophic international affair that threatened to involve some of the most powerful countries in the world. The issue at hand involved silk.

Robert H. Pruyn, who served as the Minister Resident of Japan from 1862 until 1865 at the personal request of William Henry Seward, the Secretary of State, alerted the State Department of a brewing crisis in which silk and its economic value were the main concerns.<sup>2</sup> Pruyn accepted the diplomatic post during a time in which the nation had lost much prestige amongst other countries as a result of the war and when the Japanese were especially hostile toward foreign meddling. Seward stressed not only the difficulty, but also the immense importance of his duty, writing to Pruyn that he could not “too earnestly enjoin upon you the duty of cultivating the best possible understanding with those [Japanese] representatives, and of doing all in your power to maintain harmony of views and policy between them and yourself.” This was due to the fact that “very large interests, not of our own country only, but of the civilized world, are involved in retaining the foothold of foreign nations already acquired in the empire of Japan.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Pruyn

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<sup>2</sup> Payson Jackson Treat, *The Early Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and Japan, 1853-1865* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1917): 194.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Seward to Robert H. Pruyn, December 19, 1861, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Seventh Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1862/d658>.

was tasked with the challenge of fostering hospitable relations with Japan for the future sake of the United States, directly establishing friendliness between the American and Japanese governments and monitoring the activity of other countries in Japan as well. Such instructions not only reveal that the federal government was expanding its power and reach, and in this case insisting on a stronger American position in matters of foreign policy, but they also point to the emergence of the United States as a nation state with particular interest at stake in international affairs. Pruyn enjoyed a relatively successful career as a diplomat in Japan, however, in the spring of 1865 he became alarmed over an alleged attempt by the Japanese government to create a monopoly on silk.<sup>4</sup>

Pruyn extensively reported on the brewing controversy over such a silk monopoly, which threatened economic networks, political treaties, and stable international relations, although he did admit that he exerted a degree of caution. This was due to extenuating circumstances, such as delayed letters from his colleagues in Japan, as well as his perception of how important this situation could prove to be. The Japanese government was accused of forming a project for “the consignment of large quantities of silk and ova to one market in Europe for the purchase of vessels, arms, ammunition, &c.”<sup>5</sup> The United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France were the parties most interested and alarmed by rumors of such regulation of silk. The Japanese, after being confronted with such an accusation by diplomatic representatives

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the diplomatic career of Pruyn, see Edwin B. Lee, “Robert H. Pruyn in Japan, 1862–1865,” *New York History* 66, no. 2 (April 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Enclosure No. 2, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Ninth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1865p3/d244>.

from Great Britain and the Netherlands on March 6, 1865, did not deny the existence of such an endeavor, but they did insist that they were “perfectly at liberty” to engage in contracts of this nature with foreign nations. They further argued that they had the right to pay for these contracts with the “surplus of produce not required for home consumption.”<sup>6</sup> The Dutch in particular, however, pointed out that in accordance with both custom and current treaties, payment had to be made in currency, not goods, in this case, silk. Diplomats in Japan had heard increased rumors that alluded to “the idea virtually of a monopoly which Japan was going to establish in favor of one market.” This matter was of such “vital importance” for the concerned countries that if the Japanese government could not guarantee that such claims were untrue and that silk would flow freely in the international market, “they had no alternative but to refer the matter to their respective governments as inconsistent with the rights acquired by their subjects under treaties.”<sup>7</sup>

Japan had a long and rich history in the production of fine silks, and the quality, desirability, and productiveness of the Japanese silk industry helped propel the country into the modern world. After the Japanese were forced to establish trade and diplomatic relations with the United States following Commodore Matthew Perry’s expeditions in the 1850s, the country gradually began to enter the international trade market and establish relationships with the West. Silk arguably became one of the country’s most valuable export commodities. The raw material passed through the city of Yokohama and was then disseminated throughout the world, consistently surpassing the revenue value in

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<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Enclosure No. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Enclosure No. 2.

comparison to that of all other commodities.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, rumors that indicated “the existence of an extensive design for the purchase of the raw silk and silk-worms’ eggs of Japan, and despatching [sic] these to one particular market, to lay down funds required for the completion of contracts entered into on behalf of the Japanese government in that country” were met with alarm.<sup>9</sup>

The diplomatic representatives of Great Britain and the Netherlands co-signed a memorandum that expressed rebuke over the rumored Japanese government’s plans to obstruct the silk trade, and they warned that there would be serious consequences if such schemes proved to be true. They expressed fear that native merchants would be prohibited from bringing their silk to Yokohama until they had first sold a quota dictated by the government at a lower price. The effect would be “to create a total or partial monopoly in favor of the country to which the silk is destined.” Consequently, the fallout would hurt both native and foreign merchants in Japan because there would no longer exist a “free market for the purchase of silk to which the Japanese traders are permitted to bring produce, on payment of the customary and regular transit dues,” and the price of silk would become greatly increased. The British and Dutch diplomats threatened “the weightiest form of remonstrance” if the fate of Japanese silk was so corrupted.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, Great Britain and the Netherlands believed that they could handle the problem themselves, however, after the Gorogio, part of the Japanese government, unexpectedly declared that they had the right to buy silks for sale abroad, after the two

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<sup>8</sup> Genevieve Chin and Sindhu Mommaneni, “The Silk Industry In Japan In The 1800s,” The Northampton Silk Project, Smith College Museum of Art, August 26, 2002. <https://www.smith.edu/hsc/silk/papers/chin.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Enclosure No. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Enclosure No. 3.

countries had already presented their memorandum protesting this very matter, they sought the aid and cooperation of their fellow diplomats. Prior to British and Dutch confrontation of the Gorogio, the diplomatic representative of France thought that such action was unnecessary, and after they proceeded despite his decline to sanction their actions, he then condemned their apparent defiance and refused to sanction the memorandum. Pruyn, however, expressed a willingness to join in a new memorandum with some modifications to the one that had previously been presented. The minister of France, upon receiving a copy of this revised memorandum and apparently after realizing the weight of this potential silk crisis, advised that the four concerned countries should act in unison.

Pruyn unabashedly admitted in his correspondence with the State Department that he played a significant role in facilitating this reconciliation. He wrote that his “representations and mediation have tended greatly to moderate the reply of the French minister and to soften the asperity of feeling which at one time appeared to threaten an interruption of our harmonious action.”<sup>11</sup> The issue of the Japanese government creating a silk monopoly was so alarming that Pruyn viewed his part in helping to rectify collaborative international action as worthy of boasting to his superiors. Pruyn agreed that silk was too important a commodity to allow such unfavorable action on the part of the Japanese government to dictate its future. His main objection, he claimed, was extended to “the principle” of the ordeal, and he advocated that “any violation of it should meet with immediate and strong remonstrance.”<sup>12</sup> The interest and distress over

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<sup>11</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Main Letter.

<sup>12</sup> Robert H. Pruyn to William H. Seward, March 16, 1865, Enclosure No. 4.

silk, and how Japanese interference in its trade might impact global economies and political relationships, was clearly a major concern for Pruyn and the American government that he represented, as well as other world powers.

While Pruyn and other diplomats may have been worried over how such interference in the silk trade could negatively impact global trade, other members of the United States diplomatic core expressed particular anxiety over how such actions on the part of the Japanese government would hurt American merchants and businessmen who dealt in silk. The United States Consul, George S. Fisher, wrote to the Chargé d’Affaires ad interim in Yedo, A. L. C. Portman, on August 14, 1865. He claimed that “serious complaints” were being made by numerous American silk companies and merchants related to “direct and indirect interference in their trade... in regard to their freely buying silk-worm eggs and cocoons from the Japanese merchants who have them to sell.” Because rumors persisted that such impediments to free business were resulting from orders given by the Gorogio, Fisher urged Portman to investigate the situation further. He was instructed to determine whether or not it was indeed true that the Japanese were puppeteering such violation of treaties and by doing so, “thus embarrass and restrict the lawful rights of our merchants, trade, and commerce at this port.”<sup>13</sup> Portman proceeded to write to the Gorogio the following day, making sure that American complaints and frustrations over the Japanese meddling in the purchase of silk-worm eggs and cocoons were acknowledged. Finally, on September 7, 1865, a representative from the Gorogio,

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<sup>13</sup> George S. Fisher to A. L. C. Portman, August 14, 1865, Enclosure No. 1, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Ninth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1865p3/d260>.

Midluno Idlumi No Kami, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, replied to Portman, stating that, “as it has been represented that foreigners meet with inconvenience in purchasing silkworm eggs from our merchants,” he “instructed the governor of Kanagawa to allow this article to be as freely sold as any other article of commerce.”<sup>14</sup> After this note and several additional interviews with members of the Japanese government, Portman wrote to Fisher that he had dealt with the silk issue thoroughly. “Presuming that all cause of complaint for the future has thus been removed,” he determined the next step was to “ascertain the losses sustained by our merchants from this alleged interference in the purchase of silk-worm eggs.” He proceeded to request the transmission of all bona fide claims so that “they may be presented to this government for examination without delay.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, on September 13, 1865, Portman was able to submit to Seward his summary of events regarding the silk ordeal in Japan and officially declare that “all restrictions have been removed.”<sup>16</sup>

Diplomatic activity in Japan in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War demonstrates the federal government’s desire to show citizens at home and the rest of the world that the domestic conflict had not destroyed its clout. By actively engaging in an

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<sup>14</sup> The Gorogio to A. L. C. Portman, September 7, 1865, Enclosure No. 4, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Ninth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1865p3/d260>.

<sup>15</sup> A. L. C. Portman to George S. Fisher, September 7, 1865, Enclosure No. 5, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Ninth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1865p3/d260>.

<sup>16</sup> A. L. C. Portman to William H. Seward, September 13, 1865, Main Letter, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Ninth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1865p3/d260>.

international ordeal that had the potential to evolve into a major crisis, Pruyn acted on behalf of a government eager to flex its power and expand its reach as a newly unified nation. Portman's intervention on behalf of all Americans who would be negatively impacted by potential Japanese intrusion reveals another emerging theme of the Reconstruction Era, that of the development of the nation state. Through his advocacy and protection of Americans involved in the Japanese silk trade, Portman expressed unease over common economic, political, and cultural concerns tied to silk and consciously shared among Americans.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CLOTHED IN SILK: HIGH-END AMERICAN FASHION

These potentially detrimental intrusions carried out by the Japanese government in the silk trade, as well as the American diplomatic response and correspondence concerning such incursions, had consequential impacts on the material culture of silk in the United States. Although when compared to other major producers of raw silk in the mid-nineteenth century, notably China and Italy, Japan may not have begun as one of the most influential players in the silk trade, the Japanese were aware of American demand for silk that was especially even and uniform in quality and course in size.<sup>17</sup> The consumption of fine silk goods, exemplified in the fashionable silk clothing of the well-to-do, illustrate how Americans who could afford to do so sought to flaunt their success and status through what they wore in the years after the Civil War.

The luxurious and soft touch of silk not only made it highly sought after and coveted by the more prosperous classes of society, but it also made it a desirable choice of fabric for women's dresses. Fashionable and formal lady's dresses during the late 1860s and 1870s were elaborate and required a substantial amount of material and adornments in order to stay up to date on the latest trends. This is evidenced throughout a popular publication of *Frank Leslie's Ladies' Magazine* in the latter half of 1865, the same time that the Japanese conspiracy to develop a monopoly on silk was being

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<sup>17</sup> Debin Ma, "The Modern Silk Road: The Global Raw-Silk Market, 1850-1930" *The Journal of Economic History* 56, no. 2 (June, 1996): 339-341.

disrupted. The magazine featured many different images of trendy clothes and popular styles, showcasing the most desirable dresses, skirts, jackets, sleeves, collars, caps and bonnets, accessories, and embellishments in women's fashion. Silk proliferated as an attractive and sumptuous material that was used to make various high-end clothes. One dress was described as being "of figured grenadine, scalloped around the bottom and bound with silk." The front had a breath of "three bands of violet silk above scallops" and "revers of violet silk turned back and also scalloped." The collar consisted of a "bertha of violet silk, pointed back and front and edged with pearl fringe," while the girdle too was made "of violet silk, with a bow without ends in front," and "two pointed basques at the back ended with pearl fringe" finished the description.<sup>18</sup> Such portrayals and imagery abounded throughout the magazine, captivating women with details of silk in a great variety of colors and used for many different parts of a fashionable outfit. American women greatly desired this silk in order to keep up with the latest trends, creating a high demand for the material. The magazine assured its readers that in Paris "striped silk grenadines are to be seen on all those who claim to be 'well dressed,'" while also commenting that "glacé silks are coming into fashion again," and that "light checked silks are preferred by those ladies whose luxury of dress consists in its freshness," upon which "rouleaux of plain silk" was added in addition to create an alternating pattern along the skirt.<sup>19</sup> *Peterson's Magazine*, another American publication specifically written for women, likewise prominently featured silk in its fashion section. Like so many other contemporary magazines, *Peterson's* featured images of the latest fashion trends that

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<sup>18</sup> *Frank Leslie's Ladies' Magazine* 17 (July 1865): 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Frank Leslie's Ladies' Magazine*, 14-15, 19.

described “rich silk,” “corded silk,” and colored silk spanning the spectrum of the rainbow. Silks with colored brocaded figures, some “shot with gold” were detailed as “very handsome and very expensive.”<sup>20</sup> The magazine also offered practical advice on how to treat wrinkled silk in order to make it “appear exactly as new,” which involved “spong[ing] it on the surface with a weak solution of gum-arabic or white glue, and iron[ing] it on the wrong side.”<sup>21</sup> Such detailed accounts of silk in fashion magazines throughout the United States reveal the high demand for this stylish material if women wanted to remain current with the latest modern fashion trends.

By looking at some of the actual silk dresses that survive from this time, greater insight is gained about how this material was used and what it reveals about American society during Reconstruction. After American diplomats recounted panic over what threatened to be a troublesome Japanese monopoly on silk, it persisted in being a highly desirable material in fashion. For example, the Kent State University Museum has a turquoise and ivory silk taffeta dress dated to the latter 1860s in its collection (Figure 3.1). The ensemble consists of a bodice comprised of a square neckline, pagoda sleeves, and a peplum, all of which are turquoise silk and trimmed in ivory ruffle, as well as a full-length ivory silk skirt with a train finished with alternating turquoise and ivory pleated ruffle bands at the bottom, and a three-quarter length turquoise silk overskirt that is bunched up at the sides and also trimmed in ivory ruffle. This elegant dinner dress embodies the eighteenth-century revivalist style that became popular during this time with its ample and voluminous skirt, underpinnings, and drapery. Full skirts were

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<sup>20</sup> *Peterson's Magazine* 50 (1866): 438.

<sup>21</sup> *Peterson's Magazine*, 439.

considered to be very stylish, and in order to remain fashionable, women raised the outer layers of their skirts or added overskirts to expose the various layers. This required a substantial amount of material, many elaborate dresses requiring at least twelve yards of material, although the this varied depending on how much volume was added to the skirt.<sup>22</sup> Thus, a dress such as the one described above would have required a considerable amount of imported silk in order for American manufacturers to make similar dresses.

Another American dress in Kent State University Museum's collection from the same time period is also made primarily of silk (Figure 3.2). A copious amount of tan silk taffeta was used to create this elegant dinner dress that features full-length sleeves and an extended train. Additional ivory silk and fringe, as well as pearls, line the neckline, sleeves, and shoulder cuffs, which enhance the richness of the dress. Yet another material example of how Americans craved and demanded an abundance of silk to be used to create rich and fashionable dresses, a wedding dress at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is considered (Figures 3.3 and 3.4). This ivory silk wedding dress is simple and relatively plain aside from the silk flower that cinches the upper waist, but the minimalism allows the creamy silk to shine, surely captivating everyone as the bride walked down the aisle. The long train of the dress further emphasizes the large amount of silk that was needed to create such an opulent dress. As these dresses clearly demonstrate, silk was in high demand for the production of women's dresses in the United States during the Reconstruction Era.

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<sup>22</sup> Anita Stamper and Jill Condra, *Clothing Through American History: The Civil War Though the Gilded Age, 1861-1899* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2011): 271.

Women were not alone, however, in coveting the luxury of silk to make fashionable statements. Men too wore silk in order to adhere to the trends of the day. The three-piece suit, which consisted of a jacket, vest, and pants, all generally made of the same material and matched in dark hues, became popular during the 1860s. The Metropolitan Museum of Art possesses a simple but elegant example of a black silk vest that any stylish man could have worn to complete his formal look (Figure 3.5). The men's vest, in comparison to the elaborate and fancy women's dresses analyzed, may seem relatively unassuming, but the silk that was used to make it was just as rich and lavish, creating a sleek and crisp upper-body garment. Smoking jackets also grew in popularity during the nineteenth century, heavily influenced by Japanese kimonos and European banyans, as smoking became a more widespread and trendy habit. Paisley patterns and Turkish motifs were considered fashionable at the time, worn while smoking in order to protect a gentleman's clothing from ash and help absorb the potent smell of smoke (Figure 3.6). Even though such jackets were meant to be worn to protect a man's clothing, because men retreated to a designated room and smoked together after dinner, they still needed to present themselves as stylish but also comfortable, and thus silk became the most popular material of choice.

Such lavish and sumptuous silk dresses, vests, and jackets are only a small sample of similar ensembles that survive in museum collections around the country today.<sup>23</sup> As

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<sup>23</sup> It is noted that, in general, museums disproportionately collect objects from particular demographics, specifically collecting objects from white and wealthy members of the upper classes or famous people. This inevitably skews museum collections, creating biased perspectives and lopsided representation. This does not mean that the objects found in these repositories are invalid, but it is important to acknowledge when considering material culture as a primary source base.

silk continued to be desirable for use in fashionable clothing and remained a highly coveted trendy material, demand for the product grew in the United States after the Civil War. The progressive period that followed the Civil War, in general, significantly heightened American consumption of luxury goods, which stimulated the market for silk. American demand for silk was so great that the importation of the raw material quadrupled between 1860 and 1870.<sup>24</sup> The material was so valued that those whose occupation involved working with silk earned exceptionally high wages when compared to a variety of other crafts, second only to glass work.<sup>25</sup> The rapid industrialization that followed the Civil War facilitated a general rise in wages, which concurred with decreased costs of living that resulted from deflation. However, most working-class families lived a tenuous, subsistence life, and during the Reconstruction Era inequality of wealth substantially increased. The distribution of wealth saw the small upper echelon of society grow richer in comparison to the rest of society, although the new middle class would certainly have had disposable income as well, unlike the poor working class.<sup>26</sup> As affluent Americans and those who had the extra means to splurge on luxury items grew in number and wealth, the procurement of goods made from rich foreign silk would certainly have been an effective means of demonstrating their prosperity.

The American craving for silk and the increased importation of the material occurred even as the United States quickly regained its position as a leading global

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<sup>24</sup> Frank R. Mason, "The American Silk Industry and the Tariff," *American Economic Association Quarterly*, 11, no. 4 (December 1910): 5.

<sup>25</sup> Clarence D. Long, "Wages by Occupational and Individual Characteristics" in *Wages and Earnings in the United States, 1860-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960): 105.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Leccese, "Economic Inequality and the New School of American Economics," *Religions* 8, no. 9 (2017).

producer of cotton after the Civil War. By as soon as 1870, farmers throughout the American South were producing a greater quantity of cotton than they had in 1860, and shortly after the end of Reconstruction they had regained their prewar market share in Great Britain, exporting more cotton than they had in 1860.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of successful cotton production, Americans during the Reconstruction Era demanded the importation of silk in order to meet their material desires. Indeed, Frank R. Mason, a professor in the Economics Department at Harvard, stated in 1910, “the fact remains that the enormous advance in the consumption of silk goods has been due to the ability of the consumers to spend more money on such goods.”<sup>28</sup>

While American diplomats such as Pruyn and Portman worried over rumors of a Japanese monopoly and interference in the affairs of American merchants and businessmen, citizens at home clamored for silkworms and raw silk in order to furnish their yearnings for stylish clothing. These diplomats wrote home expressing great concern over the future of Japanese silk, keeping the State Department apprised of developments, just as they would in any other situation. However, unlike other diplomatic affairs, silk, although not a necessity, was a material used to indicate one’s fashionable tastes and status. Although Japan had only just recently opened its doors to the rest of the world, it would soon become a major contributor to the global trade network, and silk would be one of its most significant exports. American diplomats recognized the importance of Japanese silk, not only for the role that it would play in the

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<sup>27</sup> Sven Beckert, “Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War,” *The American Historical Review*, 109, no. 5, (December 2004): 1427.

<sup>28</sup> Frank R. Mason, “The American Silk Industry and the Tariff,” 96.

development of international relations, but also for their fellow Americans who wished to manufacture, sell, and wear silk clothing in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Silk clothing became a powerful symbol of American identity and culture during Reconstruction, increasing in popularity due in large part to the efforts of diplomats who kept foreign markets open and trade flowing.

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<sup>29</sup> It is noted that museum collections do not always specify where exactly the silk came from to make the objects in their collections. In fact, typically the material of the objects is listed without knowledge of the material's origin. For instance, a museum may only list "silk" as the medium of a dress without clarifying if it came from Japan, although primary sources and data clearly demonstrate a steady increase in the importation of Japanese silk at this time. Because silk is an organic material, DNA could be tested to determine what part of the world it originated in, although currently museums have not shown interest in exploring this commercial and economic aspects of textiles, focusing more on their aesthetic qualities and craftsmanship.



Figure 3.1: Turquoise Silk Taffeta Dress, circa 1868. Silk taffeta. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Museum. <https://www.kent.edu/museum/online-collection>.



Figure 3.2: Tan Silk Taffeta Dress, circa 1865. Silk taffeta. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Museum. <https://www.kent.edu/museum/online-collection>.



Figure 3.3: Wedding Dress, Front View, circa 1869. Silk. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/84329>.



Figure 3.4: Wedding Dress, Back View, circa 1869. Silk. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/84329>.



Figure 3.5: Men's Vest, circa 1870. Silk. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/91070>.



Figure 3.6: Smoking Jacket, circa 1860s. Silk. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/91973?advsrc=true&description=jacket&description>.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE RAVAGES OF DISEASE IN ITALY AND THE AMERICAN RESPONSE

Although in certain situations diplomats abroad were able to actively intervene in delicate international crises and intricate foreign relationships, extenuating circumstances and acts of God prevented successful intercession in other instances. Silkworms are very fragile creatures, sensitive to adverse weather fluctuations and highly susceptible to a number of diseases. The Italian silkworm was plagued by a particular disease known as “pébrine” for several decades, beginning around 1864 and persisting, to varying degrees, throughout the Reconstruction Era. Previously, the “stronger, cleaner, more carefully reeled” Italian silk was exceptionally valuable and coveted throughout the world.<sup>30</sup>

During this period of time, however, the production of Italian silk per year diminished by as little as six percent in 1871 from that produced before the disease struck, compared to a more substantial reduction of seventy-two percent in 1876. The average diminution for the span of the plague was thirty-five percent.<sup>31</sup> Chargé d'affaires ad interim in Yedo, A. L. C. Portman, wrote to Seward on September 13, 1865, stating that the decreased silk crop in Italy, as well as in other major silk producing countries, was “owing to a more or

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<sup>30</sup> Frank R. Mason, “The American Silk Industry and the Tariff,” 15.

<sup>31</sup> William C. Wyckoff, “The Silk Goods of America: A Brief Account of the Recent Improvements and Advances of Silk Manufacture in the United States,” Silk Association of America Annual Report (1879): 13.

less alarming disease among the silk-worms.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, because raw silk from Europe, and in particular Italy, was so famous for its excellent quality and value, American diplomats expressed concern about how the rampant disease would affect consumers in the United States. They also worried how the disrupted production of Italian silk would impact global affairs and foreign relations.

Diplomats were fully aware of the precarious situation that the ruinous disease would have on Italy’s place in the global silk market and sensitive maintenance of international relations. R. Cantagalli, the Charge d’Affaires for the Legation of Italy to the United States, wrote to Seward on February 28, 1867 informing him of “the conclusion of a treaty of commerce and navigation with Japan and China, for the purpose of establishing relations of exchange and amity with those two countries upon a regular basis.”<sup>33</sup> Cantagalli reminded Seward that “a friendly intercourse with Japan is of particular importance in one of the principal branches of Italian industry, namely, the production of silk-worms.”<sup>34</sup> Additionally, a new diplomatic post was created in the capital of Japan to be filled in order to further facilitate good relations. Italy, once one of the world’s most prolific producers of high-quality raw silk, found itself in a position that demanded its diplomats to cultivate accommodating relationships with the rising Asian nations which threatened Italy’s status as a leader in the production of silk. Realizing that

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<sup>32</sup> A. L. C. Portman to William H. Seward, September 13, 1865, Main Letter, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Thirty-Ninth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1865p3/d260>.

<sup>33</sup> R. Cantagalli to William H. Seward, February 28, 1867, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Fortieth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1867p2/d22>.

<sup>34</sup> R. Cantagalli to William H. Seward, February 28, 1867.

the silkworm disease would demand diplomatic action, the Italians promptly sought to extend amicable foreign relations and ensure that the United States would support their endeavors. Seward realized how important the silk market was to international trade stability, and thus he wrote to Minister Resident of Japan, Robert Bruce Van Valkenburgh, instructing him to “comply with the wishes of the Italian government” and to support the new Italian minister in “the accomplishment of the important objects of his mission.”<sup>35</sup>

By 1872, American diplomats in Italy expressed hope that the devastating silkworm disease had run its course and that the production of fine raw silk would again commence in Italy. George Perkins Marsh, American ambassador to Italy at the time, wrote to Secretary of State Hamilton Fish from Rome on June 24, 1872, professing great optimism for the future of Italy despite some “discouraging” political and social circumstances. Most notably, Marsh revealed that “the public debt necessarily imposes heavy burdens of taxation on the people, and the national treasury does not realize by any means the full amount of taxes legally chargeable.”<sup>36</sup> However, he promptly followed this statement by declaring that, “at the same time agriculture, in spite of many drawbacks, is prosperous, commerce increasing, and manufactures, especially in silk, are reviving after a long depression.”<sup>37</sup> Marsh was an avid environmentalist and conservationist, so his

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<sup>35</sup> William H. Seward to R. B. Van Valkenburg, Marsh 5, 1867, in *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs Accompanying the Annual Message of the president to the Third Session Fortieth Congress*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1867p2/d22>.

<sup>36</sup> George P. Marsh to Hamilton Fish, June 24, 1872, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With The Annual Message of the President, December 1, 1873*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1873p1v1/d237>.

<sup>37</sup> George P. Marsh to Hamilton Fish, June 24, 1872.

particular interest in Italy's ecological improvement and enthusiasm related to the recovery of the silkworm are understandable, even if the confidence that he exhibited was premature. Although time would prove that the disease ravaging Italian silkworms would persist for several more years, Marsh divulged just how important this valuable material was to Italy's success in an ever increasingly interconnected and international world. Because he predicted that the silk industry was on the mend, he confidently asserted that he "saw no reason to doubt her future rapid progress in strength, wealth, and importance in the European political system."<sup>38</sup>

Marsh refused to believe that the disease ravaging the Italian silkworms would persist indefinitely. Two years after his first expressions of hope that Italy's silk plight was on the mend, he was still writing to the American State Department conveying sentiments of optimism. On September 27, 1874, Marsh highlighted "the success of Pasteur and others in combatting the disease of the silk-worm in Italy."<sup>39</sup> By this point in time, Marsh would have been familiar with Louis Pasteur's work in France studying the infectious diseases that were devastating silkworms across Europe. After years of extensive research, Pasteur successfully developed a method that allowed silkworm farmers to identify and preserve healthy eggs and prevent contamination, which not only salvaged the industry in France, but also throughout Europe, including Italy. Marsh took note of these exciting developments and observed that "the importation of the seed, as it is called, of this insect into Italy, was considerably reduced last season," which would

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<sup>38</sup> George P. Marsh to Hamilton Fish, June 24, 1872.

<sup>39</sup> George P. Marsh to Hamilton Fish, September 27, 1874, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With The Annual Message of the President, December 6, 1875, Volume II*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1875v02/d49>.

seem to indicate the revival of the native Italian silkworm.<sup>40</sup> Marsh insisted that “some Italian silk-growers believe that the persevering employment of these methods will entirely extirpate this malady in Europe,” and that, as a result, they would “restore the silk-industry to its former prosperity.”<sup>41</sup> Pasteur’s groundbreaking discoveries did indeed pave the way for the recovery of European silkworms, however, the enthusiasm shared by both Marsh and the Italians that the country could return to its former glory as one of the world’s premier silk producers would prove to be false hope.

Writing to Secretary of State William Maxwell Evarts on April 23, 1877, Marsh was compelled by the circumstances that he witnessed in Italy to replace the positivity that he had exhibited in previous years with a more pessimistic outlook. He lamented the “frequent and heavy losses sustained by rural industry in its great staples from frost, hail, drought, floods, and the diseases of the grape and silk-worm,” coupled with high taxes and political change, caused “severe drawbacks.” Such problems “diminished the resources and increased the burdens of the laboring poor to such a degree that nothing but exceptional industry, health, and economy” could allow them “to sustain life in reasonable comfort.”<sup>42</sup> Elaborating more specifically on the crisis involving the silk industry in Italy, Marsh reported that “two-fifths of the silk-factories are closed, four hundred looms having stopped at Como, and those working running at a loss.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> George P. Marsh to Hamilton Fish, September 27, 1874.

<sup>41</sup> George P. Marsh to Hamilton Fish, September 27, 1874.

<sup>42</sup> George P. Marsh to William Maxwell Evarts, April 23, 1877, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With The Annual Message of the President, December 3, 1877*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1877/d174>.

<sup>43</sup> George P. Marsh to William Maxwell Evarts, April 23, 1877.

Despite maintaining a clearly confident attitude toward the silk calamity before, Marsh now expressed distress over the future of Italian silk. To have such a prominent American diplomat voice these troubling remarks and exhibit obvious distress, especially one who had boisterously maintained confidence in the recovery of the Italian silk industry before, would have caused much concern at the State Department. Once the ominous news had spread to American manufacturers and consumers, confidence in Italian silk plummeted. But it was not only the future of silk in Italy that Marsh worried about, as he interpreted the suffering of the silk industry to be indicative of much larger problems looming in Italy. He observed “the misery of the Italian poor and their weight as a dangerous element in society,” which, he predicted, “must soon become intolerably aggravated unless a remedy for this state of things, of which there is no present prospect, be provided.”<sup>44</sup> The failure of silk had contributed to the creation of dire circumstances, which not only affected Italy, but also had substantial repercussions in the United States as diplomats such as Marsh made it clear that Italy was in trouble and silk was the least of the country’s concerns. Indeed, Marsh noted that “it becomes evident that in many supposable contingencies Italy may be the theater of convulsions.”<sup>45</sup> Clearly no longer expressing hopeful sentiments, Marsh forewarned of mounting strife and cause for concern in the country that he was stationed.

Unfortunately, Marsh had abandoned his dogged faith in the prosperity of Italy too soon. After the fall of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy in 1870, which completed Italian unification, the country began to develop as a great global power, exhibiting influence on

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<sup>44</sup> George P. Marsh to William Maxwell Evarts, April 23, 1877.

<sup>45</sup> George P. Marsh to William Maxwell Evarts, April 23, 1877.

the international stage and expanding through colonial ambitions. In a report to the Victorian Legislative Assembly reviewing the 1878 International Exhibit in Paris, a group of Australian commissioners made remarks that seemed to parallel the enthusiasm for Italian silk that Marsh had previously expressed. It was noted that “Italy occupies the lowest rank in Europe, as far as mechanical industries are concerned,” however, “by her production of silk, she occupies the first, even among those nations most devoted to the culture.”<sup>46</sup> The commissioners even went as far as to say that “the production of silk represents the most essential of Italian industries, that which is bound up with every branch of her existing economy, both in agriculture and in her banks and in commerce.”<sup>47</sup> It was noted that “during many a season Italy was devastated by the disease of the silkworms,” but “her silk crops have become again as abundant as in the years previous these failures.” This was due in large part to the Italians own determination as they relentlessly “sought to improve and increase production.”<sup>48</sup> The Australian report was made several years after Marsh suddenly lost hope in the recovery of the silk industry in Italy and began to fear the worst for this country, although the overall positive tone and praise are reminiscent of how he had talked about Italy earlier in his tenure. Marsh must have witnessed dire circumstances in Italy that compelled him to communicate such despair, but his words had consequences. While his pessimism might have proved to be premature, his observations were alarming to Americans at home, and they would

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<sup>46</sup> *International Exhibition at Paris, 1878: Report of the Commissioners for Victoria to His Excellency the Governor*, (Melbourne, Australia: John Ferris, Government Printer, 1879): 503.

<sup>47</sup> *International Exhibition at Paris, 1878*, 503.

<sup>48</sup> *International Exhibition at Paris, 1878*, 503.

ultimately prove to foreshadow a change in where silk was imported from into the United States.

As a result of the diseases that were ravaging silkworms in Europe, which drastically reduced the quantity of raw silk available for American consumption, the United States began to look to Asia as a viable source of silk. Although Americans had been importing raw silk from Asia by way of Europe before the Civil War, the quality was considered inferior and the supply was deemed unsatisfactory. Years of protest and attempts to convince the Chinese to improve their silk, which could be accomplished by refining the reeling process and stopping the degradation of raw silk by adding acetate of lead in an attempt to increase the weight, ultimately proved to be of no avail.<sup>49</sup> After the Civil War, the Chinese continued to revert back to bad old habits, and as a result, the quality and value of their silk was deemed unfit for Americans use.

The Japanese, on the other hand, saw a great opportunity in the global trade of silk as European silkworms suffered from disease. Initially, Japanese ambition proved to be a problem as attention was turned from reeling to breeding, and as a result, stock was substantially increased, but quality diminished greatly. Consequently, from 1870 to 1874, adequate care of the Japanese silkworms was neglected, and reeling became so careless that the material produced was determined to be very poor, eliciting constant complaints from Americans who refused to use the imported silk. The Japanese government, unlike that of the Chinese, stepped in, initiating an investigation and responding to the consequent report with rapid action. By 1876, Japan had begun to bring in the best new machinery and reels to the country, as well as skilled European operatives to help train

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<sup>49</sup> Frank R. Mason, "The American Silk Industry and the Tariff," 17.

Japanese weavers. Japan had officially entered the world market as a rising power in the production and trade of silk, and the United States took notice. The importation of raw silk from Japan to the United States rose from \$240,000 in 1873 to a staggering \$4,371,886 in 1877.<sup>50</sup> Due to uncertainties about the fate of European silk, such as that reported by Marsh in Italy, Americans were willing to turn to Asia, specifically Japan, as a new source of raw silk, so long as the quality met their standards. Italy's misfortune proved to be a great opportunity for Japan, and as a result, the consumption of silk in the United States continued.

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<sup>50</sup> Frank R. Mason, "The American Silk Industry and the Tariff," 20.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PARASOL, A WOMAN'S FAVORITE ACCESSORY

Despite the disease that had diminished the reliability and availability of European silk, demand for the material persisted in the United States, and as Americans turned to Asian silk, the production of silk goods did not falter. This is exemplified through the popularity of silk parasols throughout the Reconstruction Era. The parasol was an essential part of a lady's wardrobe, used as both a prop to instigate flirtatious behavior and a practical accessory to protect a woman's delicate complexion from the sun. Parasols had been in use for centuries, however, during the Victorian Era they became especially synonymous with high status in both America and Europe. Carrying a parasol protected the integrity of a woman's pale skin, which was indicative of her status since she had no need to labor in the sun. It also served as a powerful fashion piece that was versatile, expensive, and intricate, enhancing a lady's silhouette and arming her with a device with which to silently communicate with potential suitors on the street. The use of silk in the manufacture of parasols was common, as it was a delicate and attractive material suitable for protecting against the sun while simultaneously reflecting the status and stylishness of its owner.

Upper class women often carried different parasols depending on the outfit that they were wearing. Their activity also dictated what type of parasol they would carry. Large and plain parasols were used for walking, but smaller, more decorative and dome-

shaped styles were carried when going on a carriage ride.<sup>51</sup> In order to embellish parasols to an even greater extent, extra adornments were added to the silk base, such as lace overlays, overhanging awnings, ruffles, bows, and feathers. Although silks in bright colors became available in the 1860s, pale shades, in addition to black, white, brown, and green, remained among the most popular color choices.<sup>52</sup> Several different styles of silk parasols from the Metropolitan Museum of Art can be compared to exemplify how ladies of the upper class used and valued these accessories. One parasol features cream colored silk that is folded over wooden ribs in such a manner that gives the accessory a pointed dome-shape (Figure 6.1). This example features a small diameter and additional details of the scalloped trimming and brown silk that outlines the overhanging material and embellishes the body with thickly pleated designs. These attributes indicate that this particular parasol was used for carriage rides, where it did not serve as much of a practical purpose, but its use as a fashion statement was very important. The Metropolitan Museum of Art showcases another parasol whose function was primarily to help its owner show off, which is even more extravagant than the first example, featuring black silk and excessive ruffling that was certainly provocative and flirtatious (Figure 6.2). Alternatively, women carried bigger and more basic parasols when they took leisurely strolls, although some additional minor adornment, like fringe, may have been added to enhance the stylishness of the accessory (Figure 6.3). In all of these examples, the preference for muted and dark colors is evident.

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<sup>51</sup> José F. Blanco, ed. *Clothing and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016): 29.

<sup>52</sup> José F. Blanco, ed. *Clothing and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe*: 29.

The fact that silk was still being used prolifically to make a relatively frivolous fashion accessory throughout the Reconstruction Era, even disease plagued Europe silkworms, indicates that Americans greatly valued and desired silk products. In order to meet the demand of upper class women who wanted silk parasols, the United States was compelled to look elsewhere to acquire silk, a decision influenced by diplomatic reports that foreshadowed the decline of European silk. Regardless if Marsh was promising Americans that the Italian silk industry would recover, or if he was warning of trouble in Italy which would negatively affect silk production, the United States continued to import raw silk and create beautiful accessories with it. As long as quality and reliability were ensured, Americans simply wanted silk.



Figure 5.1: Carriage Parasol, circa 1870s. Silk and wood. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/122319>.



Figure 5.2: Stern Brothers Parasol, circa 1870. Silk, wood, and metal. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/157167>.



Figure 5.3: Strolling Parasol, circa 1870. Silk, wood, and metal. New York, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/157301>.

## CHAPTER SIX

### FINELY WOVEN SWISS SILK VERSUS MACHINE PRODUCED AMERICAN PRODUCTS

Reconstruction officially drew to a close at home in 1877, but American diplomats continued their work of exploring new lucrative possibilities for silk abroad that would ultimately benefit the United States. From the city of Berne, Switzerland, on October 17, 1877, Acting Chargé d’Affaires Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers wrote to Secretary of State William Maxwell Evarts proposing his ideas for increasing trade between the United States and other countries. Specifically, he outlined his thoughts relating to developing a more extensive trade relationship with Switzerland, a small country previously much overlooked in American foreign policy. Byers practiced law before the Civil War and joined the Union Army once the fighting had begun, but the time he spent as a prisoner of war gave him the opportunity to write the poem, “Sherman’s March to the Sea,” which became so popular that after he escaped from prison, Sherman himself rewarded him with a staff position. The poem propelled Byers to national fame, and following the war he enjoyed a distinguished career writing articles, poetry, and books in addition to a successful diplomatic tenure that included work in United States consulates in both Switzerland and Italy. Byers was an astute diplomat and a pragmatic economist, and as he explained at the end of 1877, the United States was squandering the opportunity to take advantage of the prosperous silk industry in Switzerland.

Byers understood that “trade is jealous, like individuals,” and that if the United States wanted to sell goods such as wheat, petroleum, corn, cotton, and cutlery to the Swiss, who not only had a need for such products but also desired them, then the “common usage of trade” insisted that Americans must buy from Switzerland in return. Since “the first great industry of Switzerland [was] silk” and “Zurich, indeed, [was] the second silk manufacturing city in the world,” it only seemed logical that America, “one of the greatest consumers of silk,” turn to this country for procurement of the luxury material.<sup>53</sup> According to Byers, however, the United States declined to purchase silk from Switzerland, or at least it refused to buy it fairly, because the government imposed high duties on Americans who used Swiss materials. Byers believed that if Switzerland were allowed to compete in a fair and equal market, the country could guarantee the provision of all the silk Americans desired at a significantly lower price than what they were previously paying for it. Not only would the United States have access to cheap, high quality silk, but the Swiss would also then be more inclined and encouraged to buy American surplus goods. The production of silk material was a refined skill that took the Swiss centuries to perfect, and just because America had developed a vast manufacturing industry did not mean that machines could create a superior product, according to Byers. Indeed, he insisted that “there are some things that machines can’t do and do well” because “they have not got the delicate touch of a woman’s fingers or the secret skill of an experienced dyer – things that are requisite to make silk well.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With The Annual Message of the President, December 3, 1877*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1877app/d44>.

<sup>54</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877.

Byers discussed at length the difference in quality and price of silk that was produced by machines in the United States versus by hand in Switzerland. He offered a tactile description when he explained that “only a few qualities of silk can be made really well by machinery at all, the threads of the raw material being usually too delicate and the fine finish to the stuff other than by hand impossible.”<sup>55</sup> Here, Byers advocated for the superiority of silk that had been woven by the hands of skilled weavers while simultaneously alluding to the opulence of the material. It was only in the hands of silk weavers, and in this case specifically Swiss hands, that all knots could be untangled and all imperfections removed in order to create truly luxuriant silk. Besides the clearly higher quality of Swiss silk, Byers also noted its affordability, claiming that even if it were “to be admitted that machines could make fully as good silk as skilled weavers can, still it would not be cheaper silk.”<sup>56</sup> This was attributed to the fact that those who manufactured silk by hand in Switzerland did so on farms where they employed women to weave on private looms between their other daily responsibilities. Also, little capital was invested, which resulted in lower risk, and during times when demand for silk decreased, production simply slowed down, as opposed to chaos ensuing due to the closure of factories, unemployment, and strikes. Thus, from Byers’s unique perspective as a diplomat abroad, the refined silk produced by hand in Switzerland was not only of superior quality, but also substantially less expensive in comparison to the machine processed silk in the United States. Not only are his comments revealing on the surface regarding how American silk compared to other foreign competitors, but Byers’s scrutiny

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<sup>55</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877.

<sup>56</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877.

also divulges a critique of the direction that American industry and production of goods was heading at the end of Reconstruction.

Through his avid endorsement of Swiss silk and critique of American silk production, Byers reveals some of the shortcomings inherent of the United States' growing global power as Reconstruction concluded. Americans who attempted to produce their own silk goods in the United States by machines, according to Byers, could "barely keep their heads above water," even after the government imposed no less than sixty percent duty on foreign silk.<sup>57</sup> Byers estimated that the United States imported about twenty-five million dollars worth of silk annually, which meant that consumers ended up paying fifteen million dollars as a result of the enforced duties. Not only was this an enormous waste of consumer money because quality silk could otherwise very easily be obtained from Switzerland, but it also supposedly primarily only funded no more than two hundred American manufacturers who merely experimented with silk-weaving. Byers found this arrangement to be nonsensical and ultimately detrimental to American commerce interests. "Suppose," he contemplated, that "this sum were expended to aid ship lines, in order that we might get our own products out to the world instead of trying to prevent the world's products from getting into us."<sup>58</sup> Such high duties on foreign silk were not only unnecessary because lower, more reasonable taxes would deter smuggling, but they were also disadvantageous to improving the United States' international trade relationships.

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<sup>57</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877.

<sup>58</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877.

The United States was wasting time, energy, and money on the production of inferior silk products as the country was attempting to assert itself as a robust industrializing nation. Alternatively, Americans could turn to Switzerland, where silk weavers enjoyed considerable success because of the “great cleverness of employés [sic]” and the “possibility of securing labor at extremely low prices,” according to Byers.<sup>59</sup> Byers feared that the progressive industrialization and expanding government power, exemplified in the enforcement of high tariffs, would corrupt and cheapen the value of silk in the United States. This was especially problematic during Reconstruction, a time in which Americans were formenting their identity as a rising nation state, and thus could not afford to be inefficient in the manufacture of silk goods, nor could they proudly use domestic silk products if the quality was lacking. By reimagining and restructuring the silk trade between the United States and Switzerland, Byers believed that a mutually beneficial relationship could blossom in which both countries could thrive and prosper in the global market.

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<sup>59</sup> S. H. M. Byers to William Maxwell Evarts, October 17, 1877.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
FROM LUXURY TO DEMOCRACY: THE REPERCUSSIONS OF  
INDUSTRIALIZATION

Diplomats representing the United States abroad were not the only Americans to appreciate the value and excellence of Swiss silk. The allure of refined silk continued to attract prosperous members of American society at the end of the Reconstruction Era. Men and women of the upper class flaunted their wealth through material things, and silk was certainly still just as much a symbol of luxury and affluence as it had been at the beginning of the era, although silk from Switzerland was gaining notable prestige. For instance, when Sarah Carlisle Choate, a successful artist, photographer, and patron of the arts whose family was part of the Boston elite upper class, married one of the richest men in Boston, real estate mogul John Montgomery Sears, she incorporated precious Swiss silk into her wedding ensemble. The marriage, which took place in 1877, was an extravagant occasion. The bride wore a gown of “white satin, a tulle veil, and magnificent diamonds” and carried with her a carved ivory folding fan that was made in Switzerland that is now housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Figures 7.1 & 7.2).<sup>60</sup> This elegant fan consisted of delicate silk material between two thick ivory sticks carved in a high relief design of roses, lilies, and other flowers and foliage. A silk and gold tassel and ring were attached to the bottom of the fan as well to amplify the ostentatiousness of the accessory. The extreme wealth and prominence of both her family

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<sup>60</sup> *The Morristown Gazette* (Morristown, Tennessee), October 17, 1877.

and her fiancée allowed Sarah to spare no expense on her wedding day, demonstrating to fellow members of the upper class that she was worldly and sophisticated. Not only was her elaborate wedding dress made of fine white silk, but the specific decision to carry a silk folding fan imported from Switzerland attests to the quality and esteemed reputation of Swiss silk.

After her wedding day, Sarah Choate Sears continued to flaunt a rich silk wardrobe. The famous portraitist John Singer Sargent completed a commissioned painting of Sarah in 1899, and although this work of art was done after the Reconstruction Era, it exemplifies the enduring allure of silk among the upper class even as it was becoming more widely available (Figure 7.3). In the painting, Sargent utilized loose and bold brushstrokes to emphasize the sharp folds of the silk dress and indicate the crispness of the material. The silk dress almost appears to shimmer in richness and splendor due to the subtle highlights of lavender and pink that have been mixed with the prominent white. Both the material and the color of the dress were intended to symbolize Sarah's wealth and high status in society, just as the Swiss silk fan had done on her wedding day in 1877.

Silk had long been coveted as a luxury product and used by members of the upper class to showcase their status throughout the Reconstruction Era in the United States; however, as the 1870s drew to a close the material became more widely available to everyone, including the middle and working classes. Although the cultivation of domestic silk had largely tapered off in the United States before the Civil War, local factories continued to operate using imported silk. In light of the growing industrialization of silk products in the United States, Byers' passionate endorsement of Swiss silk seems at the

very least insightful, if not influential as well. An analysis of exports from Switzerland to the United States since 1864 show “a constant increase and in certain branches a remarkable development.” In 1864, the total value of importations of Swiss goods into the United States was \$7,190,532, whereas in 1907 that total had reached a high of \$30,417,669. At the same time, the importation of embroideries from Switzerland increased after the war and throughout the rest of the century, but silk in particular dominated the market. The importation of Swiss raw silk and finished silk products peaked in 1892 at \$8,708,560, which comprised forty-four and a half percent of the total importations into the United States.<sup>61</sup> More generally, the importation of silk from all foreign markets in 1870 amounted to \$38,700,000 in comparison to the domestic production of silk, which was valued at \$10,000,000.<sup>62</sup> These numbers indicate that Americans recognized the high value that Byers had assigned to Swiss silk; however, the production of domestic silk in the United States continued to evolve into the machine-powered, industrialized behemoth that he had criticized.

The silk manufacturing industry had yet to fully mature in the 1870s, but according to William Cornelius Wyckoff, Secretary of the Silk Association of America, the stage had been set for a surge in the production of domestic silk goods and the democratization of silk in the United States. In an attempt to encourage the development and productivity of the American industry during the Civil War, and specifically to help Northern manufacturers increase their profits, the federal government lowered the tariff

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<sup>61</sup> United States Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Daily Consular and Trade Reports* 3, no. 154-230 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912): 790.

<sup>62</sup> Debin Ma, “The Modern Silk Road: The Global Raw-Silk Market, 1850-1930,” 336.

that was levied on imported raw silk but raised the tariff that was imposed on imported finished silk goods, which continued to increase as the war progressed.<sup>63</sup> The Silk Association of America's annual report succinctly reviewed the influence that the tariffs had on advancing the domestic production of silk goods in its annual report in 1879, stating that "the war of the rebellion stimulated most of our manufacturing interests by checking the importations of foreign goods," and "during the period of inflated prices that followed, many new factories were built and the facilities for work were greatly expanded."<sup>64</sup> Wyckoff not only credited the wartime tariffs for the expansion of the domestic output of silk goods, but he also credited rapid industrialization and use of machinery, specifically the sewing machine. He insisted that "the sewing machine was the means of a revolution in this branch of business."<sup>65</sup> The combination of both the wartime tariffs and usage of machinery allowed for substantial growth in the production of silk products in the United States. This progress became apparent in the Reconstruction Era and significantly escalated at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century as the country continued to assert itself as a global industrial power. Worldly diplomats like Byers were correct in predicting that high tariffs on foreign silk products and the use of machinery would ultimately devalue silk and lessen the high-quality of the material, but these factors simultaneously made silk products accessible and attainable to a widespread and diverse range of consumers. Others, such as economist and trade theorist Frank William Taussig, noted the contrast

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<sup>63</sup> Frank Richardson Mason, "The American Silk Industry and the Tariff," 9; Debra Bloom, "Henrietta Aiken Kelly and the Post-Civil War Silk Industry," *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (2014): 15.

<sup>64</sup> William C. Wyckoff, "The Silk Goods of America," 7.

<sup>65</sup> William C. Wyckoff, "The Silk Goods of America," 15.

between “cheap every day silk, turned out in great quantities of one pattern” via industrial machinery, versus silk of “limited patterns and sterling quality, catering to the well-to-do and the rich,” which was characteristic of the manufacture of silk goods “before the machine began to invade it.”<sup>66</sup> Whether the upper class liked it or not, silk was becoming a commodity available to more and more Americans as the country continued to industrialize. The ensuing democratization of silk proved to embody themes of evolving American identity during Reconstruction.

As the United States evolved into a powerhouse of industrialized machinery, quantity began to take precedence over quality, and the democratization of domestically produced silk goods superseded exclusive association with the upper class. Manufacturing became more efficient, competition intensified, and international trade expanded, which resulted in the significant decline of prices and allowed for a growing number of new customers to enjoy the material that had once only been the privilege of the well-to-do. This is exemplified in the crazy quilt fad that enthralled the nation at the end of the Reconstruction Era. As the United States continued to cultivate stronger international relationships, Americans become more exposed to foreign influences and exotic artwork. Coupled with women’s desire to tackle more sophisticated needlework and the new affordability of silk, this led to the popularity of crazy quilts across the country. American manufacturers mechanized silk processing faster than competitors abroad, and as a result, silk became available to a larger number of women for a greater range of usages. Consequently, silk scraps became common, which helped fuel the

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<sup>66</sup> Franklin William Taussig, *Some Aspects of the Tariff Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924): 233.

popularity of crazy quilts.<sup>67</sup> The trend initially began in urban centers where people were more likely to be influenced by cosmopolitan trends and have access to cheap silk, but the fad soon also spread to rural areas as well.<sup>68</sup> Greater access to affordable silk allowed women who were already finding new ways to assert their independence and embrace more progressive ideologies to further break with tradition and the status quo. Instead of adhering to strict and mundane patterns, crazy quilts combined lively and layered designs, while the use of silk added a more desirable texture. The manufacture of these silk quilts by working and middle-class women embody both skill and imagination. Rather than serving a practical, functional use, silk crazy quilts were decorative and symbolic, works of art that women displayed in their homes with great pride.

The celebration of the centennial in 1876 marked the beginning of the crazy quilt phase.<sup>69</sup> Emma St. Clair Whitney was one of countless American women who helped celebrate the birth of independence in the United States with her silk crazy quilt. The quilt that she made to commemorate the centennial is currently housed at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC (Figure 7.4). Two-inch silk hexagons in a great variety of colors were stitched together to form rosettes, each of which are separated by black hexagons. An eight-inch border of maroon colored silk frames the vivid geometrical floral design. The center rosette, the only one to have petals of alternating colors, features the inscription, “1876 Emma St. Clair Whitney Centennial,”

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<sup>67</sup> Patricia Cox Crews, “Fueled by Silk: Victorian Crazy Quilt Mania,” *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* (2010): 5-6.

<sup>68</sup> Marin F. Hanson, “The Eva Wight Crazy Quilt: Late Nineteenth-Century Quiltmaking in Central Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 26 (Summer 2003): 83.

<sup>69</sup> Marin F. Hanson, “The Eva Wight Crazy Quilt,” 83.

in the middle hexagon of the flower. This is indicative of Emma's pride, not only in her country, but also in her ability to create such a patriotic and handsome quilt of silk. Once a material exclusive to the upper class, silk was now enjoyed by Americans across the country, even in places such as Pottsville, Pennsylvania, where a small silk industry emerged at the end of Reconstruction.



Figures 7.1: Carved Ivory Wedding Fan, Folded, 1877.  
Ivory, silk, and gold. Boston, Massachusetts: Museum of  
Fine Arts, Boston.  
<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/52108/carved-ivory-wedding-fan>.



Figures 7.2: Carved Ivory Wedding Fan, Open, 1877. Ivory, silk, and gold. Boston, Massachusetts: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

[https://collections.mfa.org/objects/52108/carved-ivory-wedding-fan.](https://collections.mfa.org/objects/52108/carved-ivory-wedding-fan)



Figure 7.3: John Singer Sargent, *Mrs. Joshua Montgomery Sears (Sarah Choate Sears)*, 1899. Oil on canvas. Houston, Texas: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.  
<https://www.mfah.org/art/detail/5404>.



Figure 7.4: Emma St. Claire Whitney, Centennial Pieced Silk Quilt, 1876. Silk and cotton. Washington, DC: The National Museum of American History. [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_640627](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_640627).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

As the United States emerged from a bloody and devastating civil war, Americans were eager to assert themselves as a burgeoning power on the international stage as a reunited country. In order to be influential in foreign relations and play an important role in shaping global affairs, American diplomats abroad became integral assets. Their actions and diplomacy helped dictate the course of international events and avoid political and economic crises that involved multiple different countries. Correspondence between diplomats abroad and the State Department facilitated the exchange of ideas and observations, which had the potential to influence activity in the United States and gave insight into future trends and outcomes. During the Reconstruction Era, diplomats played a crucial role in cultivating American interests abroad and helping to establish the United States as a global power. Although silk may at first seem like a mere luxury material coveted by the upper class and used to exhibit status in fashion, it was also a source of much concern for American diplomats. Whether they were fighting to prevent a Japanese silk monopoly, providing commentary on the disease that ravaged Italian silkworms, or advocating on behalf of Swiss silk, these diplomats recognized the importance of the material in American culture and society. Through both written words and silk products, a better understanding and appreciation of the intersection between diplomacy and material culture can be achieved.

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