

THE MYSTIQUE OF SILK: Cheney Brothers Ads in the 1910s and 1920s

As the largest and most profitable silk manufacturer in the country by the late 1880s, Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company (1838–1955) profoundly affected Manchester, Connecticut. By the turn of the century, the company employed 4,700 workers in a mill complex covering 36 acres in the town.

Fundamental to the company's success was the Cheney family business philosophy of industrial paternalism:

“The wave of immigrant textile workers recruited from Northern Europe found a pleasant town with recreational and entertainment facilities in Cheney Hall, tenant houses rented to employees at low rates, decent boarding houses, a fine school and ample opportunity for religious worship.”—
Carol Dean Krute

Products made of Cheney silk and velvet extended from clothes and furnishings to automotive upholstery, and eventually to casket linings and parachutes. Most broadly known for dress goods and men's ties and cravats, the Cheney brothers proved to be innovators not only in manufacturing techniques, but also in marketing.

Design, advertising, and sales of Cheney silks were handled at the company's New York offices. Much can be learned about the Cheney Brothers brand from their advertisements in high-end magazines of the day. These ads emphasized life style and corporate image over product details.

Throughout its history, Cheney projected an aura of elegance and luxury. Their marketing built on the enduring popularity of silk and recognized early on that buying decisions for silk goods were made mainly by women seeking to attain status by having the best—for themselves, their men, their homes, and eventually their cars.

The ads in this exhibit peek into the genius of Cheney's marketing during its heyday in the 1910s and 1920s. Depictions of stylish women dressed “a la mode,” accompanied by carefully crafted copy, aimed to set a mood steeped in the impeccable taste of the privileged upper class. As the cultural edginess of the Roaring Twenties took hold, Cheney's creative approach amplified the desirability of silk through commissioned work of contemporary artists for magazine and display advertising. This strategy was felt industrywide, as the company forecast and then set seasonal fashion trends, especially in color.

Promotion of gentlemen's ties and cravats of the same era led Cheney to produce many of these ads more traditionally, telling lifestyle stories with black and white illustration. This approach was not only less expensive, but took into account that men's style changed subtly. But then, too, the lady was in charge.