



Period Floor Coverings: Floorcloths Then and Now

Chris and Audry Bond chose the Eugene Field design from our portfolio, when they were looking for a floor covering for their about-to-be-finished kitchen in their beautifully renovated 1906 Victorian in southeast Portland.

Floorcloths are painted canvas rugs that originated in Europe in the 1700s. They were initially an artisan craft, hand painted and stenciled by house painters and often made to look like marbled floors, used in place of more expensive woven carpets. Eventually, manufacturing was established in several cities in Europe, most notably Bristol and London in England, and Dundee and Kirkcaldy in Scotland.

Floorcloth History

Floorcloth manufacturing plants were constructed with 30-foot ceilings. Huge pieces of canvas, typically measuring 8' x 25', were placed on floor-to-ceiling stretching frames with scaffold erected between frames to allow workers to stand and paint the canvas in front of and behind them. The canvas, then a weave of flax and hemp, was first sized with a water paste and then sanded with pumice to smooth the surface. Heavy paint, made from linseed oil and pigments, was troweled on and allowed to dry and then sanded again, the process repeated

several times. The painted surface cured for two or three months, and then the canvas was rolled onto wooden rollers and moved to the printing room for decoration. Stamping was the primary method of decorating floorcloths at this time, with separate blocks used to apply each pattern color. Initially, these stamps were applied by hand and eventually by stamping machines.

Floorcloths became a very popular floor covering in Europe and the U.S. through the 1800s. They were used to furnish the White House for both the Adams and Jefferson presidencies and were found in many homes both quaint and palatial. Floorcloth manufacturing never really developed in the U.S. due to the advent of linoleum in the late 1800s, which eventually supplanted floorcloths as the economical, sturdy floor covering of choice both in Europe and the U.S.

Floorcloths Today

In the past few decades there has been a revival of the floorcloth craft by a

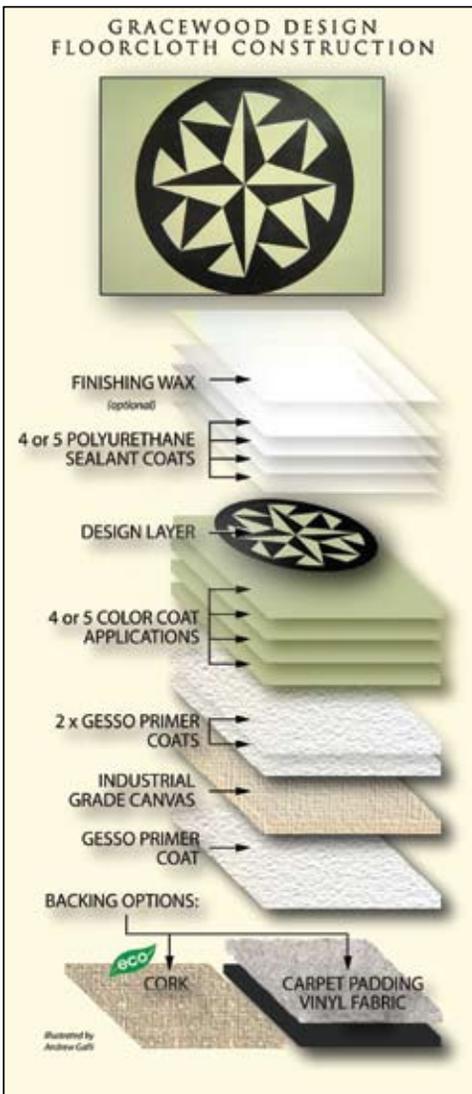
handful of artisans. Some floorcloths are made using the traditional patterns common to the colonial era, and others are produced as more personal art works. Stamping, stenciling, hand painting, and even digital printing are used as methods of applying designs. Cotton duck, which can be sourced in many weights, is the most common floorcloth base today, and acrylic products have replaced oil-based paints. Whereas floorcloths were often installed wall-to-wall historically, today they are more often made as area rugs with a glued or sewn hem.

At Gracewood Design we have developed a process for creating floorcloths that is a combination of historical methods and our own innovation. Rather than using a stretching frame, we staple our canvas to a wooden floor during the priming and painting processes. We apply multiple layers of paint, sanding between coats prior to application of the design, but thanks to modern products, cure time no longer requires months of waiting. See the inset diagram to learn about the succession of layers that make



This pattern was originally created by Gracewood Design for the St. Louis Toy Museum, the historic home of Eugene Field. The pattern is based on a sketch by noted historian William Seale, who consulted on the museum's renovation plans. He based his design on an encaustic tile pattern of the era.

This pattern is particularly complex and involves nine stencils to create.



up our floorcloths. These artistic floor covers take about three weeks to produce once design decisions have been finalized.

Robert Barnes, a prominent 19th-century London floorcloth manufacturer, summarized the enduring appeal of these floor coverings: "The floorcloth will not spoil by dust or neglect, is easy to clean; it covers joints, stops draughts and insects, hides a bad floor, gives a finished appearance to a room, and is available in a variety of styles and figures." We would add that floorcloths are hypoallergenic, can't be destroyed by pets, have no cleaning costs, are infinitely customizable, and have a very low profile (1/4" or less).

Gracewood Design is a company that comprises the husband and wife team of Ken Forcier and Gwen Jones. They have been making floorcloths in various styles since 2004. Forcier's mother and grandmother were both members of the Historical Society of Early American Decorators, engaging in many forms of colonial home decor. Forcier learned to stencil as a child. Gracewood Design has built an impressive portfolio of designs ranging from Early American, Victorian, Arts & Crafts, and Art Deco to Contemporary.

For more information on floorcloths visit www.gracewooddesign.com or call 503-922-0386. ■