



The Introduction and Promotion of Rayon, 1910-1924

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Rayon was and continues to be an important fiber to the textile and fashion industry. Prior to rayon's invention, only natural fibers such as cotton, silk, flax, and wool were available for clothing and home furnishings. Rayon, invented in 1846, was commercially manufactured in the United States in 1910 (Kadolph, 2010). Called artificial silk until 1924 when the name rayon was coined, rayon was a less expensive alternative to silk clothing and accessories.

The purpose of this project was to determine the early history of rayon's introduction and promotion to the public. Specifically, the research questions included: What names were used by manufacturers when selling rayon? What types of products featured rayon? How were the products promoted to the public? What were the stated advantages and disadvantages of rayon during this time period? Was rayon perceived to be an inferior product to silk and for what stated reasons? The year 1910 was selected because of the start date for rayon production in the United States. The invention of acetate, the second manufactured fiber in 1924, meant rayon was no longer the only non-natural fiber available, thus the stop date for the project. This topic furthers our understanding of the promotion of the first manufactured fiber to the U.S. consumer. The researchers utilized a grounded theory and content analysis approach to analyze data collected from the trade, fashion, and home magazines of *Women's Wear*, *Harper's Bazar*, and *Good Housekeeping*.

Because rayon was invented before the adoption of the Textile Fiber Products Identification Act (Kadolph, 2010), apparel manufacturers could and did use a variety of names to describe the fiber. These terms included artificial silk, art silk, fiber silk, fiber, fibre, chemical silk, manufactured silk, scientific silk, rayonner, and rayon silk. The majority of products made from rayon included hosiery, sweaters, draperies and curtains, embroidery and trim, bed spreads, dresses, scarves, blouses, women's suits, hats, and socks. The major advantages of rayon cited by the fashion press included its luster and its inexpensive cost relative to silk (Field, Senechal, & Shaw, 2007). Other advantages of rayon included its ability to cover and its durability for dress trimmings and embroidery (Rath, 1922). In spite of these advantages, there were many stated disadvantages. Rayon was susceptible to heat and moisture, only one-eighth as strong as silk, and weaker when wet (Kadolph, 2010). Since there were no campaigns to educate women about the new fiber, many consumers did not know how to properly care for their rayon products.



Rayon fibers were also coarser than silk which produced a coarser weave, had poor elasticity, poor abrasion resistance, poor dye affinity, and lacked the necessary qualities to produce a twistable yarn (Bjorkland, 1917).

Rayon was advertised as inferior to silk during the period 1910 to 1924. The industry's use of terms "real" and "true" in describing silk lent the perception that rayon was an imposter, the second choice. *Women's Wear* described silk and rayon as "the real thing and its understudy" and suggested that rayon "will require considerable application and perfection to eventually replace the genuine with the artificial product" (Silk and artificial silk, 1912). Due to the variety of terms used to describe rayon: artificial silk, art silk, fiber silk, fiber, fibre, chemical silk, scientific silk, rayonner, wood silk, and rayon silk, consumers would not necessarily know what specific product they purchased. This lack of information would presumably confuse consumers as to what they purchased and how to care for their garments and accessories. The low cost of rayon and downward expansion of the rayon market also damaged its image (Handley, 1999). *Women's Wear* doubted the continuation of rayon, stating, manufacturers should have "little fear that artificial silk will become a serious competitor of the exquisite products made entirely from the regal fiber given us by the industrious silkworm" (Some of the Lines, 1912).

While today, synthetic fibers are as common as natural fibers and manufacturers regularly educate, promote, and advertise the benefits of and care instructions for their products, this project illustrates the complex introduction of the first manufactured fiber to the U.S. consumer.

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