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Silk Bedcoverings in the Early Chesapeake Region: Documentary Evidence

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Comments

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Abstract

Eighteenth-century legal documents from the Chesapeake region describe silk bed coverings—blankets, rugs, quilts, and counterpanes—many of which have survived in museum and private collections. This article closely analyzes documentary evidence, particularly probate records, to determine the appearance, construction, commonality, and possible origin of these coverings.

were used in Chesapeake homes and were readily identifiable assigning values to the chattels of a decedent.

Probate inventories, taken shortly after death as part of the process, are rich and tantalizing documents that provide a window into the material goods. However, inventories frequently are ambiguous that historians seek. While appraisers recorded things as small and insignificant as a paper of pins, they often grouped assemblages or "furniture." At times, inventories are the only evidence we no longer survive and, therefore, where object-based research is to be the case for the silk bedcoverings known as rugs or "rug" in Chesapeake homes during the colonial period and were listed by appraisers than any other type of silk bedcovering.

Research using two sets of probate inventories from Maryland shows that silk bed rugs were owned primarily by the upper classes during the colonial period. The documents include the Gunston Hall database, a small sample of probate inventories that is heavily weighted towards the elite class. The inventories for this database were selected to provide information about the social and economic peers of George Mason (1725-1792) on the Northern Neck of Virginia. Information from this database shows that from a group of more than 3,000 inventories recorded in the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and inclusive of people across a broad geographic area. The Kent County inventory study took into account all inventories in the county, whether the decedent was a boarder and had only his personal effects or whether he lived in a mansion house filled with an extensive list of domestic furnishings. The Kent data, therefore, presents a less complete view of the ownership of silk rugs, but discloses a far lower cost of silk bedcoverings. In the Gunston Hall study, 45 percent, or almost half, of the sample who died between 1740 and 1750, owned one or more silk bedcoverings for their beds. In Kent County, silk rugs, though not widely owned, were popular between 1740 and 1750 when 5 percent of the decedents owned them.

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