Competing Images: Silk and Rayon in Popular U.S. Publications of the Nineteen Thirties

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In 1934, Mr. Paolino Gerli, President of the newly formed International Silk Guild, concluded his address at the Twenty-third Annual Convention of the National Retail Dry Goods Association as follows: “A new deal, a new era…Out of a glamorous past, not a Cinderella with a time limit beauty is beckoning to you, but a beautiful Princess, awakened by Prince Charming into a new consciousness of its eternal right to be the Queen of Fabrics.” These lofty words, delivered before an audience of American manufacturers, retailers, and wholesalers, were a call to arms for the beleaguered American silk industry. His words imparting a tone of righteousness, Mr. Gerli reflected the regal image of silk that the industry cultivated and would soon actively advance with a national promotional campaign. In that same address, he more pointedly acknowledged the woes which overtook the industry: “A new consciousness, a new pride, a new fighting spirit has been injected into the silk industry, finding its expression in a closely knit and aggressive body calling itself The International Silk Guild.”

The International Silk Guild was formed in 1933. Its purpose as stated in The American Silk and Rayon Journal, February 1934, was simply and broadly to foster trade and commerce in silk goods in the United States. The group was comprised of a diffuse range of silk textile industry and retail professionals. Raw silk importers, silk wholesalers and manufacturers, and retailers had realized by the early years of the nineteen thirties that the silk market was declining. Regenerated fibers had been encroaching upon the U.S. textile market during the nineteen twenties, and in the thirties, their production greatly increased while silk production decreased. According to the industry publication Textile Organon, February 11 1935, silk consumption in the United States generally rose from 1920 to 1929. However, from 1931 to 1933, The Rayon and Melland Textile Monthly of January 1935, reported that production of all-silk fabric in the United States fell by 45%. Several problems, among them the Great Depression, the over-production of raw silk by Japan, and poor quality silk fabrics culminated in the nineteen thirties in a significant decline in silk demand and consumption in the United States. In response to this decline, professionals in the U.S. silk industry organized, forming The International Silk Guild, a group which represented the interests of raw silk importers, silk wholesalers, and silk manufacturers. The group adopted an aggressive stance, attempting, through an active marketing campaign, to increase sales of silk in the United States.

At the same time silk production was decreasing, production of rayon and acetate was increasing. Between 1931 and 1933, production of all-rayon fabric increased by 150%. Although the problems facing the silk industry were varied and complex, the industry’s professionals blamed their woes upon the production rayon. American Silk and

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2 Ibid.
4 Annual Fiber Consumption 1920-1934, Textile Organon, 11 February 1935, 27.
5 “Rayon’s Influence in Our Silk Mills,” Rayon and Melland Textile Monthly, January 1935, 32, 60.
6 Ibid.
Rayon Journal, December, 1934, states, “The chief source of trouble in the loss of markets of the silk manufacturers is the rayon industry.”

This blame may have been warranted. Rayon yarn producers in the U.S., companies such as DuPont, American Bemberg, the Viscose Company, and the American division of Enka, marketed regenerated-fiber fabrics aggressively, persistently, and innovatively. Rayon producers employed print media, published handbooks for retailers, held fashion shows, and made short, educational films to market their products. Their marketing efforts spurred the silk industry to action, and in 1934, the International Silk Guild began a specific campaign designed to promote silk fabric in the U.S. One component of the campaign was print advertising.

Both silk and rayon fabric and yarn producers placed print ads in fashion and popular publications. This paper will concentrate on the differences between silk and rayon dress fabrics in print advertising. The silk ads will focus on those sponsored by the International Silk Guild. The time period under consideration is the nineteen thirties, a decade during which domestic rayon production greatly increased, setting new records every year while silk production struggled to maintain a steady amount.

If one were to compare typical print ads for rayon dress fabrics and those for silk, one would develop several general impressions. Advertising texts employ words that are ambiguous or used in an acontextual manner to appeal to the viewer. Silk ads often incorporated the words “satisfaction,” “genuine,” “confidence,” and “tradition,” and they imparted a sense of purpose, an importance, a loftiness, or a seriousness. Rayon ads often included words such as “youthful,” “modern,” “spring” and “fresh” while implying whimsy, fun, extravagance, or a carefree attitude. Where silk was depicted as the product of a centuries-old tradition, rayon was characterized as modern, exciting, and “fun,” as “the newest thing,” the product of new technology and science. The slogan of the DuPont company, a major American manufacturer of regenerated fibers, was “Better Living Through Chemistry.” This slogan illustrates the common idea that science and technology could be used to create fabric that was cost-effective and easy to produce. The problems the silk industry experienced, such as quality control and issues involving importing of raw materials, were non-existent in the production of rayon.

In comparing an ad incorporating DuPont rayon which appeared in The New Yorker, September 8, 1934 (fig.1) with an ad sponsored by the International Silk Guild appearing in Harper’s Bazaar, March 1935, one may see the difference between the silk and rayon campaigns. They each are typical of the general manner in which silk and rayon were promoted. Rayon was associated with bohemian, fun-loving, carefree, and active lifestyles, as affordable yet of good quality. The text from this apparel ad featuring rayon reads “The fun begins at 8:40…and goes to bed with the stars! Costume for the occasion—this CREPE CEVA in Rayon by DuPont. Fun to have a dull crepe with satin on the skin side. Fun to have the satin show when a frill flips. Only rayon gives us such amusing weaves and

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8 Harper’s Bazaar, March 1935, 47. This researcher was not able to receive permission to reproduce several images referred to in this article. Therefore, the images that may not be reproduced will be briefly described in footnotes. The pertinent text of the ads has been included in the main text of the article. This International Silk Guild ad is a black and white full-length photograph of a model standing in front of a plain wall. She has a placid expression. Her arms at her side, her head turned to her left, she looks left to three wide stair steps in the corner of the photograph. She wears a full length polka dot dress with shirred shoulders, full sleeves gathered at the wrist and a belt at the natural waist.
unweighted quality without unbalancing a budget.” The repetition of the word “fun” and the use of the word “amusing” imply a carefree existence. The ad is selling a lifestyle which includes fun, parties and entertainment.

The silk ad is typical of those paid for by the International Silk Guild (ISG). Silk was promoted, especially by the ISG, as the product of the privileged, as traditional, tasteful, sophisticated, and old-world. Generally, for these ads, the focus is primarily on silk fabric: Silk does not share the spotlight with any designer, fashion line, celebrity, or well-known retail store. The text of this ad reads, “Today—whether the scene is Paris, Hollywood, Sedalia, or New York—women who know are wearing silk. Smartly dressed women are wearing silk because it gives them that indefinable feeling of assurance—it “does something for them”—like yachts or sables or pearls.” The references to yachts, sables, and pearls and those to sophisticated and exotic locations imply a lifestyle of leisure and privilege. The text of the silk ad does not reference or even mention the garment pictured where as the rayon ad describes its dress in specific, colorful language. The rayon ad is about a particular dress—the satin, the crepe and the frills—and about a woman enjoying herself in the dress. The silk ad, referencing yachts and pearls, gives the viewer an impression of more than a dress.

In an advertisement for William Skinner and Sons silk dress fabric appearing in Harper’s Bazaar, May 1931, such luminaries as the Hollywood actress Joan Crawford and the clothing and costume designer Adrian represent the company’s silk fabric. Before the International Silk Guild became a cohesive organization, silk ads were placed in magazines by individual companies. William Skinner and Sons was well established in the silk industry. The text reads, “For many years leading motion picture stars have owed the smartness of their gowns to Adrian. At his studio in Hollywood, this noted costume designer has direct and far-reaching influence on the world of fashion. Nothing short of the best will do in his selection of materials. Hence a preference for the quality that has made Skinner the most famous name in Silks [sic].” Both Adrian and Joan Crawford were well-known during their careers. They were stars. Although it is not an International Silk Guild ad, its ideas are similar to those expressed in ISG ads. The International Silk Guild may have built its marketing strategy from those of already established silk companies like Skinner’s. This Skinner’s ad implies an elitism; the best of the best use and wear silk.

Rayon yarn manufacturers as well used Hollywood stars to promote their products. An ad from Harper’s Bazaar, January 1934 (fig. 2) shows a dress made of Acele, an acetate yarn made by DuPont. Rather than use a glamorous leading lady, the ad for Acele uses Margaret Lindsay, an actress who was quite well-known in the thirties but never quite achieved stardom. During her career she played a variety of supporting and leading roles. The text reads “Acele presents this youthful version of the new mode in Darstripe. It’s very

9 The New Yorker, 8 September 1934, 7.
10 Harper’s Bazaar, March 1935, 47.
11 Harper’s Bazaar, May 1931, 12. This ad is a black and white full-length photograph of Joan Crawford standing in profile with her head turned so she is looking directly at the camera/viewer. She stands next to a rectangular pedestal which reaches her breast and her bare arms rest on the pedestal with her hands clasped. There is a statue on the pedestal, only partially visible, of a woman bending over at the waist and gathering her hair. Joan Crawford wears a long, sleeveless evening dress with gathers at the waist, molded hips, and fullness below the knee. In the upper right hand corner of the page is an inset portrait photograph of Adrian. Under his photograph is a text panel with a quote by Adrian and the text of the ad.
12 Harper’s Bazaar, May 1931, 12.
fresh and spring-like..." The emphasis is on youth and the quality of being new, not on the “best,” whether “best” refers to designer, film star, or fabric. Where the silk ad uses a star, Joan Crawford, whose image was cultivated to be larger than life, the acetate ad uses an actress with whom the general public could easily identify.

The next comparison under consideration is interesting because similar language is used in the silk and the rayon ads. They both use the idea of standards, accepted methods for measuring quality or value. The text of the International Silk Guild ad appearing in *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1934, says “Back to the Silk Standard,” the implication being a renewed commitment to high quality merchandise. The image in the ad is a play on the word “back”: In the text, “back” means to return and in the image “back” refers to the body. The image shows the back of a woman dressed in perhaps an evening gown or a negligee. The rayon ad in the comparison also uses the idea of standards. The text of the ad appearing in *The New Yorker*, September 22, 1934 says, “The Gold Standard,” a phrase having many implications (fig. 3). It conjures images of a secure economic system, with gold as the basis of that system, a primary issue during the Depression years. It also refers directly to the dress fabric featured in the ad, a regenerated fiber cloth incorporating metallic-like, gold threads.

Although the language of both ads is similar and, in fact, the similarity may be illustrative of the direct competition between the rayon and silk manufacturers, the sentiments are quite different. The silk ad reads, “Goodby to all the compromises of the Depression Years. Goodby to all imitations and makeshifts. This year Fashion repeats: ‘Watch your fabrics. You can’t be smart in substitutes.’ ” The language is cautionary and directive, and it refers to the Depression in the first line. The ad featuring the manufactured fiber Acele reads, “The Gold Standard begins at sundown in a glistening cocktail ensemble...Brilliantly threaded in gold, this miraculously soft, metallic fabric gleams and glows at the slightest movement.” The language is descriptive and filled with images of light—note the use of the words “gleams,” “glows,” and “brilliant.” Rather than referring to the Depression as the silk ad does, the Acele ad mentions in the first line a cocktail party. The silk ad imparts a gravity, warning the viewer that she “can’t be smart” in substitutes while the Acele ad imparts a levity, suggesting a cocktail party.

Again in the next comparison, both the silk and rayon ads use one concept, that of time, in very different manners. The International Silk Guild ad appears in *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1934. The idea of the future is introduced with the phrase “We Prophesy.” The text reads, “We Prophesy: That silk will be more than ever the favored fabric—for the smartest gowns, the most luxurious underwear, the finest hosiery. That it will be imitated,
but never equaled. That the wise shopper will no longer be content merely to ask for Silk, [sic] but will look for identifying tags and labels—especially those of the International Silk Guild."19 The ad uses the idea of the future to educate the viewer that from this point forward, she must look for labels if she wants pure silk. As is typical of certain ISG ads, this one is directive. It places a responsibility upon the viewer that she actively investigate the fabric products she buys.

The apparel ad featuring rayon manufactured by Crown, appears in Harper's Bazaar January, 1935, 20 It plays upon history and contemporaneity: “Fashion History You Couldn’t Have Read Before 1935. The gowns have regal simplicity of ages past...but the richly furred little halter affair—that intricately swish shoulder cape—they are indeed fashion subtleties of the New Year.”21 It goes on to mention, “Crown rayon, the New Rayon of Fashion, woven into a miracle of fluid softness and shimmering elegance—a texture of flawless quality...The Crown Tag assures you its glamour will endure.”22 The text of the rayon ad juxtaposes contemporary fabric and fashion details with an ambiguous reference to the past. Although the historical reference is not clear nor even necessarily accurate, the point of the ad lies in the concept of endurance and of the possibility of combining the past with the present.

In comparing an ad incorporating rayon (the trade name for the rayon is Celanese) appearing in Vogue, October 1, 193723 and an International Silk Guild ad appearing in Vogue the very next month, November 1, 1937, 24 striking similarities are evident. Despite the similarities, the ads convey completely different concepts of lifestyle. The compositions of these ads are quite similar. Both use dramatic lighting, black and white photography, full images of women dressed in evening gowns, and suggestive settings; however, the silk ad uses as its strategy the idea of the viewer identifying with an economically and socially privileged class of people while the Celanese ad uses the idea of the viewer identifying with

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19 Ibid.
20 Harper's Bazaar, January 1935, 21. The ad is a black and white full-length photograph of two women standing next to one another. Their postures are symmetrical: Both face the viewer/camera turning their heads to look to their left. They each are wearing full length evening gowns which fit close to the body through the hips and have fullness below the knee. The woman on the viewer’s left wears a small shoulder cape made of the dress fabric with fur-trim while she on the right wears a hip length, full, cape made of dress fabric. They stand in an interior setting in front of a piece of furniture designed for seating that resembles a historic sofa.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Vogue, 1 October 1937, 25. The rayon ad is a black and white full-length photograph of a woman in the center of the composition. She stands in a modified contrapposto, her head tilted downward viewing the floor. Her right arm extends away from her body, reaching outward and revealing a bracelet of pearl strands, a ring on her third finger and nail polish. A strong, single source of light illuminates her face foremost and her body. The background is dark. She wears a full-length evening dress with an empire waist, shirred bodice, and short, puffed sleeves. Faintly illuminated in the background on her right is a representation of a Greek column and frieze. “Nite time Fashions” appears in the lower left corner. Ad text appears to the right.
24 Vogue, 1 November 1937, 10. The silk ad is a black and white full-length photograph of a woman in the center of the composition. She stands in profile facing her right side but with her head turned to the left and looking down at the floor. To her left is a heavy curtain with a tasseled rope. To her right in the background is a small chandelier. She wears a full-length, sleeveless evening dress with a large, bustle-type detail in the back, attached at the waist. Her arms are placed in front of her extended, with hands folded together. A dim light source seems to come from the chandelier, leaving her face in shadow.
a “jazzy” lifestyle—a lifestyle that includes late night clubs and just a hint of possible danger, of adventure and daring.

The International Silk Guild ad promotes silk by associating the fabric with a privileged class of people. In the title line, “socially prominent, silk,” the words “socially prominent” connote a class of people who not only have money and power but who have social status. One of the ISG’s main marketing points, illustrated in this ad, is that only real silk gives the wearer a confidence and an assurance that she would not have if she wore any other fabric. The text reads, “Women who know about clothes insist on silk. They not only recognize the value of its tradition and the added glow that silk inspires but they appreciate those qualities of beauty, longer wear, and cleanability.”25 The model’s face is hidden in shadow. She shuns the spotlight unlike the model in the Celanese ad who is directly in the spotlight. Good taste may be understated, may speak for itself, the silk ad implies.

The ad incorporating rayon is not concerned with good taste nor is it concerned with well-behaved ladies who do not draw attention to themselves. The dress in the ad belongs to a line called “Nite time Fashions.” At least two points about this name suggest an appeal to a non-elite audience: The first is the name itself: “Nite time Fashions.” The word “night” is used as opposed to “evening.” “Night” implies a later hour than evening. Where “evening” is reserved for cocktail parties, “night” is open to many activities, some of them perhaps not so refined. The second point is the spelling of “night.” In the ad it is spelled “n – i – t - e”—unacceptable in standard English. “N-i-t-e” is a phonetic spelling, not the correct spelling. It suggests different ideas. It may be a way of circumventing the status quo or it may imply a disregard for “correct” behavior, as reflected in the disregard for correct spelling. In any case, it is difficult to imagine the spelling “n-i-t-e” appearing in the silk ad.

Interestingly, the Celanese ad employs a form of the word “prominent,” as does the silk ad. The fabric name of this particular cloth is “Prominence.” The text reads, “In the sculptured mood inspired by the Paris Exposition…Dramatically interpreted in ‘Prominence’ a fabric of fluid grace in Celanese.”26 The text of the silk ad reads, “socially prominent—silk…Women who know about clothes insist on silk…”27 The meaning of “prominent” in the silk ad is closer to “eminent,” “important,” or “well-known” whereas the meaning of “prominence” in the Celanese ad is closer to “conspicuous” or “noticeable.” The model in the Celanese ad is noticeable and completely comfortable in the spotlight.

The concept of the contemporary woman was exploited by rayon yarn manufacturers. In an ad featuring Acele, the tradename for a cellulose acetate yarn made by DuPont, Amelia Earhart herself appears (fig.4). The ad states that the fashion line highlighted was designed by Amelia Earhart, and in fact, Macy’s, it says, carries the Amelia Earhart line in the Amelia Earhart shop.28 This ad is consistent with the image of youth and contemporary life that rayon yarn producers cultivated. The text includes the words “newest,” “most challenging,” “ingenious,” and “freshest”—all refer to either Earhart herself, the design of the dress, or the Acele fabric. The text reads, “This newest and most challenging of American designers has struck a clear note in clothes for sun-light wear—a note almost dramatic in its simplicity of taste, and ingenious as can be. From her air-travel Amelia Earhart has captured design-motives, and has adapted and applied them to the

25 Vogue, 1 November 1937, 10.
26 Vogue, 1 October 1937, 25.
27 Vogue, 1 November 1937, 10.
28 Vogue, 15 February 1934, 13.
freshest, simplest, and most completely feminine of fabrics…”  

Earhart was a celebrity identified with daring solo airplane journeys and women’s accomplishments. Choosing her to represent Acele advanced the image of rayon as the choice of the modern woman. In addition to print ads, both silk manufacturers and manufactured yarn producers held national promotional events, fashion shows, museum exhibitions, merchandising forums. Rayon was even featured in the 1938 movie *Vogues of 1938* in which one entire scene takes place at a fashion show dubbed the “Fête de Rayon Fantastique.” This scene may have been based on a ball held at the Hotel Astor on December 4, 1936 called by the very same name “Fête de Rayon Fantastique.”

When the silk industry realized that rayon fibers were not just a flash in the pan, it organized. But the organization happened after regenerated fibers had gained quite a large share of the textile market. *The American Silk and Rayon Journal* reported in February, 1934 that of the 100,000 silk looms operating in 1933 in the United States, the majority in that year produced rayon fabrics, not silk. Finally, the organization in 1934 of the International Silk Guild enabled silk professionals to unite and they began spending money on strategic promotional campaigns. The ISG, on the defensive, seems to have designed a specific image for silk fabric, an image incorporating privilege, wealth, and tradition; quite a contrast to ads featuring rayon fibers which concentrated on science, technology, and contemporaneity. The massive marketing effort on the part of the silk professionals did raise the profile of silk in the United States, but rayon continued to set production records through the end of the decade. The International Silk Guild remained an active organization in the years following the thirties. A decade of incredible success for rayon, and necessary changes for silk, the thirties saw the global textile industry change forever. It was the decade in which rayon became the fabric of the masses and the modern while silk codified its identity as a fabric of good taste and fine tradition.

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29 Ibid.
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Illustrations

Fig. 1. *The New Yorker*, September 8, 1934, 7. Ad featuring rayon by DuPont. Courtesy E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company.

Fig. 2. *Harper’s Bazaar*, January 1934, 29. Actress Margaret Lindsay in an ad featuring Acele (acetate) by DuPont. Courtesy E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company.


Fig. 4. *Vogue*, February 15, 1934, 13. Amelia Earhart in an ad featuring Acele (acetate) by DuPont. Courtesy E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company.