Abstract

Title: Lincrusta-Walton: History of a Versatile Embossed Wallcovering
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Lincrusta-Walton is a relatively unknown wallcovering that has been in continuous production over the last 130 years. Lincrusta played a part in the wallpaper industry primarily between 1880 and 1930, but had a rather undocumented history. Lincrusta was invented in 1877, an embossed solid relief material consisting primarily of oxidized linseed oil, applied to walls with an adhesive and requiring extensive drying time. The resulting surface was incredibly resilient, completely washable, and nearly indestructible. Lincrusta was available in innumerable patterns from the Fr. Beck and Company, but was often used as a substitute for more affluent materials, such as tooled leather, pressed metal, and plasterwork.

Concentrating on advertising, catalogues, and product reinvention, revealed the history and context behind Lincrusta’s rapid rise and fall in popularity. Early on Lincrusta was aggressively advertised as fine art, and functioned primarily as an upper-class material in price, design, and application. By 1900 use began to shift toward more utilitarian design and purpose, primarily available through mail-order catalogues and discount department stores. Essentially economic pressures and changes in taste brought about the end of Lincrusta’s widespread popularity; in 1930 Americans were not spending money on imported wallcoverings, and the breadth of available patterns further decreased. Lincrusta just could not compete with advances in wallpaper products of the twentieth century. At first only affordable in mansions, Lincrusta was eventually found in the hallways of basic apartment buildings. Lincrusta was simultaneously a substitute for more expensive materials, an upper-class artistic product, and a basic protectant for high-traffic areas of buildings. Lincrusta could “outlast” the building it adorned, and recent restoration methods are on the forefront of preservation technology, with a growing resurgence of interest connected to the rise of the historic preservation movement. Lincrusta is still in limited production utilizing the same techniques, a piece of living history preserved today.