



A young woman of the "lines and squares" group of weavers at their local workshop in Gimigliano.



A new generation is weaving traditional patterned cloths using yarns obtained from broom, cotton and linen.

Many Yarns Spin a Revival in Calabria

A Young Generation of Weavers Gives Modern Twist to Traditional Techniques

By Kate Singleton

CAULONIA, Italy — Dipped into the Ionian Sea on one side, and the Tyrrhenian on the other, the wild mountainous region of Calabria has long been sidestepped by development. Communication — and cooperative activities — are often difficult.

Yet in the past few years, various activities from textiles to tourism have sprung up that are injecting new life into local economies. And a younger generation is choosing to stay in Calabria rather than look for work in the north.

Among them are young, well-educated women intent on reviving centuries-old weaving techniques that produced some rare and wonderful silks and linen cloths. And they have turned to the older folk, the depositaries of age-old weaving skills, for help.

Anna-Maria Rattuis, a pharmacist by profession, is passionate about the rich heritage of silk-weaving for which the region was once renowned, and she is devoting her free time to encouraging a return to sericulture in the area.

"You can't weave the cloths if you don't have the right yarns," she said in the little seaside town of Caulonia. "Around here we used to have mulberry trees, not citrus groves. Nowadays local farmers can't find a market for their fruit, the silkworms up in the northern Veneto region have stopped producing silk because of the pollution, and down here our traditional weavers can't afford artisan yarns and find the Chinese industrial ones unsuitable for their fabrics.

"In the past few years, we've actually been dispatching fresh, clean mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms up north. Surely the whole situation needs rethinking before it's too late."

For Rattuis, the answer is to raise enough silkworms locally, which means planting mulberry trees again. Last year she obtained some public funding to set up what is currently Calabria's only silk spinning workshop. For want of a better location, she has made over the basement of her pharmacy to house it.

Current production is little more than 10 kilograms (22 pounds) a day, offering employment to two young women on state-subsidized training contracts. But it is hoped that output will increase once the word gets around.

Two small towns that should be interested in the yarns are San Floro and Cortale, both perched on hillsides overlooking a steep valley in the region of Catanzaro. This area was once so famed for its handwoven silken brocades that the peasant women are said to have worn silken underwear made from the offcuts.



At Cortale, Nicola Procopio and his wife have set up Dal Baco alla Seta (From Worm to Silk), a small company with its own little showroom selling exquisite bedspreads, cushions and curtains in natural-colored handwoven silk. Such individual enterprise has spurred the mayors of both towns into organizing subsidized weaving courses for young people wishing to follow their example.

On the other side of the valley in the towns of Tiriolo, San Pietro Apostolo, Gimigliano and Serrastretta, various groups of young women have set up looms together in rooms provided by local authorities.

With the help of some elderly experts, they have revived the tradition of weaving beautiful patterned cloths using yarns obtained from broom as well as weaving cotton and linen. Many of the fabrics are wonderfully innovative, blending traditional techniques with modern design. Some of the cloths combining various yarns of contrasting color and texture are impressive.

Most of these artisans have taken part in development projects coordinated by Artes, a Bologna-based agency that

specializes in obtaining funds from the European Union for its Alliance regional development programs.

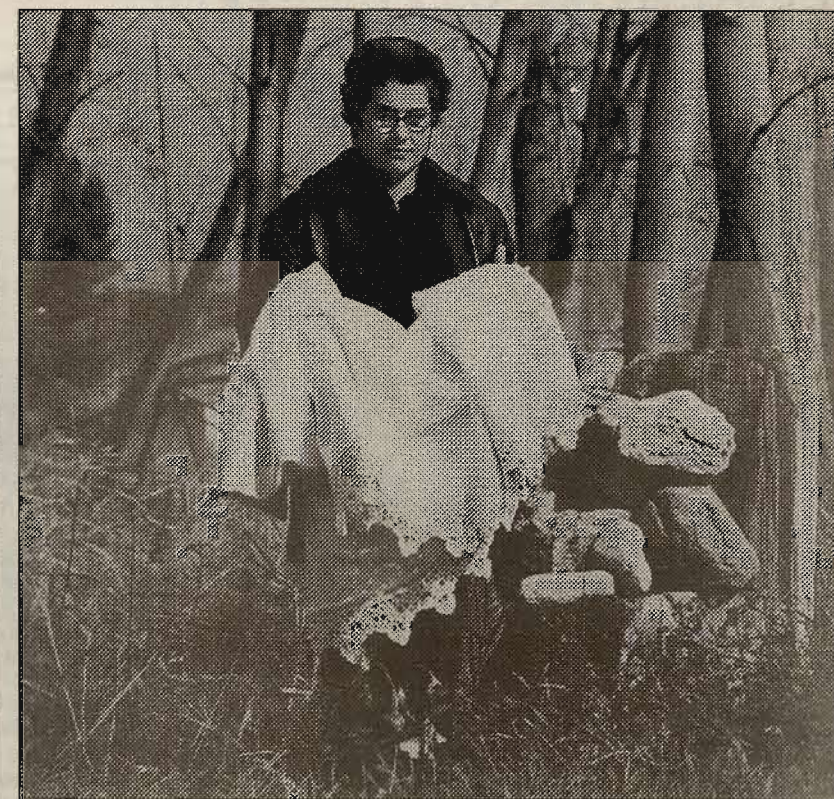
The Artes director, Lilia Infelise, herself of Calabrian origin, has had a prototype collection of clothes and bags styled with these fabrics that was recently shown at the Bari trade fair, the most important event of its sort in southern Italy.

"Both the cloths and the garments themselves met with considerable interest, and this is gratifying for young people who have been struggling to get going," Infelise explained.

"But the initial training must be followed by further support," she added.

"Calabria is not only difficult because people lack faith in themselves," she said. "The interior is so mountainous that communications are also more demanding. What these young people need now is tailored Computer-Aided Manufacture and Computer-Aided Design programs and new looms to get the best out of the traditional skills they have learned."

The young weavers of the Alliance project are in contact with each other and exchange ideas with the Lanificio Leo, a



Photos by Luca Musella

A silk weaver in Cortale, left, lays the warp. Above, Anna-Maria Rattuis, the owner of a silk spinning workshop, holds some handwoven cloth.

local factory using proto-industrial looms to create some very interesting cloths.

Elsewhere, however, isolation has hampered development. An opportunity for creating further links will be the *Festa della ginestra*, or festival of broom, the shrub with the little yellow flowers — a 10-day event devoted to weaving with broom fibers. It will be held in the village of Riace, just inland from the Ionian coast, from June 18-29, when the broom will be in flower.

Just a few years ago, Riace was practically a ghost town. Thanks to the energy and enterprise of a small local cooperative, the Associazione Citta Futura, its future as a lively textile community now seems assured.

With support from the local bishop, Giancarlo Bregantini, and a bank loan, the association members have worked hard to turn the tide. Riace now boasts a thriving workshop of artisan weavers. In fact, there is talk of extending the Alliance development model to certain areas of Brazil.

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