Linoleum Encyclopedia Article

Linoleum

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Linoleum

Linoleum is a smooth-surfaced floor covering made from linseed oil, gums, and resins applied to a felt or burlap backing. It was invented in 1860 by Englishman Frederick Walton. Up until this time, most households had bare floors, carpeting being out of the reach of all but the well-to-do. Walton discovered that linseed oil, when oxidized (exposed to air), thickens into a rubber-like substance. Walton mixed this with resins and fillers and then pressed it onto a fabric backing. He called the new product linoleum, from the Latin words *linum* ("flax"--source of the linseed oil) and *oleum* ("oil"). The original linoleum-producing process was very slow and required large amounts of space. The oil was oxidized by being spread in successive thin layers on a sheet of fabric; each layer had to dry before the next could be added. It took several weeks or months to build up a thickened oil film of an inch or more. Much space was needed for the drying sheds. After the oil-resin-gum mix was applied to the backing, it had to be dried and hardened, another time-consuming process. Walton built the first linoleum-production factory in Staines, England, in 1864. Early in the 1900s, he developed a method for oxidizing the linseed oil in large kettles and a machine that made linoleum in different patterns. The modern process for making linoleum is very similar to Walton's original design but much faster. Linoleum's resistance to wear, easy cleaning, and affordability made it an extremely popular floor covering for many years. Linoleum production peaked in the late 1940s. After that, plastic floor coverings eclipsed linoleum because of their greater resistance to moisture and chemicals, and the great variety of pattern and color they offered. Today's floors are largely, vinyl, which is available in tile or as planks that resemble wood. This resilient flooring often has a foam base that is comfortable to stand on and that comes in designs that include faux marble, wood, or stone. These sophisticated floorings are found in rooms throughout the house, creating an easy care, elegant environment.