

An ultimate guide to silk

RIE NATALENKO

I have felted with and onto silk, painted and dyed silk, dabbled in silk-screen printing, sewn silk clothes (always use a new needle when stitching silk), run my fingers through silk yardage, and rubbed silk against my face, savouring its gossamer softness. I thought I knew silk, but through researching this article, I now know so much more!

What is silk? Technically, but not always, it is a protein fibre produced by the silkworm caterpillar. It creates a cocoon of silk prior to emerging as a moth. Before the moth emerges (in most cases), the sericin (gum that sticks the cocoon fibres together) is removed and the silk is “reeled” off the cocoon to be made into threads and fabric. The weight of the silk fabric is termed “mm” (momme) - pronounced “mommy”. The smaller the mm, the finer the silk.

There is vast variety in silk—it can be divided by type (type of caterpillar, cultivated or not), weight, weave, or method of manufacture (different countries often use the same names for different types of silk, or different names for the same type of silk!).

To make sense of this confusion of silks, I have compiled an alphabetical list, including, when possible, potential uses in our crafting world.

Anaphne: From Southern and Central Africa; made by silkworms of the *Anaphne* genus (eg.

book, trisnian-tsamia and kook); soft and fairly lustrous; elastic and stronger than mulberry silk; often used in velvet and plush fabrics.

Batiste de soie: Fine, light weight, soft; plain weave; sheer but tightly woven; resists snagging.

Broadcloth: Plain, dense weave (the weft is heavier than the warp); soft cotton-like feel; similar to China silk, but heavier, crisper, and it wrinkles less; often used for shirts (10mm and higher).

Brocade: Rich, decorative; stiff; medium to heavy weight; usually woven with various coloured yarns; often a jacquard design and embossed effect, and incorporates metallic thread and other synthetic fibres; suitable for skirts, jackets and decorative furnishings.

Canton Crepe: Soft crepe-woven with crosswise ribs; like crepe de chine, but heavier.

Charmeuse: A crepe-backed satin with a soft face and dull backing; light weight; rich lustre; beautiful drape (better than crepe de chine); very good for scarves, draped blouses, lingerie and flowing evening gowns; does not hold its shape well (tends to cling against the body); tears easily, especially when wet; difficult to sew (slippery); the thicker charmeuse (19mm and higher) is often used for bridal dresses and upholstery.

Charmeuse stretch: 6% lycra; at 19mm, it is ideal for dresses, blouses, home decor and nightwear.

Chiffon: Light weight, plain, woven, soft drape; made from twisted yarns (gives it a slightly rough feel) spaced out to make the fabric transparent; can be light to medium weight (5-10 mm); excellent for



scarves and stoles, overlays on evening gowns and bridal wear; wonderful for nuno felting; use tissue paper underneath when cutting out patterns and to stabilise seams when sewing.

Chiffon Crinkle: Crepe-textured with a dull, soft finish; transparent; ideal for shawls and scarves; 8mm; wool felts easily onto the edges, and as the fabric shrinks, leaves a “gathered” look at the sides.

Chiffon Lame: 70% silk plus 30% metallic; 8mm; airy and diaphanous; magical for scarves, wraps and nuno felting (sparkles in the light).

China silk: Also called Fuji Silk; light weight, plain weave fabric; slippery surface and soft sheen; 5-12mm; usually inexpensive because it is made utilising shorter silk fibres; used mostly for lining and crafts; often called washable silk; wrinkles easily; often sold as Habotai (Habutai) or Pongee (Paj) but these names really belong to better quality silks; not good for fitted garments (seams tend to tear under stress); 8mm is the standard.

Cloque: French for “blistered”; has a raised woven pattern and a quilted or puckered look.

Crepe: Gauzy, pebbly appearance; lovely drape; the yarn is highly twisted before weaving, and the weft is much thinner than the warp; many varieties and thicknesses, including crepe de chine, Moroccan crepe, crepe backed satin and crepe georgette; used for dresses and skirts requiring perfect fitting.

Crepe de chine: Thin, lustrous, plain weave, made with twisted yarn (giving it a “pebbly” appearance); comes in a number of different plies; 2-ply is too soft to give a tailored look, but is great in blouses, dresses, men’s shirts, jacket linings and

home decor (14mm is considered inferior; 16mm is the standard); 4-ply (40mm) is the traditional silk for the Parisian “little black dress,” the jacket or evening coat, or for an evening, wedding gown or bridesmaid’s dress; 6-ply looks amazing as sumptuous cushions or a bed-throw.

Coan: A traditional silk from the Mediterranean, made by *Pachypasa atus* D silkworms which feed on pine, cypress, juniper and oak; used in Ancient Rome for crimson-dyed apparel; some coan is still gathered and used by local crafters.

Damask: light to medium jacquard-woven silk with elaborate patterns; used for upholstery and bed covers.

Dupioni: (dupion, douponi, doupioni, douppioni) Made with the thread from two different silkworms that spin their cocoons close together (the fibres get tangled and is used to make the silk thread); the tread is rough, containing bumps and irregularities; stiff, taffeta-like appearance; resists wrinkles and holds creases after ironing (which can give a garment a crisp, tailored finish); both sides are the same; doesn’t stretch at all (measurements must be very precise); unravels easily; works well for jackets, wedding dresses, skirts, window treatments, table runners and cloths, and other home decor; a number of varieties—Italian dupioni is the finest, with a flat finish and a subtle linen-look with few slubs (used for classy daywear), Chinese, which is more often used for home decor, and Indian (thinner 34mm, with more slubs).

Eri: (Endi, Errandi) A dull silk made by one of two silkworms—*Philosamia ricini* Hutt or *Philosamia Cynthia* Drury, reared in the north-eastern Indian



states on castor oil plants, producing white or brick-red silk; the moths are allowed to emerge, and the cocoons are then spun into yarn.

Fagara: from the giant silk moth, *Attacus atlas* L (light brown cocoons).

Faille: (similar to poult) A thick, soft taffeta with crosswise ribs; slightly glossy; excellent drape; used for suits, jackets and home decor; 40mm.

Four-ply: a heavy-weight silk; greater body and structure than most silks; can be found in several varieties of silk.

Fuji Silk: (See China silk) Spun silk; best for lining and craft; inexpensive; often called washable silk; wrinkles easily; 8mm and up.

Georgette: A sheer crepe silk; crinkly, dull surface; lightweight, but heavier than chiffon; 16mm; used in scarves or overlays for evening dresses; good for nuno felting, especially for garments such as jackets and skirts.

Gumma: Untreated silk made with high twist yarns; sericin left in the fibre; excellent for shibori and creating permanent structure and shaping.

Habotai: (Habutai) Very fine, almost transparent; plain weave; wrinkle resistant; 8mm; good for scarves, lining, lingerie and nuno felting.

Jacquard: Smooth, elegant feel; woven on a jacquard loom; intricately woven patterns using matte and reflective threads, usually in a single colour; amazing for freeform dyeing; used in bedding, scarves and upholstery.

Jersey: See Knit.

Kihachijo: Made on Hachijo island; dyed in

three colours—black, bright yellow and orange-brown; usually woven into stripes.

Knit: Made by inter-looping the yarn to produce a smooth, flat texture; soft, slippery and stretchy; silk knit jersey drapes beautifully without clinging, and is suitable for all draped clothing; use a ball-point needle when sewing; heavy, at about 35mm.

Matelasse: Has a raised or woven design which appears puckered or quilted.

Mulberry silk: 90% of the commercial silk in the world comes from the silkworm *Bombix mori* L which feeds (indoors) on mulberry leaves; the most superior quality of silk.

Muga: The muga silkworms, *Antheraea assama*, belong to the same genus as tasar silkworms, but the silk they produce is golden-yellow and very strong; used almost exclusively for traditional dress in Assam.

Mussel silk: Not made by a caterpillar, but by a mussel, *Pinna squamosa*, in the Adriatic; the “silk” is the strong brown filament the mussel secretes to anchor itself to a rock—it is collected, combed and spun into a silk-like fibre; sometimes called fish wool.

Noil: Dull, with random dark and light flecks and a nubby texture; made from leftover silk fibres; has the appearance of soft cotton or fine wool; rougher than most silks; fabulous for clothing because it is wrinkle resistant, travels well, and can be machine washed on the ‘delicates’ cycle; felters love it because it is very warm for winter garments and only has ten percent shrinkage; sometimes available in a herringbone weave.

Oak Tasar: Like tasar, but a finer variety; silkworms feed on oak leaves.

Organza: plain woven; sheer; strong; made of tightly twisted yarn; stiff; holds its original form when ironed (excellent for interfacing and veils); also comes in satin, metal and crinkle varieties; 6mm; good for feltmaking (softens when felting, but makes a very strong base for skirts, coats and jackets, plus there is hardly any shrinkage).

Peau de soie: Double-sided silk; medium weight; smooth with a satiny lustrous finish; fine cross ribs; looks slightly corded.

Pongee: (Paj) Woven fabric; slight surface texture; uneven grain; inexpensive; lightweight; when nuno felted it has the effect of passionfruit skin, and three metres will shrink to 2.6 metres; good for scarves, wraps and other garments.

Poult: (Similar to faille) Soft, thick taffeta with clear crosswise ribs; Poult de soie is often called faille taffeta.

Continued on page 49...

Raw silk: Any silk that hasn't had the sericin removed: stiff and dull; tends to attract dirt and odour; can be used to make drapes and upholstery.

Satin: Shiny; the points where the warp and weft intersect are hidden (makes it look as if the fibres are laying side-by-side); excellent for fancy gowns, christening robes and would make beautiful curtains; ranges from 32 to 42mm.

Shantung: Similar to pongee, but heavier; may be referred to as spun wild silk; rough texture; slub yarns are used in the warp of the material; durable; often used for men's suits, as well as smart suits and jackets for women. See tussah.

Silk linen: Nubby yarn; plain weave; has the look and characteristics of linen.

Spider silk: Made by several species of spiders; strong and elastic; soft and fine; not yet used in the commercial textile industry, but is very important in optical instruments.

Surah: Distinct effect of diagonal grooves and ridges through the manner of weaving.

Taffeta: Plain; crisp; shiny; light weight; woven; rustles when handled; iridescent taffeta is created by using different colours in the warp and weft threads; creases easily; usually about 22mm; used for garments.

Thai silk: Uses one colour for the warp and one for the weft; appears to change colour in different lights.

Tissue silk: Very fine georgette or chiffon; used in nuno felting for scarves and wraps; 3 metres will shrink to about 2.4 metres.

Tulle: Diaphanous fabric; wonderful drape; used for wedding veils; often embroidered or beaded; soft; about 7mm.

Tussah silk: Firm; rigid; coarse; medium weight; neutral tones (creamy tan); usually produced in its natural colour; tends not to dye easily; often called shantung; made from the cocoons of the wild tasar (*Antheraea*) silkworms; the cocoons are spun after the moth has hatched, so the filaments are much shorter; doesn't wrinkle easily; used in clothing, furnishing and interior decor; sometimes referred to as raw silk (a misnomer); if used for felting, it will shrink up to 20%.

Twill: Dense; woven with a double thread; appearance of fine diagonal ribs and grooves; expensive; used for suiting.



Velvet: Pile fabric, which has tufted yarn cut off at single height to resemble fur; luxuriously soft feel and beautiful drape; excellent for evening wear, capes, curtains and special clothing; Devore velvet, where some tufting is removed to leave patterns, is great for nuno felting; felting shrinks the velvet by up to 20%.

Voile: Any light, matt fabric made from twisted yarn, where the threads are spaced out to make the fabric transparent.

Washable silk: (see China silk, Fuji silk) This modern term refers to the light weight, cheaper silk that is considered unsuitable for outer garments; good for silk painting; makes great scarves. Please note that most silks are considered "washable".

Thank you to Sylvia at Silksational (www.silksational.com.au) and Marion at Beautiful Silks (www.beautifulsilks.com) who sent samples of silks and silk products to aid the research for this article. Thanks also to Carol at Silk Wholesalers (www.silkwholesalers.com.au) for sharing her expertise.

