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excavated from between the third and sixth centuries in Akhmim in Egypt are deemed to be the earliest surviving examples of warp velvet weaving.

'Evidence for velvet weaving is scant and ambiguous until the late medieval period,' says Wendy Landry. Her research suggests that the practice of velvet weaving was introduced in the mid- to late-13th century to northern Italian centres: Lucca, Florence, Siena, Venice and Genoa, as well as to France, and by the 14th and 15th centuries had also extended to other European cities and capitals, India and east Asia.

The desirability and refinement of the complex textile arguably reached its zenith in the Renaissance period – particularly in Italy. Certainly its role as signifier of social standing was heavily echoed in art of the time.

Today, only a small number of artisan studios around the world continue to offer handloomed velvets, including Venetian workshop Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua, where individual weavers can handloom at a rate of just 20 to 25cm of bespoke cloth a day. Since the Industrial Revolution, the vast majority of velvets are made on mechanic looms.

Decorating with velvet

From cushions and curtaining to upholstery, velvet undoubtedly elevates an interior. Durability and cost depend on variables including fibre type, pile density and intricacy of design, as well as the production methods.

'Velvet is an incredibly hardwearing material, which often surprises people who regard it as a luxury fabric that is hard to maintain,' says Sharon Crowson, founder and creative director of the Design Archives. 'For me, it is important to look out for a composition of 100 per cent cotton pile as this ensures the characteristically lustrous finish and soft handle that makes velvet so attractive. I have always loved printed, patterned velvet, which can enhance any interior; a beautiful print can only intensify velvet's already luxe qualities,' she explains.

Interior designer Victoria Wormsley of French-Brooks Interiors is also a keen advocate. 'I almost always use velvet in a decorating scheme as it adds a luxurious textural contrast that sets off other fabrics,' she reveals. 'The pile brings a lustre which changes in the light, adding richness to the colour. Some clients can be put off by bad memories of synthetic Dralon, but I tend to avoid overly shiny polyester and viscose velvet, sticking instead to cotton or linen velvet, which is more subtle. I often use a darker velvet for sofas as a wonderful foil for decorative cushions. It helps to anchor the scheme in a large room. Velvet can also elevate a plain rectangular headboard – especially when set off by narrow satin piping. ➤