

# From *Indiennes*\* to Industrial Printed Cotton: A focus on Swiss Traditional Dress

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## Abstract

This paper investigates how *indiennes* were processed from an exotic luxury textile into a folklore ornament for a variety of Swiss costumes, between the 17th and 20th centuries.

In the 17th century, these Indian printed cottons became a much sought-after fashion artefact in Europe. Western manufacturers, including several Swiss companies, began to produce imitations of these fabrics that were sold all over the world. Throughout the 18th century, these were quickly transformed from luxury items purchased by the privileged spheres of society, into semi-precious products. At the beginning of the 19th century, *indiennes* gradually expanded to the working classes, rural areas, and mountain regions in the form of women's clothes, handkerchiefs, or scarves. In the early 20th century, although industrially produced, they were considered an integral part of several traditional regional dresses. The aim of the present research is to portray the material culture of *indiennes* fashion, understanding the conditions and dynamics through which objects acquired significance in people's lives at a given period.

*\*Indiennes*: in French, *indiennes* or *toiles peintes*; in English *chintz* or *calicos*, is a generic term used to refer to printed cotton fabrics of Indian origin and their European imitations. During the 18th century, it included both chintzes produced in India and imported into Europe, and those ordered by European customers and sent by Indian manufacturers for the Western market, or even those of European creation (Ballateros Gourguet, 2000, 47-48). During the first half of the 19th century, the term *indiennes* mainly referred to first-quality production. In the second half of the century, however, the term became obsolete due to the industrialisation of production, in favour of the appellation 'printed cotton' (Bieri Thomson, 2018, 13-14).

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## Introduction: *indiennes* production in Switzerland

In the 17th century, Indian printed cottons (*indiennes*) became a much sought-after fashion artefact in Europe. Western manufacturers, including several Swiss companies, began to produce imitations of these fabrics that were sold all over the world. Throughout the 18th century, these were quickly transformed from luxury items purchased by the privileged spheres of society, into semi-precious products. Meeting the demand of a wide range of customers from various geographical and socio-economic areas was made possible through the development of categories of different qualities, levels of complexities, and costs. At the beginning of the 19th century, *indiennes* gradually expanded to the working classes, rural areas, and mountain regions in the form of women's clothes, handkerchiefs, or scarves. They often had a ceremonial character during feast days or rituals linked to engagements or weddings.

The origins of cotton printing in Switzerland date back to the end of the 17th century when the Edict of Nantes (1685) was revoked and it was illegal to wear, manufacture, or import *indiennes* in France (1686). Several Huguenots and artisans working with printed cloth in France found refuge among Protestant communities. At the end of the 17th century, they established manufactories, starting in Geneva. In Neuchâtel, at the beginning of the 18th century, several families from the area—or of Huguenot origins—supported by the Prussian regime—set up businesses for printed cloth production and trade, realising the economic potential of this market. They were soon followed by entrepreneurs from Basle, Bienne and Mulhouse, and then by others based in Aargau, Zurich, Thurgau and Glarus (Bieri Thomson 2018). As a result, the production of *indiennes* placed Switzerland at the centre of a hitherto unparalleled scale of trade. Millions of white cotton and dyeing products meters were imported from Europe, Africa, America, and Asia, and up to 95% of the production was exported—mainly to Europe, but also to the Middle East, the Far East, as well as to Africa and European colonies in America. With about 16 million metres of printed cloth produced annually, France was the world's largest manufacturer of *indiennes* around 1785. England came in second with 12,4 million metres. It is estimated that Swiss production at the time was around 8,5 million metres per year (Veyrassat 2018, 65).

In this decisive phase of the industrial revolution, *indiennes* thus contributed to placing the Swiss economy, in a durable way, in the European and world economy (Caspard 2020). During the first half of the 19th century, many Swiss and European factories were forced to close due to the political climate in Europe and the advent of production mechanisation initiated in England, which allowed a drastic reduction of the selling price on the market. The Glarus canton production was an exception. At the beginning of the 19th century, the first industrial buildings were constructed, and the export business was extended via Italian trading bases to the eastern Mediterranean. This export was then expanded throughout the Ottoman Empire and later on to Asia and Africa. Some firms survived until the end of the 20th century (Arx, Davatz and Rohr 2005).

## From exotism to folklorism

During my research into Swiss *indiennes* production and consumption, I came across several examples of printed cloth samples, accessories, garments, or documents referring to these textiles as 'typical' or part of a 'traditional costume' that personified the identity of a region. I wondered about the meaning and perception of 'typical,' 'regional,' and 'traditional' clothing over the centuries, especially as *indiennes* are considered by historians to be one of the earliest consumer items in history, as they were sold on all the continents. In addition, clothes respond to the collective and constant renewal of fashions that underline how quickly our needs evolve. Clothing not only dresses the body but also presents the wearer, and according to certain conventions, integrates him or her into a community.

Two feminine dresses with printed cotton accessories illustrate this issue very well. One is from Ticino (southern Switzerland) (**Fig. 1**) and the other, from Neuchâtel (western Switzerland) (**Fig. 2**). Both date back to the third decade of the 20th century. In this period, although industrially produced, printed cottons were considered an integral part of several Swiss traditional regional dresses. The southern Switzerland dress imitates, in a simplified way, peasant women's clothing in use in several European Alpine regions. It is characterised by wide, ankle-length skirts, tight bodices, spencers, aprons, shoulder and headkerchiefs, often made of printed cotton. Women's clothing in Neuchâtel is marked by a fitted bodice and a gathered skirt evocative of the Ancien Régime's popular shapes.

At that time, by means of historical research, the goal was to reconstitute and preserve these specificities, driven by a strongly stereotyped folkloric movement that emerged in Switzerland, as throughout Europe: the emergence of national identities (Thiesse 1999) which portrayed, through the 'traditional costume,' the symbol of an authentic rural life and met the expectations of tourists. One can witness a phenomenon of 'folklorism,' a manipulated folklore, a sort of homologising movement in opposition to local identities often rectified and deprived of their historical content. Because of how their image is interpreted and manipulated, popular costumes have all too frequently come to represent a sense of regional belonging, itself perceived as timeless, thus encouraging the spread of stereotypes (Bouvier 1999, 131-145; Lethuillier 2009).

The two dresses are characterised by one main difference: the production of *indiennes* on their territories. Any proto-industrial or industrial activity in the fields of printed cotton arose in the southern regions of Switzerland. Shortly after the middle of the 18th century, in neighbouring Lombardy (northern Italy), and more specifically in the State of Milan, about twenty factories printed small pieces of linen or hemp at the request of individual customers; however, they lacked washing-resistant colours because of too primitive systems (Bellezza Rosina and Cataldi Gallo 1993, 53-66). In opposition, Neuchâtel and its 14 factories concentrated in a limited area represented one of Europe's most important *indiennes* production centre, with an annual total of around 2 million metres in 1797 (Caspard 1979, 102-103). There, the use of printed cottons in women's traditional clothing bears witness to the flourishing textile industries that marked the region in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This led me to investigate how *indiennes* were processed from an exotic luxury textile into a folkloric accessory in Switzerland between the 17th and 20th centuries, all the while keeping in mind the global or 'glocal' context that defines them; and to understand the conditions and dynamics through which objects acquired significance in people's lives at a given period.

Some significant examples from Ticino illustrate in a relevant manner the purpose of the present research. Ticino, in southern Switzerland, was a remote but central transit area for trade routes between the north and south of Europe. Manufactured printed cloths that reached the region between the 18th and 19th centuries via a complex international trade network were integrated into consumption habits while maintaining the production of local handcrafted textiles (wool, hemp, linen). At the same time, the demand for these products made the provincial area part of the European consumption and industrialisation process (Trentmann, 2016; Vries, 2012).

In 2019, the Swiss National Museum in Zurich renovated its exhibition rooms devoted to the history of Switzerland. In the section dedicated to tourism and tradition, several of the numerous national regional costumes are now displayed with their respective accessories. The exhibition space evokes the discovery and development of tourism in the Alps, starting at the end of the 18th century—when Switzerland became a popular destination for travelers. At that time, artistic handicrafts experienced a golden age, as did the traditions that complemented the concept of Swiss cultural authenticity. This is attested to by the exhibited 'traditional costumes' worn in many places on Sundays or feast days. Among the artefacts on display is the legacy of Swiss dress scholar Julie Heierli (1859-1938). The artefacts collected and meticulously studied by the ethnologist date back to before the Swiss Costume Federation's 'renewal' and 'standardisation' of costumes in the 1930s. From 1880 onwards, Julie Heierli collected everyday life accessories with the aim of preserving the clothes kept in peasant homes, churches, and workplaces, that were, at that time, in danger of being replaced by mass-produced industrial goods and thus disappearing forever. In conjunction with the Federal Constitution of 1848, the need emerged to codify the identity of traditional regional customs at a national level. Around 1920, she published her five-volume seminal work, *Die Volkstrachtender Schweiz*, providing Switzerland with a unique instrument that is still the most comprehensive and historically well-documented work on the subject (Heierli 1922-1931).

The Swiss National Museum opened its doors in Zurich in 1898. At the same time, most cantons established historical collections and regional museums. Julie Heierli directly assisted in the creation and collection of Swiss folk costumes and accessories, and contributed to the folklore of traditional dress based solely on historical sources and material culture.

The south Swiss example currently displayed in the National Museum is an original version worn by peasants during feast days in the Verzasca valley (**Fig. 3**). The dress, which is characterised by an empire-style high waist starting below the bust and a spencer with long sleeves that do not extend above the waist and which, in the fashionable centres of the time, served to cover the neckline, is obviously of early 19th-century influence. A blue or white bodice, open at the front, accompanies a long hand-woven skirt in ecru wool or dyed in blue with narrow ruffles falling into heavy pleats. The version displayed in the Swiss National

Museum has a hand-woven long white linen cloth apron with embroidered red edges and trimmed with fringes, while one preserved in the ethnographic Museum in Verzasca has a late 18th-century to early 19th-century *indienne* with a motive inspired by nature and largely produced in several factories throughout Europe at that time (**Fig. 4**).

During the 19th century, printed cotton aprons spread further to the popular classes, as well as to European country and mountain areas. As women's clothes, aprons, handkerchiefs, or headscarves became, on the one hand, a phenomenon of a 'luxury' article for the lower classes, thus determining the cycle of fashion obsolescence, and, on the other hand, an element of social, temporal, and spatial demarcation. The study of numerous dowries confirms a change in habits in Ticino from the 18th to the 19th century (Laurenti 2024, 34-57). Furthermore, the working classes made extensive use of the second-hand market. Domestic servants, who made up an important part of the working classes, also participated in this process of change by appropriating what the masters no longer liked (Fennetaux, Junqua and Vasset 2015).

### **Indiennes in Swiss women's wardrobes**

During the 18th century, the aristocratic class in Ticino did not become enthralled with *indiennes* imported from India to Europe; rather, the bourgeoisie gradually and steadily increased their consumption in clothing and in interior design. A trend that was observed in the rest of Switzerland in parallel with the specialisation, increase, and diversification of product prices on the market and, above all, with the emergence of Swiss local manufacturers (Laurenti 2015, 317-328; Laurenti 2024, 34-57). The wealthy classes, both town and country, were essentially the ones who introduced these fabrics into their wardrobes and furnishings during the second half of the 18th century. It is crucial to remember that, at the time, the majority of the population in Ticino and many other Alpine regions, was mainly composed of rural class families, with only a few ones belonging to the upper class. Its pre-Alpine valleys, small townships, and limited means of communication did not facilitate social interactions. As a result, it was uncommon for people from various social and economic backgrounds to meet and exchange new goods. In this context, it was the merchant bourgeoisie that could afford to travel and buy printed cottons, as demonstrated in the Maggia valley (Chiesi Ermotti, 2019, 108-110). Among the locally woven and spun textiles, such as linen, hemp, and wool, more sophisticated products were brought into the provincial areas at that time, imported through migratory movements or the trafficking of merchants passing between north and south. Their possession strengthened a social status that differentiated the bourgeoisie's ladies through their trousseaux and the way they dressed; thus, it is no coincidence that, during the second half of the 18th century, merchant bourgeoisie women were portrayed wearing dresses embellished with precious fabrics (**Fig. 5**), including printed cotton aprons with a white background that revealed naturalist flower motifs in vogue in Europe at that time, or sewn inside the sleeves of their woolen spencer. Both *indiennes* gave a fashionable touch to the garments, differentiating them from an ordinary dress produced locally (**Figs 6 & 7**).

## Printed cotton trade in the Alpine areas

Through its role as a transit and point of contact between the north and south of the continent, Ticino integrated the European economic system despite lacking significant urban areas and being remote from the major trading centres of the time. Moreover, like many other centres located in the Alpine region during the modern era, the canton based its activities on the transport and shipping of goods, which contributed to defining its role as an economic intermediary between northern and southern Europe (Lorenzetti 2009, 517-526). The trade in printed cloth integrated this dynamic, and, in addition to actively participating in trade networks by favouring the export of printed textiles from Switzerland to the Italian market, it was directly linked to it through the purchase and consumption of articles locally.

Shopkeepers were constantly in contact with Swiss trading houses, manufacturers or intermediaries in order to purchase printed textiles for private customers, shopkeepers or Italian trading houses located in northern Italy (mainly Lombardy, Piedmont and Venice). According to accounts by Swiss merchants travelling to Italy and Ticino at that time, Italian customers demanded articles with 'simple designs and bright colours' that generally reproduced the Mulhouse and Rouen designs, referring to products offered by the well-known Alsatian manufacturer, Hartmann & Cie (MahN, Fonds Famille Bovet, 1854). In Alsace, at the beginning of the 19th century, Daniel Koechlin produced the dye on cotton, known as Adrianople red, or Turkey red. These articles, bearers of a new kind of aesthetics, first seduced Europeans and, later on, a large proportion of consumers worldwide. In particular, the French production centres of Mulhouse and Rouen, the Manchester region, Scotland, and Switzerland, especially Glarus, specialised in the manufacture of such goods (Jacqué 1995) (**Fig. 8**).

It turned out that one of the major manufacturers in Glarus, Batholome Jenny & Cie, opened a sales branch in Lugano between 1822 and the end of 1850 to increase and control their business between Switzerland and Italy (Comptoir Daniel Jenny & Cie). Several examples of printed cloth or iconography preserved in the ethnographic museums of Ticino bear witness to this (**Figs. 9 & 10**). Often beautifully depicted, peasant women in the paintings wear clothes and accessories reserved for feast days, including brightly coloured handkerchiefs made of printed cotton, wool, or silk, in the manner of the Glarus production, as shown by the *Vallerana* (valley woman) portrayed by Antonio Rinaldi (1816-1875) around the middle of the 19th century (**Fig. 11**). During the 18th and 19th centuries, *indiennes*—once an exotic textile reserved for the wealthy classes at the end of the 17th century—became a social indicator that distinguished the common classes. Festive days were the occasion for people to gather and socialise, as well as to show off through simple garments such as head and neck handkerchiefs or aprons. This explains the important presence of these accessories in dowries and iconography of the mid-19th century.

## **Conclusion: from global to local**

Between the 17th and 20th centuries, printed cottons were at the heart of a social and cultural custom. They bear witness to the enthusiasm for objects imported from the East, the circulation of technical skills and people, the transmission of ornamental vocabulary, and the creation of a category of luxury and semi-luxury products for consumers in the modern era. Concepts such as 'exoticism' and 'folklore' in western fashion, the conflict between local and global, and the significance of fashion and tradition are revisited through the discovery of printed cottons consumption in a particular geographic area. Regional dress can, in this sense, be seen as the product of an ever-renewing work of creation and complex intersections dependent on the cultural and economic factors of a particular region connected with the rest of the world. Styles, textiles, and sartorial forms found in small European towns and rural areas cannot be separated from fashions spread by European courts during the Old Régime and, later, by urban ones. Moreover, the 18th century saw a greater variety of clothing and a wider range of textile materials, including cotton, which revolutionised fashion not only in Europe, but worldwide (Riello 2013). Considering cotton and the fashion phenomenon it aroused in a cultural and economic context that went beyond the boundaries of a single region, we highlight the complexity of circulation, exchange, and aesthetics outside the large centres. At the same time, while avoiding assigning a typically regional character to textiles, decorations, or accessories, we detect their global and local scope, and explore the relationship between macro and micro-history, and the perceived exoticism and folklore in a given historical and cultural period. Indeed, since the 18th century, international trade, circulation, and exchange have significantly influenced society and resulted in a globalisation of culture. In response to this phenomenon, 'glocalisation' was, and still is, the tendency to adapt a global product to a local context in order to make it more attractive to a given market or society.

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Fig. 1

'Ticinella,' Traditional costume, Ticino, 1926.  
Archivio storico ticinese, Bellinzona, Switzerland.

© ASTi, Bellinzona



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Fig. 2

Child traditional costume, Neuchâtel, circa 1930.  
Musée d'art et d'histoire, Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

© MahN, Neuchâtel



Fig. 3

Traditional dresses, Verzasca or Maggia Valley, Ticino, Switzerland, 19th century.  
Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

In 2019 four special stamps have been dedicated to the Swiss costumes by means of the ensembles collected at the Swiss National Museum.

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Fig. 4

Traditional dress, Verzasca Valley, Ticino,  
early 19th century.  
Museo di Val Verzasca, Sonogno, Switzerland.

© Museo di Val Verzasca

Fig. 5

Portrait of Maria Caterina Lanzoni  
Anonymus, oil on canvas, 1773.

Private collection ©Eugen Reutsch Verlag, 1930

This portrait was chosen and published in one of the major works of scholar Julie Heierli (1859-1938) as a reference for the bourgeois costume of Valmaggia.



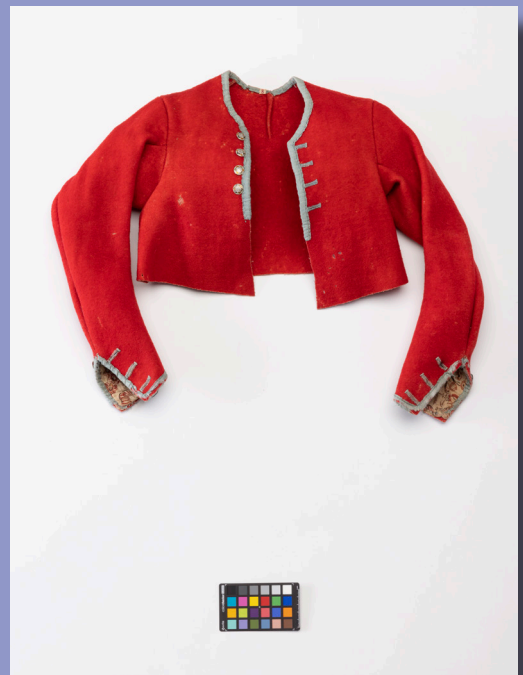


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**Fig. 6**

Apron, printed cotton, Switzerland or France,  
second half 18th century.  
Museo di Valmaggia, Cevio, Switzerland.

© Museo di Valmaggia



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**Fig. 7**

Spencer, Ticino, second half 18th century.  
Fabric: wool, cotton, silk (edging); Lining: printed cotton.  
Collezione Museo storico, Ufficio Patrimonio Culturale,  
Lugano, Switzerland.

© Ufficio Patrimonio Culturale



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**Fig. 8**

Pencil and gouache on paper.  
Glarus, manufactory Blumer & Cie, Switzerland,  
1830-1840.  
GWA, BLUM AND 51.1

© Wirtschaftsarchiv, Schwanden



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**Figs. 9 & 10**

Head or neck handkerchiefs, Switzerland or France, 1830-1850.  
Museo Onsernonese, Loco & Museo di Valmaggia, Cevio, Switzerland.

© Museo Onsernonese, Museo di Valmaggia

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**Fig. 11**

Vallerana.  
Antonio Rinaldi, oil on canvas, mid-19th century  
Pinacoteca cantonale Giovanni Züst,  
Rancate, Switzerland.

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