



DECORATING TIPS

BED AND WINDOW CURTAINS

Decorating Ideas from the 18th Century

In the 18th century, bed furnishings were often the single most expensive item in a household, and goods were woven only 18 to 28 inches wide. Textiles are relatively inexpensive today, and twice as wide, so we allow ourselves the luxury of matching patterns when we join seams. Such waste was virtually unknown in colonial America.

When choosing fabric, trim, and design, the first consideration is the room and the overall effect you wish to achieve. Are curtains intended to be the focal point of the room or an understated complement to other furnishings and decoration? To replicate a period interior, choose a documented reproduction, such as a blue Indigo resist, a woven linen check, or a red copperplate print (toile de Jouy). Other aspirations in decorative style allow for wider choices of material and in style and technique of fabrication.

A bold monochromatic printed toile makes a statement, while a crisp white cotton dimity or seersucker suggests a comforting coolness to counter Southern summers. Line a printed toile with a contrasting color for impact: the purple toile in the Governor's Palace is lined with green silk. A soft cherry-red cotton satin lining creates a cheerful glow inside red toile bed curtains. Consider using fabrics in creative ways: think of the decorative possibilities of using horizontal, or "railroad," treatments for valances, or of using the appliqué technique, where textile elements are cut out and sewn onto a base fabric in a decorative manner.

A strongly patterned fabric such as a toile can carry a heavy fringe treatment to edge curtains and valances. The dense green wool fringe on the purple toile at the Governor's Palace is a good example. In contrast, an unlined curtain and valance treatment with a strongly shaped valance—such as the green checked bed furniture in the George Wythe House is effectively trimmed with a simple twill or woven checked tape binding.

One of the most graceful 18th-century curtain designs is the fluid "drapery" curtain that draws up into a soft swag. This treatment creates a softer and more dramatic alternative to the static "swag and jabot." Popular from about 1750 to 1780, the "draw-up drapery" style was a favorite with English patrons who used Thomas Chippendale as their interior designer. Chippendale intended the patterns in his book for the upholstery workshop as well as the patron, so he gave instructions and diagrams for the design of the cornices (often fabric covered) and the pulley lath systems that supported bed drapery and window curtains.

These curtains work beautifully in a variety of fabrics. In the dining room of the Governor's Palace they are shown in an unlined springy wool moreen. An elaborate Indian chintz bed at the Palace is lined with green cotton satin; the curtains are pulled up in double drapery, one of the variations shown in Chippendale's influential 1754 pattern book *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*. If the curtain is lined, the lining fabric needs to be sufficiently decorative—it will show when the curtain is pulled up. Satin weave cotton is appropriate for cotton; a complementary printed fabric can also be effective in more modern treatments.

The windows' proportions along with the scale of the room will determine which curtains will work most effectively. For instance, a pair of narrow windows on one wall might look best if each window gets one curtain, each swagged to the outside, rather than two panels crowded onto each window.

Chippendale shows the "draw-up drapery" with the complete architectural complement of a molded or carved cornice, sometimes covered with fabric matching the curtains, and valances (sometimes buckram stiffened) beneath the cornice at the top of the curtain. The curtains can be mounted to a pulley lath without cornices (as with more contemporary balloon shades), but the effect is not as strong or as architecturally complete. The valance is an option that can stand in place of the cornice, or that can be omitted at more modest windows if a cornice is used.

Whether you make your own pattern and assemble the curtains according to Chippendale's design, or hire an interior decorator or upholstery shop to handle the sewing fabrication, bear in mind a few details: The pulley lath, mounted with angle irons to the inside of the cornice, holds and organizes the lines that raise the curtains. The lines run through a row of rings sewn into the lining side of the curtain, then through pulleys or screw eyes at the outer corner (or corners, depending on whether your window has one or two curtain panels) of the pulley lath. The lines run back down the side of the window to be tied off on "cloak pins" that anchor the curtain in the raised position. For an authentic look, pairs of decorative cast brass or enameled cloak pins should be used for securing the draperies of both bed and window hangings. A modern alternative is to mount pairs of cabinet pulls to the window molding—much more attractive than the conventional window shade anchor. These should be mounted low on the window molding, between the sill and the chair rail.

Each pair of curtains is made of two panels that reach to the floor—the length is very important for creating the proper effect when the curtain is drawn up. The width of each curtain depends upon the desired effect. A sumptuous curtain in silk damask will require many widths of fabric; a slightly austere colonial effect in checked linen will need fewer. Avoid making the panels too skimpy, however, or they will lose some of the soft and rich effect when drawn up. Each panel should be at least twice as wide as the window (measured outside the window frame) before gathering.

If the edge of the curtains is bound with tape that wraps around the edge, outer curtain and lining should be sewn with wrong sides together. Otherwise, right sides should go together and are inverted at the top before gathering into heading. Add trim after turning inside out. Unlike contemporary curtains, this style

does not have a return of face fabric on the lining side. Face fabric and lining need to be the same width, or the effect will be ruined when the curtain is drawn up and the decorative lining is revealed in the swagged “tail.”

A less complicated way to get an effect similar to a “draw-up drapery” bed or window curtain is by swagging a gathered curtain panel using a button or a tape loop. These curtains could be easily and quickly closed to give the sleeper privacy or to protect from mosquitoes. This treatment was often used on hangings made for portable tent beds (also called field, or camp, beds). Curtains were sewn to the tester, or ceiling, of the bed; the entire unit draped over the bedstead as a tent drapes over its frame. George Hepplewhite illustrated this treatment in his 1787 pattern book *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide*. White cotton (particularly a ribbed stripe called dimity) was popular for this style of bed treatment, in vogue in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Since portability was a factor for original tent bed hangings used during army campaigns, curtains were seldom lined. Edges were bound with white twill tape or trimmed with cotton fringe. Original military tent bedsteads did not have cornices or valances, but when the fashion was domesticated these more elaborate elements were sometimes added.

This article was taken from *Williamsburg Decorating with Style*.

The accurately dressed windows and beds in the museums, as well as the references in these essays, are based upon the research of curator of textiles Linda Baumgarten and her colleagues in Williamsburg’s curatorial and conservation departments.