

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Floorcloths: Beauty Underfoot

by Sarah Coster

The inventory of John Carlyle’s household goods, taken after his death in 1780, lists “2 floor oyle cloths” valued at a total of 1 £. The “oyle” (oil) cloth, also known as a floorcloth, is a canvas floor covering, thickly coated with linseed oil and pigment. It is the ancestor to linoleum, patented by Englishman Frederick Walton in 1860. Floorcloths were designed to imitate the marble floors of the British elite.

Carlyle House, as a museum, has long displayed these handsome works of art underneath the feet of its visitors. In July, with the generous funding of the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, the museums purchased a new floorcloth to replace the well-worn, 30-year old one in John’s study.

The new floorcloth’s pattern comes from John Carwitham’s *Various Kinds of Floor Decorations represented both in Plano and Perspectivo, Being*

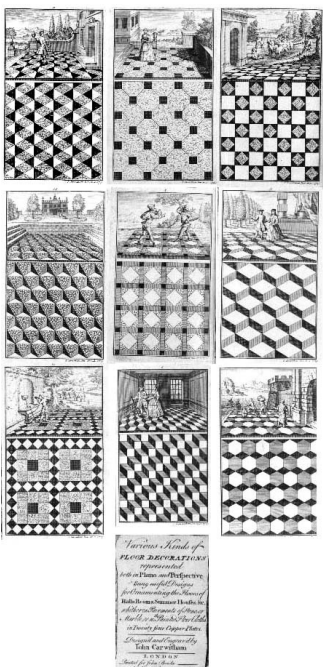
useful Designs for Ornamenting the floors of Halls, Rooms, Summer Houses, etc., Whither in Pavements of Stone, or Marble, or with Painted Floor Cloths. The book, published in London in 1739, illustrated 24 plates of popular patterns for floorcloths. The patterns used shapes to create two and three dimensional effects. The “tumbling blocks” pattern of our new floorcloth is one of the more complicated and eye-catching patterns.



The bold gold and black colors of the tumbling blocks comes from an early 1800’s folk painting of a girl and her dog standing on a floorcloth. The painting is in the collection of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia.

There are practically no surviving examples of 18th-century floorcloths, although we know from probate inventories that they were one of the most commonly used floor coverings of the period. The lack of existing examples makes choosing colors difficult. We can glean a little information from other primary sources, such as newspapers, letters and inventories, as well as period paintings.

The first floorcloth reference appears around 1710. In 1708, the inventory of Englishman Sir Thomas Dickens lists “some canvas floor and stair cloaths”



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Anonymous Folk Painting, c. 1800. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum.

and in 1710, Captain Hoskin makes a payment for a painted cloth imitating black and white marble.

The popularity of the oil cloth grew quickly, both in England and the colonies. By 1750 floorcloths were one of the most common types of floor coverings.

Art historian Sophie Sarin did a study of 39 British households in 1750 with floor coverings and of those, 35 had floorcloths.

In the Gunston Hall Probate Inventory study, which looked at homes in the Chesapeake region from 1760 to 1800, about half of the homes have floorcloths. Most homes had an average of two floorcloths, typically in passages, parlors and even bedchambers.

One reason floorcloths were so popular was that they could be cleaned easily. Charles Carroll the Barrister must have realized this when in 1767 he ordered “2 Good Painted floor Cloths, one of them to be 18 feet Long by 16 feet wide the other 16 feet wide by 12 feet Long, both made of the best and strongest duck [canvas] and Painted so as to bear mopping over with a wet mop and Put up Dry and so as not to be Cracked or to have the Paint rubbed of.” (Invoice to Mr. William Anderson, 24 February 1767, “Letters of Charles Carroll, Barrister,” *MHM*, 37 (March, 1942): 61).

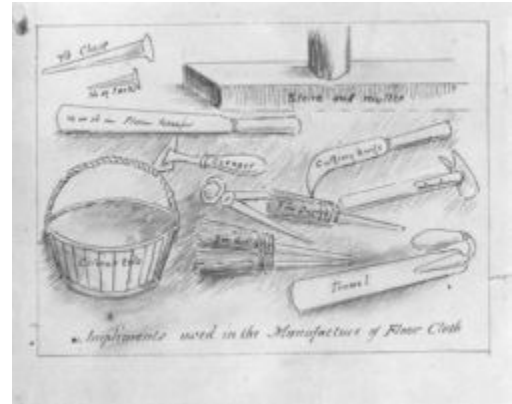
In 1761, Virginian Robert Beverly made an interesting color choice for his floorcloth, requesting “1 good Thick Floor Cloth diced with white Divisions on one side, and red on the other side—The length



15 feet, Breadth 12.” (Robert Beverley to John Bland, 27 December 1762).

While most floorcloths were imported from Britain,

some were produced locally by professional painters. About 1760, George Washington employed a convict servant and painter named John Winter who specialized in painting floorcloths. We learn of his skill from a runaway ad placed in the summer of 1760:



Floor Cloth Stenciling Equipment of Joseph Barnes, London, 18th century. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Charles County, June 22d, 1760
RAN away from the Subscriber, a Convict Servant Man named John Winter, a very compleate House painter: he can imitate Marble or Mahogany very exactly, and can paint floor Cloths as neat as any imported from Britain . . . he was hired to a Gentleman in Virginia . . . The last Work he did was a House for Col. Washington near Alexandria . . . (Advertisement of John Fendall, *Maryland Gazette*, 26 June 1760).

While not a convict servant, artist Lisa Mair of Canvasworks Floorcloths created a floorcloth “as neat as any imported from Britain” and we hope you will appreciate walking on it for many years to come.

Works Cited

Gunston Hall Room Use Study, 2002. www.gunstonhall.org

Sarin, Sophie. “The Floorcloth and other Floor Coverings in the London Domestic Interior 1700-1800.” *Journal of Design History* 18, no. 2 (2005) : 133-145.