Carlyle House
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Grandeur Underfoot: Wilton Carpets and Social Status

by Erin Adams

Then-called the Blue Room, Carlyle's Dining Room was the home of what one writer dubbed "amusing" floors. By the 1940s, when this photo was taken, the floor coverings had improved somewhat.

It is, indeed, amusing—these glittering chairs and sofas, with their stiff, straight backs (I saw but one comfortable chair in the whole house and that was in the Blue Room), when one looks at the floors. These rich draperies in their cloth-of-gold valances and these rich gilt chairs look decidedly humorous when one looks at the rough, crude floors with their wide and poorly finished planks. The rugs on the floors, also, are crude drawn rag rugs that spoil the whole effect of luxury which the colonial decorators were striving so hard to obtain.

There has been little improvement in draperies, in wall decoration, and in much of the furniture between those days and now, save to make them more practical and comfortable, but there has been tremendous progress in making our floors and our floor coverings harmonize with the rest of our interiors. This is the central thought striking one, the big impression we carry away.

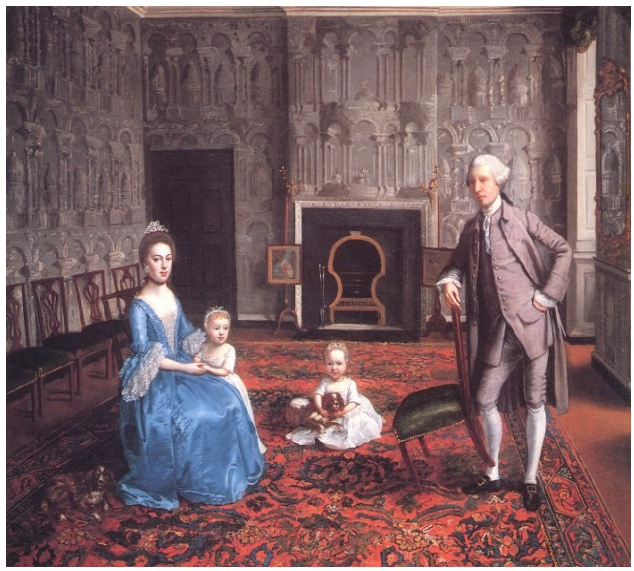
Could John, Sarah, or Sybil Carlyle have read Chesla C. Sherlock's 1926 assessment of their stately mansion, they probably would have passed through the range of emotions from mortification to incense. As a pacesetter of Alexandria society, indeed the supplier of colonial fashion, Carlyle placed great value on the materials he was shipping within the British trade routes. The mansion, designed to stand out as the residential showpiece of Alexandria, would have been as stunning internally as it was externally.

In Mr. Sherlock's defense, the nation was then in the throes of the nationalistic Colonial Revival era. And Mr. Sherlock, completing his book *Homes of Famous Americans*, saw Carlyle House close to the end of its long period of post-Civil War decline. While the early-20th century interpretations of colonial décor were certainly tinged with nationalistic fervor and devoid of much aggressive historical scholarship, Mr. Sherlock hit one nail on the head: the crude drawn rag rugs on the floors *would* spoil an interior's luxury. And this is precisely why Carlyle and his wives probably never entertained the idea of putting rag rugs on the Dining Room floor.

Textiles have long held the fancy of historians, artists, and lay people. From an historian's point of view, textiles speak to conspicuous patterns of consumption. The creation, purchase, use and even disposal of these items speak loudly about the culture consuming them. Artists may dwell on the possible combinations of color, design, and texture as they adorn bodies and buildings. For most of us, the attraction to textiles is more primitive: These objects of silk, cotton, wool, hemp, linen, fur, flax, synthetics, or leather shelter us, comfort us, provide an outlet for self-expression, play a major role in all daily

functions from the menial to the celebratory, and become objects to pass on to future generations. Despite their inevitable degradation, textiles are among the most treasured objects in a home, even John Carlyle's. By examining these three perspectives—historian, artist, homeowner—we may arrive at a closer idea of the importance of having a Wilton carpet in the Carlyles' home.

Between 1720 and 1770, the ability of colonists to influence British fashion was non-existent. It must be remembered that whatever was popular and considered first-rate in Britain was intrinsically popular and first-rate in the colonies. Colonists celebrated the fruits of a burgeoning economy by purchasing whatever London was selling. The comparative ease with which British goods reached major East Coast ports caused one merchant to remark "*that there is no fashion in London but in three or four months is to be seen in Boston*."



Philip Hussey, *Interiors with Members of a Family*, 1750.

The English cities of Axminster, Kidderminster, and Wilton established their carpet industries concurrent with John Carlyle's arrival in Virginia. More than the other two cities, Wilton (in Wiltshire) was the center of carpet manufacture from 1741 until 1815, when peace between England and France introduced competition from Continental markets. Resurgence was seen in Wilton Royal Carpet around the turn of the 20th century until the company's final collapse in 1995.

Today, the term Wilton is applied to any carpet still woven according to the original Wilton designs and specifications. Wiltons are very much in demand, and can be seen frequently in hotels, office buildings, even airplanes, and are known for their durability and beauty. Many of the manufacturers in England still use the same methods of production, although often mechanized. Since 1741, the wools have been woven into 27" or 36" strips. Once the weaving was completed, the strips of carpet were bound by hand. A border usually had been woven separately and then attached by hand to the finished carpet. The edges of the carpet were bound by hand, and occasionally featured a narrow fringe at two ends. Although the fringe is often seen in pictures and in extant pieces, fringe was not always applied to a Wilton.

Instead of reinserting different yarns throughout the rug, the hallmark of a Wilton carpet is the use of a continuous thread of yarn throughout. For this reason, the color palette of a Wilton is limited : no more than five colors can be accommodated in one rug. During the 18th century, the palette was generally limited even further to reds, greens, and blues. In 1760, the vibrancy of the tones caused Charles Carroll the Barrister to remark that he desired "*1 Good English carpet in lively colors*."

The typical design elements found in Wilton carpets are present in the carpet that now enhances the sense of luxury in the Dining Room. Like much art of the mid-century, carpet designs drew on both architectural motifs and natural images. The alternation of lozenges and diamonds with leaves, vines, and flowers united the strong affinity for architecture and nature. English rococo taste, spearheaded by Thomas Chippendale, was somewhat restrained when compared to the more whimsical French style, but still intended to recall thoughts of the Orient in the onlooker. Did Carlyle know all of this when choosing the carpets listed on his 1780 Probate Inventory? Probably. Carlyle's architectural choices alone reveal a man with an agenda—making his home as spectacular in the details as it was in the dimensions.

In her volume *At Home*, Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett describes the ideal 18th-century Dining Room: "its appearance 'that of masculine importance'; its furniture plain, neat, and mahogany." To complete its furnishings, Garrett lists only those items which are at rest: carpets, chairs, tables, and fireplace equipage. Everything else—plate, utensils and protective carpeting—is carried in and laid where appropriate. When trying to reconstruct the full impact of John Carlyle's Dining Room, the staff relies on the Historic Furnishings Plan. Written by Robert Leath and Betty Leviner of Colonial Williamsburg, the Plan was implemented beginning in 2005. In their recommendations for the Dining Room, Leath and Leviner identify "*1 large Carpit*" be placed on the floor.

How does Carlyle's two carpets compare with other households of the area? An examination of probate inventories of the Chesapeake region reveals some very interesting trends. John Carlyle's "*large Carpit*" was valued by William Herbert and Charles Little at twelve shillings in 1780, indicating the age and condition of the carpet. Although we cannot be sure when Carlyle purchased his carpets, we have one very good option: his

marriage to Sybil West and the subsequent re-painting of the house. If this serves as a useful timepoint, compare the 12 shillings to Annapolis resident Mrs. Hen. Maria Dulany's "*1 neat Wilton*" valued at £5 at her death in 1768. Other inventories value Wiltons at £9 (for two), £7, and £2 between 1763 and 1768. Perhaps this leads to a better assessment of the nature of the carpet.

Purchasing a Wilton carpet was never an impulsive decision. Documentation implies that Wiltons were rarely, if at all, imported into the colonies to be sold in shops. George Washington, George William Fairfax, John Adams, Peyton Randolph and others placed orders directly with merchants in London, bypassing American salesmen altogether. Orders for carpets steadily inclined until the outbreak of revolution in 1776. The Continental Congress had issued statements requesting colonists to cease the consumption of British goods and be more resourceful in their use of all goods. Somehow, though, a slow trickle of carpets into the West Indies found their way into Virginia. Joseph Prentis of Williamsburg was invoiced for a Wilton carpet measuring 24' x 18' along with smaller carpets in April 1780, and was given a statement that "*Mr. Beal agrees to join J. Prentis in the risk of importing the above Goods from Curacoa,* [Curaçao] *and to pay half their amount in Curacoa*." Other Virginians were including their carpeting on inventories of goods being moved to westward properties, out of the way of greedy troops.

British architect Robert Adam reflected that dining rooms "*are considered as the apartments of conversation, in which we are to pass a good deal of our time*." How did a Wilton carpet influence that time? Once laid, the carpet offered the Dining Room a new aesthetic appeal, more vivid and intricate than the floor cloth of the summer months. During the winter months, the carpet stayed on the floor, protected from diners' crumbs by a cheaper fabric called a crumb-catcher. (It would be removed for dancing and similar entertainments.) The lush wool added a layer of warmth to protect sitters from the wintry drafts creeping in from the Central and Side Passages. For those going about the house barefoot, the carpet was a sumptuous change of pace. Finally, a well-placed carpet carried not only sensual satisfaction, but the inner personal satisfaction of being a symbol of one's success in business and society. A silent reminder, if you will, of one's accomplishments.

William Carlyle presides over his son's gracious Dining Room.

Design specifications for the of carpet now in the Carlyle House Dining Room.

Seventy-four years after Carlyle's death, the presence of Wilton carpets in the nation had increased exponentially. Rather than making them commonplace or vulgar, the prized carpet retained its position of honor in American households. Even John Quincy Adams, perhaps inspired by his father's own material quest for social and political prominence, noted the carpet's worth. In 1854, he published a volume of poetry entitled *Poems of Religion and Society* and included an entry on "Wants of Man":

And maples, of fair glossy stain,
Must form my chamber doors,
And carpets of the Wilton grain,
Must cover all my floors.

Sources

- Garrett, Elizabeth Donaghy. *At Home*: The American Family 1750-1870. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.
- Gunston Hall Plantation. "Room Use Study." http://www.gunstonhall.org/architecture/roomuse/methodology.html. 2002.
- Hunter, Phyllis Whitman. *Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World, Massachusetts Merchants, 1670-1780.* New York: Cornell, 2001.
- Lanier, Mildred B. *English and Oriental Carpets at Williamsburg.* Williamsburg: CWF, 1975.
- Sherlock, Chesla C. *Homes of Famous Americans*. Des Moines: Meredith Publications. 1926.
- Thornton, Peter. *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior, 1620-1920*. London, 1984.

Textile Exhibitions of Interest

- The Textile Museum, located on S Street NW, next-door to the Woodrow Wilson House, hosts a rotating schedule of exhibitions focusing aspects related to either construction, consumption or cultural impact. www.textilemuseum.org
- Trace the evolution of American interiors at Winterthur Estate & Museum. www.winterthur.org
- Colonial Williamsburg's vast collection of period research materials is available on their website, as is a rotating series of exhibitions from their collections. www.cwf.org