





***At the Beginning
is White Gold.***

g u t

***Tales of linen
production in
St. Gallen from
1250 until BIGNIK***



'Good

– At the Beginning is White Gold'.

Tales of linen production in St. Gallen

from 1250 until BIGNIK

St. Gallen can look back on a centuries-long history of textiles, its beginnings reaching back to the Middle Ages. Its high quality ensures the renown of St. Gallen linen in the old days; known as “white gold”, it becomes a myth that endures to the present day. The concept and action artists Frank and Patrik Riklin from the Atelier für Sonderaufgaben absorb textile traditions, investing them with new meaning with BIGNIK, a social sculpture that grows each year.

Also, in a free, artistic interpretation, Martin Leuthold joins up the past and present of textiles. Himself an icon of contemporary textile design, Leuthold creates an extensive installation that is on show in the Textile Museum St. Gallen from April 22th 2022 to January 29th 2023. Since the 13th century, linen production has been among the most important sources of income for the city and region of St. Gallen. Tens of thousands of people are employed with the “White Gold”: planting the flax, spinning the yarn, as

well as weaving, bleaching and finishing the cloth. That the linen meets the highest standards in all phases of production is ensured by guilds and city authorities. They testify to the origin of the textile article that is destined for long-distance trade with a “G” (standing for “St. Gallen”) – in some interpretations it refers to the quality, too (“good”). When the linen trade comes under pressure in the 18th century, the textile region of St. Gallen begins to refocus – with first cotton processing flourishing, followed later on by embroidery.

The linen period came to an end centuries ago and with it the lengths of material laid out on the fields to bleach disappeared, too. Yet the hills around St. Gallen are once again covered with material – at least sporadically. “Creating communally a giant picnic rug for the whole population, consisting of 286,478 pieces of material, exactly as many as the inhabitants of the region.” That’s the vision of the twin brothers Frank and Patrik Riklin from

the Atelier für Sonderaufgaben, who, together with the REGIO Appenzell Ar-St.Gallen-Lake Constance started the BIGNIK project in 2012, and who have initiated an installation at different places in the region year by year ever since. After 10 years of collecting and sewing, the city of St. Gallen has now itself become the installation venue: white collides with red, business with culture, history with life. To mark this, the Textile Museum St.Gallen is showing the exhibition '*G o o d – At the Beginning is White Gold*', in which the past and the present in textiles join up to make a visual total work of art.



« G o o d »

As the saying goes, our future builds on our past. This is particularly the case when it comes to creating textiles. As a qualified embroidery designer, I have spent my entire life working in St.Gallen's textile industry. I draw inspiration from historical fabrics, discover new things in ancient materials and create new textiles every single day.

Cloth production in St.Gallen begins with "white gold". Personally, I find this tradition simply fascinating. The trade in linen has brought the region wealth and renown, and carried St.Gallen's name out

into the wider world. A great deal has been invested in the "white gold" that has left its mark on the textile industry. "Good" stands for adept organisation, an awareness of quality, modesty, a cosmopolitan spirit and innovative drive. Education, fashion, architecture, banking, insurance, medicine and the automotive sector – many different industries benefit from the prestige and expansive network that the textiles bring. St.Gallen's cloth production has shaped the region and its people for 800 years. Of course, not everything that glittered

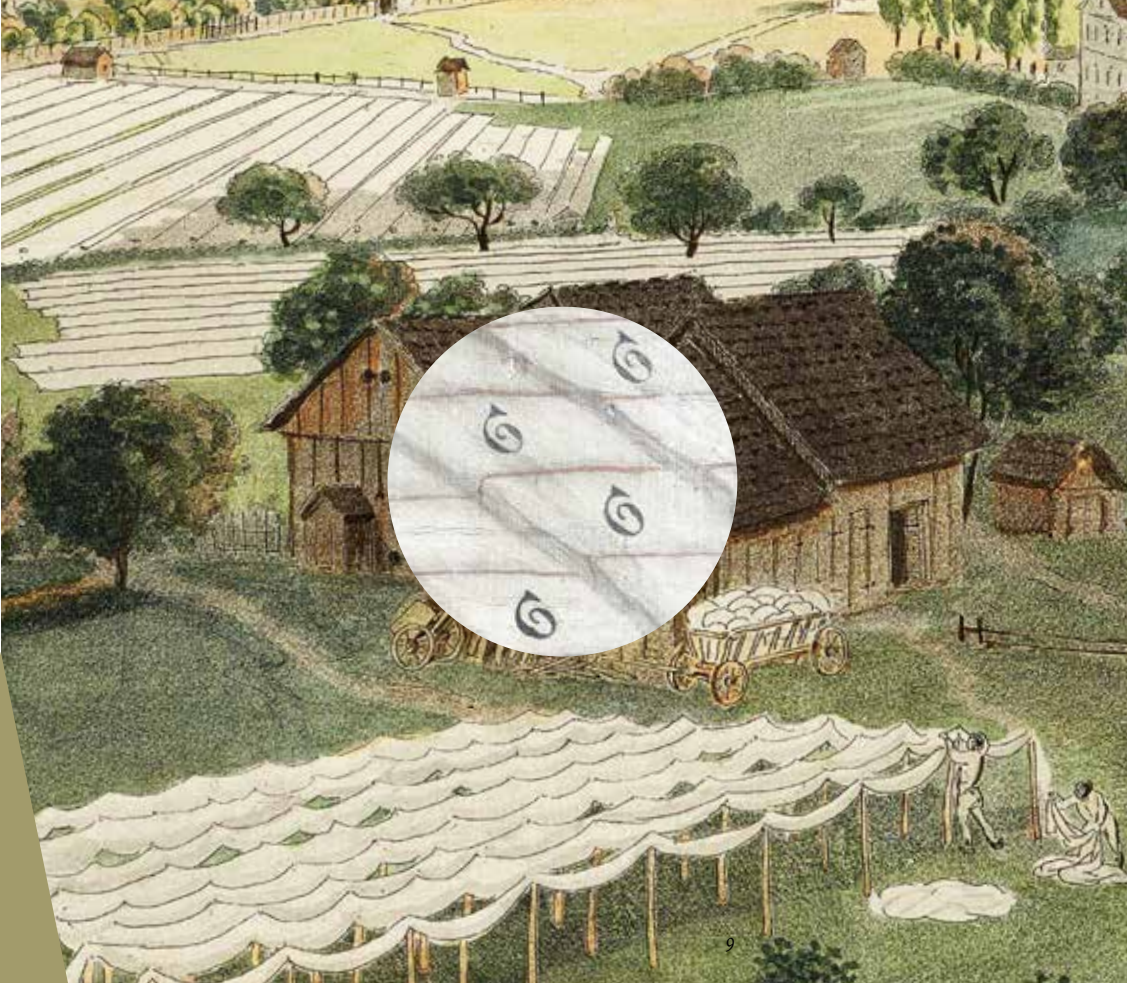


was gold though. The glitter was by all means accompanied by shadows – in the acquisition of raw materials, the working conditions and distribution of the profits, for instance. The textiles production of times past raises questions that are at times more and at others less convenient and thus forever topical.

Indeed, the textile history quite literally gets under the skin of the population living in Eastern Switzerland. Whether they want it or not, or are even aware of it, textiles are in their DNA. BIGNIK is a striking testimony to this. The concept artists Frank and Patrik Riklin have been working with local inhabitants since 2012 to lay out a giant red and white picnic blanket. This collaborative effort to revive the regional cloth trade continues to grow every year.

In the exhibition entitled '*Good – At the Beginning is White Gold*', I strive to reminisce about Eastern Switzerland's rich textile tradition, to take visitors back to the world of the bleaching fields and to share my fascination with textiles and their complex production processes.

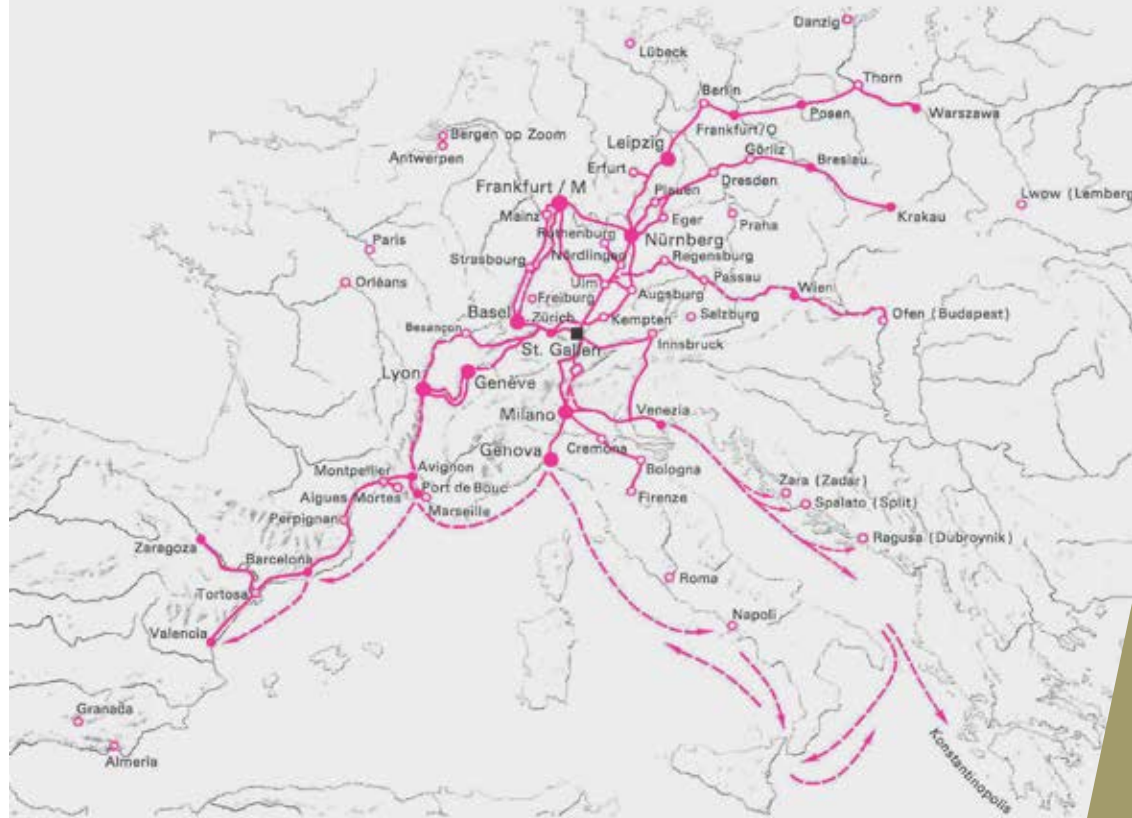
Martin Leuthold





Cloth from St.Gallen, a popular export





Lines = important
trade routes
Points = popular
fairs and markets

St. Gallen's trade network

St. Gallen's linen industry focused on export trade. Long-distance traders travelled all over Europe in search of customers. The map here shows the fairs and markets where cloth from St. Gallen was traded and the distances that the carters and tradespeople travelled. Linen from St. Gallen first appears in Genoa (1262), Venice (1362), Padua (1368), Milan (1375), Frankfurt am Main (1371) and Nuremberg (1387). Over time, the production in St. Gallen becomes more extensive and the trade network increasingly dense. In the

mid-sixteenth century, about 20,000 lengths of cloth – each of almost 100 metres in length and one metre in width – were being produced there every year. Lined up end to end, this corresponds to the distance between St. Gallen and Kiev! Production reaches its peak in 1610 when 23,622 lengths of fabric (of the highest quality) are distributed throughout Europe.



Historical textile bleaching



Flax has been grown, yarn spun, and linen woven in and around St. Gallen since the Middle Ages. The cloth is finished in the city, where master craftsmen bleach, mangle, and dye the cloth.



The finished cloth is subject to a rigorous inspection during its presentation, after which it is stamped with an official mark. Long-distance traders travel to markets and fairs all over Europe to sell the cloth.

The returns from St. Gallen's cloth trade are so great that the city is able to pay off the imperial monastery after 1457 and become a free imperial city.



In 1721, the immigrant Peter Bion begins processing cotton in St. Gallen. Inspiration gained in Lyons leads to thousands of fustian and mousseline fabrics being embroidered by hand in Eastern Switzerland.

In the 1860s, machine embroidery becomes the leading industry in Eastern Switzerland. Young people acquire artistic and commercial skills at textile colleges in St. Gallen.



The Kaufmännisches Directorium trade association dispatches trade delegations around the globe. Exporters sell the white embroidery on the newly accessed markets.





***View, question
and read more***

The historical paintings shown in '*Good – At the Beginning is White Gold*' are as vivid as they are revealing. They are vivid as they depict the most important professions, activities and interdependencies in Eastern Switzerland's textile industry. The client (the Kaufmännisches Directorium trade association that was itself familiar with textiles) was keen for the artists to incorporate both the bigger picture and the textile details into their depictions. And they are revealing as there is more to the paintings than just the details prescribed. For the paintings testify to the culture and history of the time. Since the time of creation and moment of viewing

diverge, museums come into play. Among others, they are tasked with compiling, preserving and exhibiting the paintings. At the same time, they are duty-bound to scrutinise and critique them.

The historical painting by Emil Rittmeyer (1820–1904) raises some uncomfortable questions. It shows key scenes from regional production and the global trade in linen and embroidered cotton products. Cotton features as a rather insignificant raw material, despite the fact that it was actually entirely crucial to industrialisation, globalisation and colonisation. The oil painting was created in 1881 at a time when racist theories were widespread and generally accepted, even though slavery had already been abolished in some places. The conviction prevailed at the time that people were not equal and could be classified according to their physical characteristics. This belief is clearly perceptible in the painting. Stereotypical depictions of ethnic groups can be observed at the far right. Today, this method of presentation would be entirely unthinkable and extremely hurtful. Unfortunately, the prejudices construed in the form

of racism, cultural trauma, and social and economic inequality continue to impact the present day and still haven't been resolved.

The historical depictions of the linen production process also raise questions. The Historical and Ethnological Museum in St.Gallen owns a series of pictures dating from the mid-seventeenth century. It is unclear who painted the 11 scenes. Long-distance traders are believed to have used them as promotional gifts or to adorn their business premises. The production process presented in 'Good' is by Daniel Wilhem Hartmann (1793–1862), who hailed from St.Gallen. The artist was probably commissioned by the president of the Kaufmännisches Directorium trade association to copy and expand the original sequence into 14 postcard-sized watercolours.

Today, they belong to the Vadian Collection of the Citizen's Community of St.Gallen. The historical paintings certainly glorify St.Gallen's linen trade. Indeed, it is questionable whether the work processes in the city and countryside were really as charming and the division of labour between the different professions as harmonious. The sale of linen in Europe was also more prone to disruption than the series of paintings would lead to believe, and could yield sizeable gains as well as substantial losses. Conspicuous omissions from the linen production scenes can moreover be discerned.



Those seeking an alternative interpretation should refer to further literature. Here are a number of reading recommendations for a deeper understanding of the oil painting by Rittmeyer:

Hans Fässler: Reise in Schwarz-Weiss. Schweizer Ortstermine in Sachen Sklaverei. Zürich 2005

Sven Beckert: King Cotton. Eine Globalgeschichte des Kapitalismus. Munich 2014

Patricia Purtschert / Barbara Lüthi / Francesca Falk (Eds.): Postkoloniale Schweiz. Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien. Bielefeld 2014

The following publications inform on the linen trade in St.Gallen:

Hans Conrad Peyer: Leinwandgewerbe und Fernhandel der Stadt St.Gallen von den Anfängen bis 1520. 2 volumes. St.Gallen 1959–1960

Curt Schirmer / Hermann Strehler: Vom alten Leinwandgewerbe in St.Gallen. St.Gallen 1967

Ernest Menolfi / Peter Bolli: Frühes Unternehmertum in Hauptwil. Die Textilmanufakturen Gonzenbach im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert. (Thurgauer Beiträge zur Geschichte; 157). Frauenfeld 2019

Professions

Participants
in St. Gallen's
linen trade:



merchant



carter



foreman (supervisor)



broker



linen inspector



bleaching master



farmer (home weaver)





dyer



muleteer



linen cutter



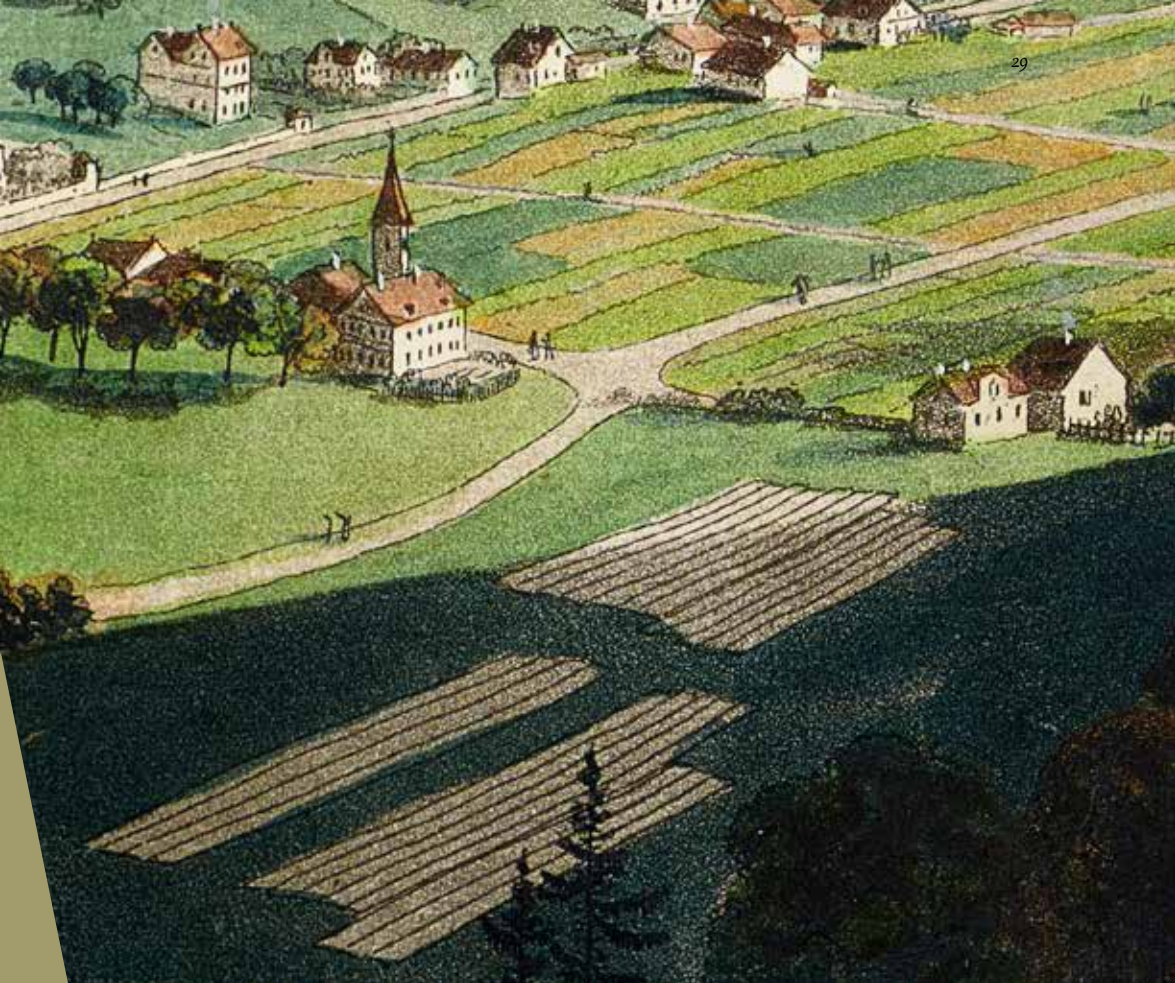
packer



linen dryers



cooper



***The linen production
process – a historical
depiction***



Cloth production in St.Gallen in the past and present

*The BIGNIK vision – a collaborative
endeavour that grows every year*



Around 800 years ago, the city of St.Gallen and the region that surrounds it developed a process to transform flax into linen. This labour-intensive product was used for clothing (shirts, aprons, veils, etc.) as well as for home textiles (curtains, tablecloths, bedding). The cloth was in fact so valuable that (gold) coins were used to weigh it out and it was sometimes referred to as “white gold”. The production and sale of linen brought St. Gallen immense prestige, prosperity and renown.
First things first though:

An oversized picnic blanket is being spread out across the region between Säntis and Lake Constance. The local inhabitants have been collecting, sewing and laying out red and white cloths since 2012. The motto: one cloth per person. A social sculpture is thus created that will continue to grow year after year until 2050. For this is how long it will take to make this vision a reality. Conceived by the concept and action artists Frank and Patrik Riklin from the Atelier für Sonderaufgaben, the long-term performance draws on Eastern Switzerland's textile history and consolidates resources for pioneering projects of the future. Those who pool their ideas, skills and contacts achieve more – for both the region and its inhabitants.
First things first though:



The farmers sow the flaxseed in their fields between mid-March and June. The cultivation area must first be cleared of weeds and clods of earth, and the soil loosened and ploughed. Meanwhile, other crops are sown in the meadows and nurseries to feed the people of St. Gallen.

In April and May, the region is scoured for suitable materials. The people of St. Gallen are invited to search their attics and cellars, and to get out all their white and red cloths. It doesn't matter whether it is patterned, beige, orange or Bordeaux red: the more cloth there is and the bigger it is, the better. A Rapid tractor is used to collect the cloth.





Once the soil has been readied, the seeds are sown. Despite the favourable climate, the plants must be tended and cared for as they grow. There is plenty of work to be done – from drawing the harrow through sowing the seeds to weeding.



In the space of four to six weeks, the concept artists Frank and Patrik Riklin scour the region's districts with their assistants in their search for suitable cloth. All those not paid a personal visit by the "cloth hunters" can also hand their contributions in during opening hours at one of the cloth collection points set up at town and city halls. Cloths must be a minimum of 1.40 × 1.40 metres in size.





Roughly twelve weeks later, the flax is ripe and can be harvested. Plenty of helping hands are needed for this. The plants must be pulled up, washed, and dried before the stalks are drawn through a rake-like device and laid out on the meadows. The stems rot away during this process to reveal the fibres inside.



One cloth per person – that's the BIGNIK vision. This means that a total of 286,478 cloths must be collected, so exactly as many as the region has inhabitants. Scraps of cloth from curtains, bed sheets or tablecloths can be found tucked away in old cupboards and dusty drawers in almost every home. Participation encourages people to interact with one another; unlikely communities are formed.

The workers then prepare the flax at home. The women use bush hammers to beat the leaves and seeds off the stems (riffing). Next, they loosen the fibres from the stems (breaking). Lastly, they pull brushes with iron teeth (hackles) through the fibres, gathering them together in braids.





The red and white cloths that have been collected are then cut. Each cloth – whether a bed sheet, curtain, tablecloth or off a roll – is cut to exactly 1.40×1.40 metres in size. This step is performed in empty industrial textile production halls and requires a great deal of accuracy, for the BIGNIK modular concept will not work otherwise.



The fibre is then spun into yarn. The farmers' wives use a hand spindle to twist the flax fibres from the distaff. Yarn of the desired length is produced in this way, which is wound up (reeled), braided and washed. This is a highly coveted semi-finished product on the market in St.Gallen.



In the next step, the cut cloths are prepared for sewing: four red or white cloths are sown together to create white or red cloth modules. The Riklins were inspired by their grandmother, who often served dinner on a red and white chequered tablecloth. They reinterpret this and integrate it into the landscape.



The yarn is processed into cloth in damp cellar rooms. This process is depicted in the painting here by the two silhouettes in blue and red. Year in, year out, they sit at their loom for hours on end making linen. Rarely more than five metres is made in a day. The woven cloth has a brownish hue.



From May, the sewing begins in public places, such as on traffic islands or ramps at railway stations. Or at home. BIGNIK seeks in this way to revive the regional work reality of former times and to transfer it to the present day. There are no musty cellar taverns or 14-hour working days though. Instead, it is a fun-filled activity all in the name of Eastern Switzerland's great BIGNIK vision.



The farmers and distributors take the raw linen folded in bundles to the city where it is presented at the bakehouse or in the weavers' guild. The presentation is overseen by city officials dressed in black. The punishments for any violation of the production and trade regulations are severe.



Each completed cloth module comprises four cloths and measures 2.70×2.70 metres in size. White Velcro fasteners at the corners allow the individual modules to be joined together when they are laid out. Local politicians in dark suits also take their turn at the sewing machines and get the needle flying. Each finished cloth module is celebrated before being stored in a box.



Not all linen is the same. The city officials carefully inspect the thickness and regularity of the cloth presented. This inspection on the one hand serves to determine the price of the cloth, as the farmers receive their weaving wage once a fee has been deducted. On the other hand, the quality of the cloth is determined. The city officials stamp the linen with a quality mark:



while cloth of the highest quality is marked with a “G” (for St.Gallen), “crab” or “ring”, inferior cloth is stamped with a “Nasenbletz” rejection mark or a black and red “cross”.



BIGNIK is not just a picnic. Nor is it merely about the delights consumed while on it. Rather, BIGNIK is a long-term performance in which the entire population is involved. BIGNIK “chips away” at the mentality and recalls the “textile DNA” of the entire region. The social production and cultivation of BIGNIK moreover creates a unique cultural asset for St. Gallen.



Only the finest cloth is brought to the bleaching plant for further processing. Bleaching masters offer their services outside the city walls. From March until August, a sea of linen surrounds St. Gallen. The finished cloth is created by fulling, which involves soaking the cloth in water before pounding it. The bleaching workers then douse the cloth with lye and lay it out in the bleaching fields for several weeks to dry.

The dramaturgic climax comes between June and September when the local inhabitants help to lay all of the cloth modules out in the region in a chessboard design. Clothmaking is today the new haymaking! Farmers allow their fields to be used and mow the meadows early for this. And everything that could appear to be in the way is simply incorporated in – houses, trees and railway tracks included. The size of the cloth depends on the number of people helping to lay it. Once the cloth has been laid, it can be used to enjoy a picnic together for a few hours.





The linen dryers perform the final step. They stretch out the linen, fix it taut between sticks and smooth it with a rolling stone ball to make it thinner. This completes the finishing process. The cloth is then folded and taken to the city for the final quality control, the white linen presentation.



The final step involves folding up the cloths again. As the afternoon draws to an end, the cloth modules' Velcro fasteners are undone again and the cloths are folded together and packed away in grey boxes. Every helping hand is needed for this, as the humidity increases after sunset and the cloths must not get damp.



Cloth deemed inadequate is taken to the dye masters in St. Gallen. The lengths of cloth are then hung from house façades or drying towers to dry.



Any cloth modules that have gotten damp are collected up and sent to the BIGNIK assistants, who hang or lie them out over window sills to dry. These cloths are then returned to the BIGNIK stock. The same applies for any damaged or soiled cloth modules, which are repaired and washed.



Long-distance traders establish a network of contacts in the trade markets. They reach agreements on sale of the cloth and organise its transport. Packers store the valuable cargo safely in bales, crates or barrels and load it onto pack animals. The poor road conditions mean transport by wagon is unthinkable.



The cloths are stored in a safe place for the rest of the year – in a fire station depot or municipal warehouse, for example. Every year, BIGNIK requires increasingly complex logistics, more space and ever more people to store the growing cultural asset. There are currently around 3,000 cloth modules, which corresponds to about 6.2 Percent of the target BIGNIK vision.

Carters and muleteers transport the cloth all over Europe. The linen from St. Gallen is sold at the large international fairs in Lyons and Nuremberg. The merchants working there then take care of distribution to the farthest corners of Europe. Well-to-do women from as far away as Valencia and Warsaw appreciate the products of the St. Gallen linen trade.





Since 2018, cloth has also been laid out on asphalt in city centres. Known as asphalting, this process involves covering streets, squares and alleyways with cloth modules. The cloth is poured into place like a liquid. What is special about

this new development is that the surroundings are integrated in even more and the public spaces in villages and towns “painted” with cloth.

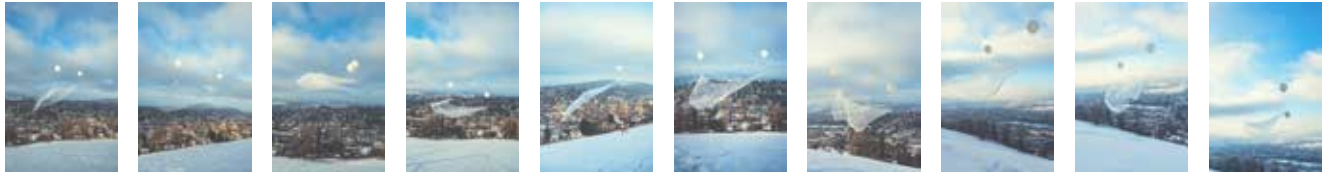


The merchants of St. Gallen return home laden with impressions and goods from around the globe. In around 1750, a merchant from St. Gallen discovers Turkish embroidery on silk at the fair in Lyons. This triggers an enthusiasm for hand embroidery on linen and cotton in Eastern Switzerland and heralds the golden years of the embroidery industry in St. Gallen – but that is another story.



BIGNIK is striving for a utopia. It is an attempt to create a unique community tradition for the region, entirely according to the concept of “slow and steady (cloth laying) wins the race”. To date, more than ten thousand people have been involved in the creative process. They collect, sew and lay out the cloth modules and thus help to further the vision. The BIGNIK vision is expected to be completed in 2050.

Frank and Patrik Riklin



«Off-White»
December 18, 2021
Land Art with
water filter fabric
and weather balloons

Martin Leuthold and Marcus Gossolt
Photography Maurus Hofer



Photo credits

Agentur Alltag
Off-White, Fotografien:
Maurus Hofer
Seiten 2, 6, 14, 62f.

Atelier für Sonderaufgaben
BIGNIK, Fotografien:
Frank und Patrik Riklin
Seiten 35, 39, 41, 45, 47,
49, 51, 57, 59, 61
Helikopter-Service Triet AG
Seite 8
Bodo Rüedi Seite 37

Jelena Gernert Seite 43
Daniel Ammann Seite 53
Ruth Gradenecker Seite 55

Kantonsbibliothek St.Gallen,
Vadianische Sammlung der
Ortsbürgergemeinde St.Gallen
• St.Gallen vor der Anpflanzung
der Gemeindstheile [Ausschnitt],
Daniel Wilhelm Hartmann, 1818,
Gs q 1 D/11A Seite 8
• St. Gall. Vue prise depuis
le Romonte [Ausschnitt],
Franz Nikolaus König,
1817, GS q 1 D/1 Seite 9
• St.Gall. Vue prise depuis
la Solitude [Ausschnitt],
Franz Nikolaus König,
1830, GS f 1 D/3 Seite 29

• Reimspruch zum St.Galler
Textilgewerbe mit vierzehn
Aquarellen zum St.Galler
Leinwandgewerbe,
Daniel Wilhelm Hartmann,
Ms S 45a, 4.21-33
Seiten 24–28, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42,
44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60

Martin Leuthold
Künstlerische Überblendung von
Leinwand- und BIGNIK-Zyklus
Seiten 10, 30

Hans Conrad Peyer
Leinwandgewerbe und Fernhan-
del der Stadt St.Gallen von den
Anfängen bis 1520, Bd. 2,
St.Gallen 1960, Seite 27, ergänzt
vom Stadtarchiv der Ortsbürger-
gemeinde St. Gallen Seite 12

Textilmuseum St.Gallen
Von der mittelalterlichen Lein-
wandindustrie zum Stickerei-
Welthandel, Emil Rittmeyer,
1881. Gemalt im Auftrag des
Kaufmännischen Directoriums,
der heutigen Industrie-
und Handelskammer St.Gallen-
Appenzell Seiten 16–20

Imprint

Herausgeber
Textilmuseum St.Gallen
Vadianstrasse 2, St.Gallen
textilmuseum.ch
© 2022

Konzept und Gestaltung
Martin Leuthold
Marcus Gossolt
Maurus Hofer

Projektleitung
Paul Gruber

Kooperation
Frank und Patrik Riklin

Redaktion
Mandana Roozpeikar
Roman Wild

Wissenschaftliche Beratung
Nicole Stadelmann, Co-Leiterin
Stadtarchiv St.Gallen

Textarbeit
Sandra Čubranović
Silvia Gross
Mandana Roozpeikar
Frank und Patrik Riklin
Roman Wild

Übersetzung
CoText Übersetzungs Service
GmbH

Korrektorat
Kerstin Forster

Grafik und Bildbearbeitung
Alltag.ch

Schrift
GT Sectra

Druck
Typotron St.Gallen

Papiere
Bavaria Gloss
Holmen Trend
Magno Satin
Rebello
Maxi Offset

Produziert in der Schweiz

ISBN 978-3-033-09197-9



9 783033 091979



| | |
|--|----|
| « <i>Good</i> » | 7 |
| Cloth from St. Gallen, a popular export | 11 |
| Historical textile bleaching | 15 |
| Professions | 24 |
| Cloth production in St. Gallen in the past and present | 30 |
| «Off-White» | 62 |