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2002

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Allen, Gloria Seaman, "Silk Bedcoverings in the Early Chesapeake Region: Interpreting Documentary Evidence" (2002). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 499.
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Silk Bedcoverings in the Early Chesapeake Region: Interpreting Documentary Evidence

Gloria Seaman Allen, Ph.D.

Eighteenth-century legal documents from the Chesapeake region occasionally refer to silk bedcoverings—blankets, rugs, quilts, and counterpanes—yet very few of these bedcoverings have survived in museum and private collections. It is important, therefore, to closely analyze documentary evidence, particularly probate inventories, for clues as to the appearance, construction, commonality, and possible origin of these objects that were used in Chesapeake homes and were readily identifiable by men charged with assigning values to the chattels of a decedent.

Probate inventories, taken shortly after death as part of the process of settling an estate, are rich and tantalizing documents that provide a window into past ownership of material goods.¹ However, inventories frequently are ambiguous and omit information that historians seek. While appraisers recorded things as small and seemingly insignificant as a paper of pins, they often grouped assemblages of objects as “parcels” or “furniture.” At times, inventories are the only evidence we have for artifacts that no longer survive and, therefore, where object-based research is not possible. This proves to be the case for the silk bedcoverings known as rugs or “ruggs,” which were used in Chesapeake homes during the colonial period and were listed more frequently by appraisers than any other type of silk bedcovering.²

¹ Chesapeake probate inventories provide information over long periods of time about the personal property of people of various means who lived in a specific locality. They are weighted, however, in favor of the older, free adult male who had had many years in which to acquire wealth and material possessions. The chattels of men with negligible estates and of single women—widows or spinsters—were inventoried less frequently. The estates of married women, children, and free blacks were almost never inventoried, and slaves and indentured servants had few possessions of their own. Therefore, the lower end of the economic spectrum was under reported.

² It is likely that silk bed rugs were used in affluent homes in other American colonies. Linda Baumgarten, in her study of textiles in seventeenth-century Boston documents, found two references to silk bed rugs in the 1670-1675 period. Linda Baumgarten, “The Textile Trade in Boston,” *Arts of the Anglo-American Community in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Ian M. G. Quimby, Winterthur Conference Report, 1974 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 262. Cummings, however, found no silk bed rugs in his compilation of rural New England inventories. Abbott Lowell Cummings, ed., *Rural Household Inventories: 1675-1775* (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1964). Margaret Schiffer located one silk bed rug in a 1764 inventory from Chester County, Pennsylvania. Margaret B. Schiffer, *Chester County, Pennsylvania Inventories 1684-1850* (Exton, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1974), 12. In a more recent study, the Hershes did not find any references to silk bed rugs in the 1220 probate inventories filed in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania between 1750 and 1800. Tandy and Charles Hersh, *Cloth and Costume 1750 to 1800, Cumberland County, Pennsylvania* (Carlisle, PA: Cumberland County Historical Society, 1995).

Research using two sets of probate inventories from Maryland and Virginia indicates that silk bed rugs were owned primarily by the upper classes during the eighteenth century. The documents include the Gunston Hall database, a small sample of Chesapeake probate inventories that is heavily weighted towards the elite class [80+%]. The 325 inventories for this database were selected to provide information about the possessions of the social and economic peers of George Mason (1725-1792), builder of Gunston Hall on the Northern Neck of Virginia.³ Information from this database is supplemented by that from a group of more than 3,000 inventories recorded in Kent County, on the upper Eastern Shore of Maryland, and inclusive of people across a broad economic spectrum. The Kent County inventory study took into account all inventories recorded in the county, whether the decedent was a boarder and had only his wearing apparel or whether he lived in a mansion house filled with an extensive list of imported and domestic furnishings.⁴ The Kent data, therefore, presents a less biased, more democratic view of the ownership of silk rugs, but discloses a far lower concentration of silk bedcoverings. In the Gunston Hall study, 45 percent, or almost one half, of the people in the sample who died between 1740 and 1750, owned one or more silk rugs as coverings for their beds. In Kent County, silk rugs, though not widely owned, also peaked in popularity between 1740 and 1750 when 5 percent of the decedents in the survey owned them.⁵ [See Graph] Although silk rugs were listed in other Chesapeake probate

³ Inventories for this database were selected according to predetermined criteria—from counties where George Mason owned property or transacted business, and from other Virginia and Maryland counties where room-by-room inventories were available from the 1740-1810 period. Most of the inventories were of estates of individuals whose economic status approximated that of George Mason. Each inventory was assigned a wealth classification—elite, aspiring, decent, old-fashioned—based on a system devised by Barbara Carson. For detailed information see

<<http://www.gunstonhall.org/probate/backgrou.htm>> and Barbara G. Carson, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects Press, 1990). I am grateful to Barbara Farner for her assistance in navigating the Gunston Hall database.

⁴ The study includes the more than 3,000 inventories filed in Kent County, Maryland, between 1668 and 1798. Kent *Inventories*, vols. * through 10, i., Maryland State Archives c 1059-1 through c 1059-16. The inventories were not entered into a database. They were read for references to silk rugs and other silk bedcoverings.

⁵ The Kent study covered a longer period, but for comparison of ownership, only data from the years corresponding to the Gunston Hall database, 1740-1800, are used here. Other references are taken from earlier Kent inventories, later Gunston Hall inventories, and information from the research files of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts [MESDA]. The Gunston Hall database does not cover the 1730-1740 period, a time when silk bed rug ownership may have been high. In Kent County inventories recorded between 1730 and 1740, 6 percent of all inventoried decedents owned silk rugs—almost the same percentage as for the 1740-1750 time period. The dramatic decline in ownership of silk rugs in the 1751-1770 period, seen in both sets of data, is worth noting. An indication that silk rugs were devalued over time was found in the probate record of innkeeper Daniel Richardson who had three silk rugs on beds in his Cecil County,

documents from as early as 1708 [Kent] and as late as 1809 [Charles County, Maryland], their numbers were negligible before and after the middle of the eighteenth century.⁶

Inventories of deceased Chesapeake merchants, which included separate lists of their store goods, have not provided any references to silk rugs, yet many storeowners maintained an inventory of the far more common woolen or worsted bed rugs in a variety of colors. References to the sale of silk rugs, however, have been located in the accounts of several Virginia merchants. As late as 1797, Alexandria wholesale merchant, William Hodgson, recorded sales of silk rugs in his journal, and in 1792, a Fredericksburg merchant recorded in his daybook the sale of a "Large Silk Rug."⁷ A more detailed entry comes from the letter book of Alexander Henderson, factor for Glasgow tobacco merchant John Glassford.⁸ In 1762, Henderson received at his Colchester store in Fairfax County a shipment of blankets and rugs. Evidently, he had ordered "fine white thick spotted worsted Rugs" and received, instead, "Silk Rugs . . . which [did] not answer so well." By that time, silk rugs may have lost their appeal for Henderson's customers.

Probate inventories tell us something of the relative popularity of silk rugs and of the class of people who owned them. A long run of inventories frequently demonstrates change in ownership patterns over time. Unfortunately, inventories tell us very little about the appearance of silk rugs. If we could look at surviving silk rugs in museum collections, this omission of descriptive information would not be critical, but, to date, no silk bed rugs are known to be extant, and object-based research is not an option.⁹

Maryland, establishment when he died in 1806. Cecil County, *Inventories* 13/542 [1806]. However, of the four bed rugs listed between 1800 and 1810 in the Gunston Hall database, three were described as silk. While silk rugs were clearly no longer in style, some people still valued them and kept them long after they discarded their woolen rugs.

⁶ There is an unusually early, and perhaps questionable, reference to a silk rug in the 1662 will of John Bly (Blyth), who owned property in both Virginia and England. "Desire £3 to be paid for silk rugge I received from Richard West of money in hands of Brother Giles, and release him the rest." "Virginia Gleanings in England," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XIII (1906): 57-58.

⁷ *Journal of William Hodgson, November 30, 1796 to December 30, 1797*. Reference courtesy of Gretchen Bulova. *Smith, Hue and Alexander, Day Book, Dumfries, Virginia, 1791*, 315. Kenmore, Fredericksburg, Virginia. Reference courtesy of Ellen Donald.

⁸ *Letter Book of Alexander Henderson, 1760-1764*. Alexandria Library, Alexandria, Virginia. Reference courtesy of Ellen Donald.

⁹ Museums with major Anglo-American textile collections were contacted. These include the DAR Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, National Museum of American History, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Winterthur Museum, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Valentine Museum/Richmond History Center, and in Great Britain, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the American Museum in Britain, Bath, the Royal Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, and the Mecclesfield Silk Museum, Cheshire. In addition, a request for information was posted on the list serve of the Textile Society of America, which reaches members worldwide.

In Chesapeake probate inventories, silk rugs were clearly listed in a bedding context.¹⁰ A well-equipped colonial bedding assemblage might include a feather bed, bolster, two pillows, two sheets, one or two blankets, and a rug. If the rug was described as silk it was always the outer most bed layer. If the rug was woolen or worsted, it might be covered by a quilt, counterpane, or coverlet. Therefore, the silk rug was both warm enough not to require an additional layer of covering and showy enough to serve as the outer, decorative bedcovering.

The term rug, or “rugg,” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary [OED] as “A large piece of thick woollen stuff (freq. of various colours) used as a coverlet . . .” or as “A rough woollen material, a sort of frieze . . .” and by Florence Montgomery in her dictionary, *Textiles in America*, as “A coarse wool cloth with a shagged or friezed finish.”¹¹ Surviving woolen and worsted rugs, although few in number, have a woven looped or cut pile that gives the appearance of a low shag in texture. Silk rugs, clearly differentiated by appraisers from silk quilts and silk blankets, may also have had a pile or shag texture. Edward Maeder defines “shag” as “cloth with a velvet nap on one side, usually of worsted but sometimes of silk” and used as early as 1632.¹² In its definition of silk the OED cites an even earlier reference, 1618, to “Embroidered gowns of grass-green silk-shag.” Montgomery also associated the material “silk” with “shag.” In defining shag in her dictionary, she wrote, “The term once applied to cloth made from inferior silk; in 1671 Edmond Booth petitioned to manufacture ‘a rich Silk Shagg . . . made of a Silke Waste, hitherto of little or no use, and shagged by Tezell or Rowing Cards . . .’”¹³ The reference to “Silke Waste” is interesting and provides a link to one inventory reference that suggests that silk rugs had a textured surface. In 1742, Captain John Smyth of Kent County owned “a Silk thrum’d Rug.” “Thrums,” as defined in the OED, are the “ends of the warp thread left unwoven and remaining attached to the loom when the web is cut off.” Thrums are further defined as “odds and ends of thread” and “loose ends of thread projecting from the surface of woven fabric . . . [or] a tuft.” This slimmest of documentary evidence suggests that silk rugs may have had a woven low pile, shag, or tufted surface similar to extant woolen rugs.

Probate inventories, unfortunately, provide no clues as to the origin of silk bed rugs. Unlike woolen rugs, which Chesapeake appraisers frequently described as “Wiltshire” or “West Country” or sometimes as “homemade” or “country-made,” no origin descriptors have been found for silk rugs. Presumably they were manufactured in Great Britain or on the Continent and re-exported through British ports to the colonies. At this time, we have only the name of the British agent, “Mr. Tatnall,” who supplied the silk rugs in place of worsted rugs to Alexander Henderson’s store in Colchester, Virginia.

¹⁰ Silk rugs were not used as table or floor coverings, objects usually designated as “carpets.”

¹¹ Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 336.

¹² Edward Maeder, *An Elegant Art: Fashion & Fantasy in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 245.

¹³ Montgomery, 345.

The order was processed in Glasgow, the headquarters of John Glassford & Company, and the rugs were transported on a vessel sailing from the River Clyde.¹⁴

Probate inventories are nearly silent on the color of silk rugs. While appraisers listed wool and worsted rugs ranging in color from saturated reds, greens, and blues to the more muted colors of “sad” and “dun,” color was almost never used to describe a silk rug in period documents. The one exception was found in the 1751 Charles County, Maryland, inventory of Henry Holland Hawkins. His household possessions included “1 old Red Silk Rug” with the low value of eight shillings.¹⁵ In addition to being identified by color, woolen rugs were frequently described as “mottled” or “spotted,” as in the white spotted rugs the factor at Colchester, Virginia, expected to receive.¹⁶ In woolen rugs, the descriptors mottled and spotted may have referred to a mixture of different shades of natural wool.¹⁷ One Kent County appraiser did take care in 1729 to describe Mr. Robert Dunn’s bedcovering as a “Silk Spotted Rug.” He assigned to this rug the unusually high value of six pounds sterling while other silk rugs at that time ranged in value from fifteen shillings to two pounds. The lack of documentary evidence regarding color and pattern suggests that silk rugs were usually without a discernable figure and may have been made from undyed silk. Given that silk rugs were frequently found in estate inventories along with red, green, blue, and spotted woolen rugs, their lack of description cannot be construed as omission on the part of the appraiser.

In general, appraisers assigned higher values to silk rugs than to woolen rugs. Woolen rugs came in a variety of widths and colors, could be dyed or undyed, and were old or new; so their values could range from a few pence for an old worn cradle or cot rug to two pounds or more for a new red rug or thirty-five shillings for a new Wiltshire rug. Kent County appraisers usually valued silk rugs between one and two pounds, averaging around one pound, five shillings for a new rug. The values assigned to silk rugs in the inventories of the wealthy in the Gunston Hall database were considerably higher. They ranged from a few shillings up to fifteen pounds, averaging around seven pounds.¹⁸

¹⁴ Henderson.

¹⁵ Gunston Hall, HWKNS51.

¹⁶ No imported spotted woolen rugs are known at the present time. There is a surviving “county made” rug from Wytheville, Virginia, which has a figured or spotted design created from different colored dyed wools tied in turkey knots to a woven linen ground. It is in the collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts.

¹⁷ A Kent County appraiser listed a “figured rug,” presumably woolen, in a 1751 inventory. In Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, the Hershes found a woolen rug that was described as “checkered.” Hersh and Hersh, 93 and personal communication 26 June 2002.

¹⁸ At this time there is no explanation for the value disparity. Revolutionary inflation does not seem to be an issue since most values for silk rugs predate 1765. Also, it is not a question of appraisers in one county using a different value scale from appraisers in another county since the inventories in the Gunston Hall database came from a number of Maryland and Virginia counties. Several of the Kent County owners of lower valued silk rugs were among the wealthiest men in the county and owned furnishings comparable to the aspiring and elite decedents in the Gunston Hall study.

One additional and equally ambiguous piece to the puzzle of silk rugs comes from several references in inventories recorded from the late 1760s through the 1780s to “Silk and Cotton” bed rugs, the earliest noted in the 1768 inventory of Samuel Groome of Kent County. At about the same time [1769], appraisers in Kent County started to list cotton and rag rugs in the context of other bedding. Based on only a few examples, mixed silk and cotton rugs appear to have received lower values than rugs made entirely of silk or than most woolen rugs.¹⁹

Silk rugs, while concentrated in the homes of the well to do, were the most numerous, but not the only silk bedcovering used in colonial Chesapeake homes. [See Table] Wills, inventories, and other legal documents record the use of silk cradle cloths and counterpanes in the 1690s, and silk blankets and quilts from the early 1700s. References to silk cradle cloths are few, and they appear to have been rare, treasured possessions, described as damask or worked, and probably not intended for daily use.²⁰ Silk blankets, occasionally noted in Chesapeake documents between 1718 and 1780, were always listed in pairs, but nothing is known of their appearance.²¹ They were neither quilts nor rugs. John Carlyle, when he died in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1780, left among his possessions one silk quilt, one silk rug, a pair of silk blankets, and four pair of woolen blankets.²²

For silk quilts and counterpanes, we have some documentary-based evidence and fairly extensive object-based evidence. Eleven percent of the decedents represented in the Gunston Hall database owned silk quilts or counterpanes between 1751 and 1770, a percentage almost equal to that of ownership of silk rugs in the same period, but not

¹⁹ Woolen rugs were clearly on the decline in the late 1760s when appraisers described many as “old.”

²⁰ In 1660, Virginians were prohibited from importing “silk stuff in garments or in pieces, except for hoods and scarfs, nor silver or gold lace, nor bone lace.” This legislation was enacted to encourage silk production in the colony—an ongoing effort from the 1620s that was stimulated by premiums and other incentives. The ban imposed on the importation of silk items would have contributed to the rarity of silk bedcoverings for a time. Other colonies enacted similar legislation. In 1651, Massachusetts restricted the wearing of silk and laces to the wealthy and brought to court those who wore “silk in a flaunting garb . . .” William R. Bagnall, *The Textile Industries of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1971), 61; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 125.

²¹ The collection of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities includes a silk damask christening blanket, 1730-1750, which is associated with the Alden family of Duxbury, Massachusetts. Abbott Lowell Cummings found a silk blanket in the Hingham, Massachusetts, inventory of yeoman David Cushing, who died in 1724. Cummings, 104.

²² Gunston Hall, CRLY80. Peter Thornton cites several examples of silk blankets used in noble English houses during the late seventeenth century. Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England, France & Holland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 113.

nearly as high as the 45 percent ownership of silk rugs in the preceding decade.²³ The broad based socio-economic spread of the Kent County data reveals a much lower percentage of ownership of silk quilts and counterpanes—only .2 percent for the 1751-1770 period, down from nearly 1 percent in the preceding decade. In later periods, ownership was even less widespread as silk quilts, like silk rugs, lost in popularity to light weight, washable quilts and counterpanes of imported, inexpensive printed linens and cottons.²⁴ [See Graph]

Appraisers were sparing with details when listing silk quilts and counterpanes. They occasionally noted the weave structure of satin and damask and sometimes they listed a color—crimson, yellow, green. Presumably, these bedcoverings were all of one color, pieced together from lengths of new or recycled silk fabric into a top and known today as “whole-cloth” construction. As was the case with woolen or worsted quilts and counterpanes, the material and color of the silk bedcovering frequently matched the rest of the outer bed furniture. The 1690 estate of John Carter of Lancaster County, Virginia, included a “Sute of Lemon Colour’d damask Curtains, Vallins, head Cloth and Counterpane.” The “Window Curtain . . . Cupboard Cloth . . . Couch Cloth . . . five chaire cloths and Stool cloth . . .” also were all of damask and, perhaps, in the same lemon yellow material.²⁵

In 1759, the earliest recorded notation in this study, an appraiser of the estate of Sarah Green of York County, Virginia, described her silk quilt as “Patch Work”; perhaps it was of her own making.²⁶ After that time and continuing into the nineteenth century, silk patchwork or patched quilts and counterpanes occasionally appeared in households of the upper classes of the Chesapeake region. In one case, appraisers listed a silk patchwork bedcovering as a coverlet. When Thomas Boyce of Kent County died in 1779, he left “1 small silk Coverlid (patched work’s not finished).”²⁷

Appraisers generally assigned higher values to silk quilts than to silk rugs. In Kent County, Maryland, values ranged from two to five pounds. In the Gunston Hall database, which included inventories from a number of Chesapeake counties, values for silk quilts were higher—up to eighteen pounds for a red damask quilt. Sometimes, appraisers gave

²³ Silk quilts accounted for only 4 percent of all the quilts listed in the Gunston Hall database, while silk rugs accounted for 15 percent of all bed rugs listed. Given the size of the Kent County inventory pool—almost ten times larger—a similar analysis was not attempted for that data.

²⁴ The earliest listing of a silk quilt in the Gunston Hall database was in 1753. In the Kent County study, which covered a longer time period, the earliest listing was in 1708. The MESDA research files include Chesapeake documents that mention silk bedcoverings as early as 1690. See below.

²⁵ Lancaster County, VA, *Inventories and Wills*, vol. 8/21a [1690/91], courtesy of MESDA.

²⁶ Gunston Hall, GREEN59. As Kim Ivey at Colonial Williamsburg has pointed out, it is not possible to determine from this early reference if the appraiser was referring to a silk quilt with some type of patch used as a repair or ornamentation, or whether the quilt was intentionally pieced together from patches of silk to form a design. Personal communication, 3 December 2001.

²⁷ Kent *Inventories*, vol. 8/111 [1779].

the same value to silk rugs and quilts. Benjamin Fendall, who died in Charles County, Maryland, in 1764, left two silk quilts and two silk rugs, each worth fifteen pounds.²⁸ Silk counterpanes were appraised at lower amounts—five to six pounds, and silk patchwork quilts even lower at twenty to forty shillings. Possibly, appraisers considered the scrap nature of the fabrics and discounted the workmanship of the seamstress.

From surviving artifacts, we know more about the appearance of silk whole-cloth quilts and counterpanes, but less about the appearance of silk patchwork bedcoverings. Several historians have written about silk quilts in a regional context and have described their construction.²⁹ A number of silk quilts and counterpanes survive in museum collections—many without information as to maker, origin, or eighteenth-century ownership. Of those with recorded provenance, almost none has a clear history of having been made or used in the Chesapeake region. The exception is a patchwork quilt made by Mary Alexander Thornton Posey (1756-1837) around 1810 at Valombrosa plantation in Virginia. The quilt is pieced from scraps of numerous imported silk dressmaking fabrics—many identified as having come from gowns of prominent Virginia women. The quilt is lined with glazed worsted wool and interlined with wool batting.³⁰

Based on this quilt and other surviving examples, we can make some assumptions about the appearance of silk quilts and counterpanes listed in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Chesapeake probate inventories. Silk patchwork quilts were pieced from imported dress silks in a variety of colors, patterns, weave structures, and decorative techniques. Piecing patterns of four triangles were arranged around a central framed motif. The American-made quilts were lined with worsted wool and interlined with wool batting.³¹

²⁸ Gunston Hall, FNDLL64.

²⁹ Deborah E. Kraak, "Early American Silk Patchwork Quilts," *Textiles in Early New England: Design, Production, and Consumption*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Symposium Papers, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1997), 7-28; Patricia T. Herr, "Quaker Quilts and Their Makers," *Pieced by Mother* Symposium Papers, ed. Jeannette Lasansky (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1988), 13; Patricia Keller, "*Of the best Sort but Plain:*" *Quaker Quilts from the Delaware Valley, 1760-1890* (Chadds Ford, PA: Brandywine River Museum, 1997).

³⁰ Mary Alexander Thornton Posey's quilt is in the collection of Dumbarton House/ The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America, Washington, D.C. According to family tradition, fabrics used in the quilt came from the gowns of Martha Washington, Betty Washington Lewis, Nellie Custis, and the wedding dress of Mary Posey as well as from gowns belonging to members of other prominent families related to or associated with George Washington. Evidently, two silk patchwork quilts were made: one was handed down from oldest daughter to oldest daughter until it was presented to Dumbarton House in 1964; the other quilt descended in the male line and is now lost. Kraak, 17, n.19. Catalogue information courtesy of Dumbarton House.

³¹ Kraak has located four silk patchwork quilts with proven American provenances; three from New England and the Posey quilt from Virginia. A fifth quilt, with an uncertain provenance, resembles the others and may be from New England. An identifying characteristic of American silk patchwork quilts is the worsted woolen lining. The

Whole-cloth silk quilts, unidentified as to country of origin, probably were made in England, the products of professional upholsterers and quiltmakers.³² The tops were sewn together from lengths of silk furnishing fabrics, and they were usually lined with linen, cotton, or silk, and interlined with wool batting. The quilting pattern is often elaborate with a framed central motif or an overall design.³³ Whole-cloth silk quilts, with possible American attribution, have similar characteristics but, like silk patchwork quilts, usually were lined with woolen or worsted fabrics.³⁴ Eighteenth-century Quaker silk whole-cloth quilts from the Delaware Valley also have intricate quilting patterns and were lined with wool or cotton and interlined with carded wool.³⁵ Some Quaker silk quilts were pieced from lengths of recycled dress silks or incorporated quilted pieces from silk petticoats as central motifs.³⁶

Unfortunately, we have no object-based evidence to make assumptions about the appearance of silk bed rugs. From document-based evidence we know that they were costly, imported, warm, and perhaps showy, but generally without a particularly noticeable color or pattern. They were found in well-to-do homes of the Chesapeake region, especially around the middle of the eighteenth century, when some people owned more than one silk rug along with other bed rugs, quilts, and counterpanes. Appraisers mentioned them more frequently than silk quilts, yet none are known today. Perhaps as more descriptive clues are found in eighteenth-century documents, previously unclassified silk objects hidden away in the recesses of museum storage rooms may eventually be identified as silk bed rugs—a popular bedcovering among the elite classes of the colonial Chesapeake region.

English silk patchwork quilts studied by Kraak have linen, cotton, or silk linings. Kraak, 21.

³² Keller, 17, 19.

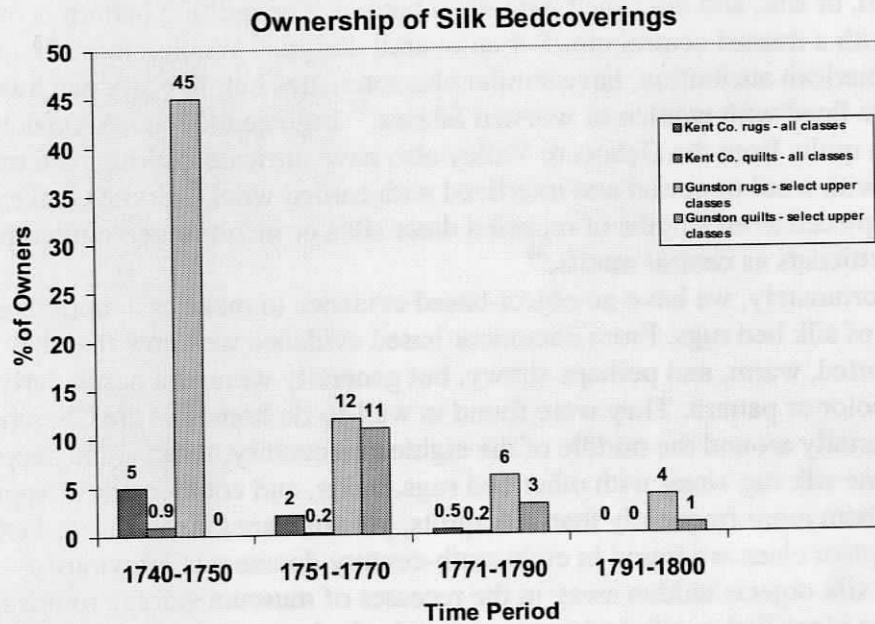
³³ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁴ This assumption is based on a small sample of cataloging information for silk quilts in the collections at the Winterthur Museum and the National Museum of American History. Further analysis may determine that other fabrics were used as lining materials on American-made whole-cloth silk quilts.

³⁵ The earliest documented Quaker whole-cloth silk quilt is inscribed in the quilting, “10 mo 5th 1761” and is in the collection of Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia. It is lined with cotton and interlined with carded wool. Herr, 14. Keller notes that Quaker women continued to make silk whole-cloth and pieced quilts with undyed carded wool as filling long after other American quiltmakers used cotton textiles for their quilt tops and cotton batting for their interlining. Keller, 19.

³⁶ Keller, 20.

GRAPH



TABLE

Descriptors for Silk Quilts, Counterpanes, Blankets, Cradle Cloths, and Coverlets, 1690-1800

Quilts

Color: crimson [1701], green [1742]

Material: silk, satin [1701], damask [1732]

Construction: patch work [1759]

Blankets

Color: none given

Material: silk

Counterpanes

Color: lemon [1690]

Material: silk, damask [1690],

Construction: needlework [1719], patch work [1794]

Cradle Cloths

Color: lemon [1690]

Material: silk, damask [1690]

Construction: wrought [1704]

Coverlets

Material: silk

Construction: patch work [1779]