

CONSERVATION FLOORING IN HILLWOOD'S RUSSIAN PORCELAIN ROOM

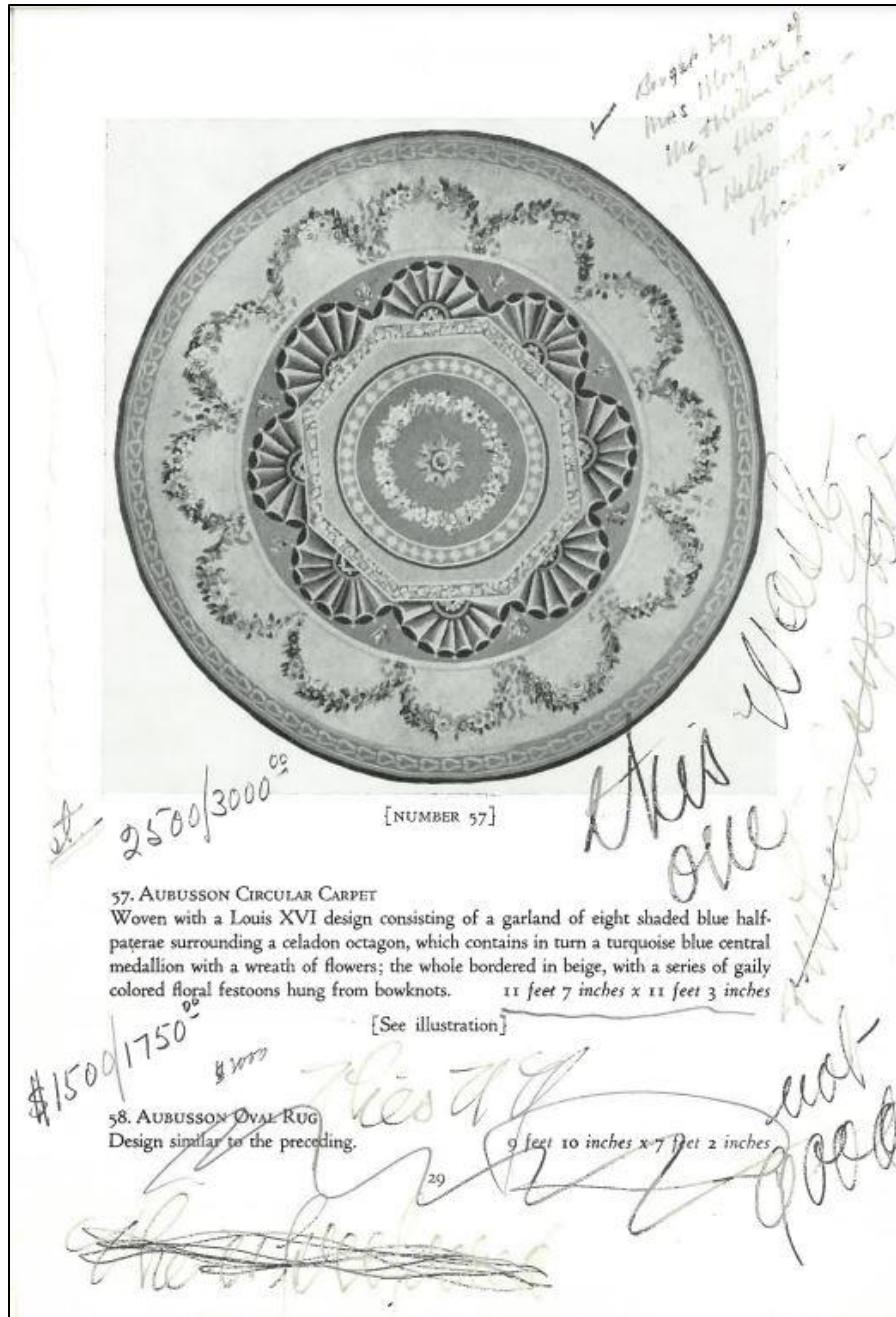
Megan Martinelli, Associate Curator of Textiles, Apparel, Jewelry and Accessories
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Many of the bare-floored spaces at Hillwood were once covered with carpets during Marjorie Post's time including the Icon Room and the adjacent Russian porcelain room. In 1957, Post commissioned the central marquetry floor element at the center of her octagonal display room from Philipp Rimmller, a marqueteur based on the Upper East Side in New York City. To create the design, Rimmller used 25 types of wood and incorporated additional materials like zinc, brass, and mother-of-pearl. Perhaps Post recognized the delicacy of her new architectural element when she sourced a square-shaped carpet via her interior design firm, McMillen from the auction house, Parke-Bernet in January 1960 (42.5). Archival correspondence indicates that Post initiated a search for an appropriate floor covering for the space with McMillen as her liaison as early as 1955.



1 View of foyer (with carpet also!) looking into the Russian porcelain room and featuring 42.5, the first carpet acquired by Post for this space, 1960. Hillwood Archives & Special Collections.

It originated from the stock of esteemed carpet dealer Ohan Berberyan (1882-1970), who sold antique and modern carpets from his showrooms in New York and Palm Beach. Intriguingly, the carpet was replaced by Post a little less than two years later when she acquired a circular carpet from an additional liquidation sale of Berberyan's stock at Parke Bernet. The second carpet was purchased from the October 1961 sale and was reputedly woven from a Louis XVI design (42.4).



2 Annotated page from the Parke Bernet, New York, October 28, 1961 (lot 57) sale of Omaha Berberyan's stock. Object files: 42.4, Curatorial Files, Hillwood Archives & Special Collections

It was probably selected because its shape complimented the space, and its predecessor was relegated to the English bedroom for a bit. Thanks to the technology of Eyemat, a company creating conservation flooring using digital images based in the UK, visitors will soon have the opportunity to experience the Russian porcelain room as they would have during a visit in Post's lifetime—stanchion free and with the freedom to step on the replica of the round carpet!



3 Edge of the round carpet, 42.4 acquired by Post in 1961 in the Russian porcelain room. Note the Icon Room carpet visible in the background. Hillwood Archives & Special Collections.

Volunteers will be notified when the conservation flooring is added to the Russian porcelain room. This project is ongoing with an expected completion date of late 2023.

FROM EAGLES TO EGALSOFT: EYEMATS INSTALLATION IN HILLWOOD'S RUSSIAN PORCELAIN ROOM

Megan Martinelli, Associate Curator of Textiles, Apparel, Jewelry, and Accessories
January 2024

On Monday, December 11, 2023, Hillwood's first-ever Eyemats were installed in the Russian porcelain room. Learn more about that process, which was years in the making, below. For the history of the carpet reproduced, [please see Megan's research](#), published in the May 2023 volunteer newsletter.



Figure 1. Morning light bathes the new Russian porcelain room Eyemats

Thanks to the technology of Eyemats, a UK-based company that specializes in creating conservation flooring using digital images, visitors can now experience the Russian porcelain room as they would have during a visit in Marjorie Merriweather Post's lifetime. Now stanchion free, visitors have the freedom to step on the replica of the round carpet Post acquired expressly for the space in 1961. Hillwood has been in contact and conversation with Eyemats since 2017, so this realization is the result of careful discussion and research. The Russian porcelain room is a small, yet high traffic area, making it an excellent pilot location for the Eyemats. This flooring technology has potential to reinvigorate other notable spaces in the mansion, simultaneously elevating the visitor experience while protecting some of Hillwood's treasured floors and carpeting.



Figure 2. Kevin Thorndycroft, principal of the UK-based conservation firm Eyemats, unpacks panels destined for Hillwood's Russian porcelain room in the front hall



Figure 3. Comparing samples in situ and against the original carpet during Eyemats' September 2023 visit.

The process involved onsite photography of both the historic round carpet and the surrounding floors. The correct vantage point was critical, so Neil, Eyemats' photographer, stood on a ladder for much of the July 2023 photoshoot. Kevin Thorndycroft, the principal of the company, accompanied a series of samples for a first matching session in situ in the Russian porcelain room in late September. A few short weeks later, Hillwood received additional samples from the company, and a decision was made to select the sample with slightly enriched colors of the carpet and faithful shades of the deep hardwood floor.

Equally critical was the choice of an underlay, a barrier between the nitrile-backed Eyemats and the hardwood floor that would help keep the Eyemats in place. After considering other options offered by Eyemats, such as spring bound felt and needlefelt, the collections team preferred the density and softness of Egalsoft, a vilt felt that is even treated with a layer of adhesive on the side holding the Eyemats together for added stability. Of course, an additional layer of heavy canvas protects the double headed eagle marquetry.



Figure 4. Collections Technician Manuel Rouco protects the marquetry detailing with an additional layer of heavy canvas.



Figure 5. Collections Preparator Jon Meo assists Kevin by uniting the Egalsoft underlayer with double-sided tape.

Once the Eyemats were produced, Kevin returned for a final time to Hillwood to fit and install the product in the space, a process that involved fitting and cutting the Eyemats and the Egalsoft backing to the unique, octagonal room, then carefully piecing together first the backing, then all eight printed panels with special double-sided tape. Photos from that process are included in this piece; Kevin was assisted by Hillwood's magnificent collections team.

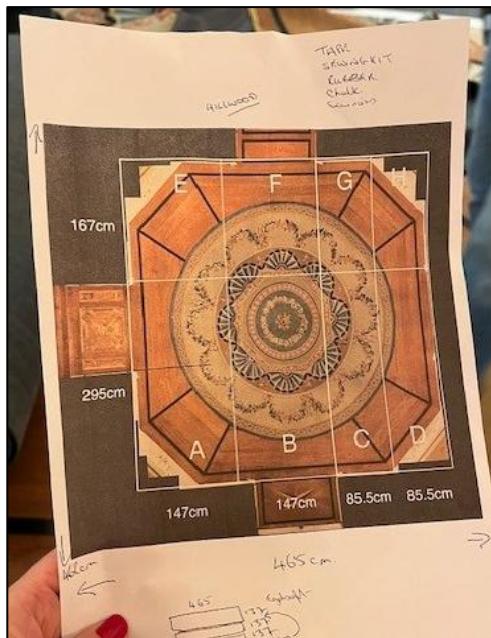


Figure 6. Chart of all eight panels required to cover the Russian porcelain room



Figure 7. Binding each of the printed Eyemats panels together.



Figure 8. Custom cutting the Eyemats and the Egalsoft backing to accommodate the Icon Room doorway.



Figure 9. The finished product, which can be easily cleaned and withstands wheelchair traffic.

EYEMATS INSTALLATION IN HILLWOOD'S PAVILION

Wilfried Zeisler, Deputy Director & Chief Curator
December 2024

On November 18, 2024, a floor covering by the UK-based company Eyemats was installed in the pavilion (Fig. 1) to replace the previous T-shaped runner (Fig. 2). This installation completed a new phase of Hillwood's floor covering enhancement project that began last year with the Russian porcelain room.



Fig. 1. The Eyemats covering in the pavilion gives visitors a new look at the intricate marquetry design.



Fig. 2. The pavilion floor was initially covered and protected by a T-shaped runner.

The Eyemats floor coverings allow visitors to see the mansion's floors how they were during Marjorie Merriweather Post's time, either covered with carpets or bare. Like in the Russian porcelain room, the precious floor is protected with the same underlay called Egalsoft, that is attached to the Eyemats with adhesive (please see this January 2024 article by Megan Martinelli for more insights into Eyemats' process of producing and installing these floor coverings). In the pavilion visitors can now admire the beauty and intricate design of the marquetry floor which was previously partially covered with a runner.

The accessioned pavilion floor (acc. no. 34.84) was installed in 1957 by William J. Erbe Co. of New York, a company specializing in parquet floors, wood carpet, hardwood flooring, antique floors, reproductions, old floors, refinished, floors sanded as stated on their stationary. Still active today, the family business worked with Hillwood's 1955-57 renovation architect Alexander McIlvaine on this project (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Floor in Pavilion at Hillwood, acc. no. 34.84



Fig. 4. Archival photograph of the Pavilion's floor in the Rovensky mansion at 1051 Fifth Avenue showing the original design of the four central medallions.

The floor originally adorned the second-floor reception room of the Rovensky mansion at 1051 Fifth Avenue. William J. Erbe Co. removed it after the sale of the New York mansion's content by philanthropist and collector Mae C. Rovensky (1881-1956), an acquaintance of Marjorie Post. Mae Rovensky is also remembered as a jewelry enthusiast. During the Gilded Age, she was known as Mae "Maisie" Plant when married to the railroad magnate Morton Plant (1852-1918) (since 1914). In 1916, their mansion, the Morton F. Plant House at 653 Fifth Avenue was exchanged for the two strings pearl necklace that Pierre Cartier considered "to be the most expensive necklace in the world".¹ Soon after the mansion became the jeweler's US headquarters. Maisie and her husband moved to a new mansion at 1051 Fifth Avenue built by architect Guy Lowell (1870-1927) and decorated by Arthur S. Vernay (1877-1960), a well-known English born American antique dealer. Mae kept the home until her death. She was then married to banker John E. Rovensky (1880-1970) who is documented as a regular Mar-A-Lago guest.

¹ Francesca Cartier-Brickell, *The Cartiers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2019), 137-138.

Mae Rovensky's collection kept at 1051 Fifth Avenue and in her Newport residence, Clarendon Court, was dispersed through different sales organized by Parke-Bernet in New York in 1957.² Her two main houses "at New York and Newport and their contents constitute a social document for the American historian," stated Leslie Hyam in the introduction to the main auction catalogue. Marjorie Post acquired different pieces during the sale, including linen, porcelain sets, and a precious box (acc. nos. 45.50, 26.161, 26.205, and 11.32.1-2). She also bought the floor seen today in the pavilion.

Flooring specialist William J. Erbe Co. installed the floor at Hillwood in 1957. They added borders to adapt it to the space and tasked master of marquetry Philip Rimmeler with creating three medallions in the alcove (where the piano stands). Rimmeler most likely also replaced/enhanced the four central medallions, each featuring each a vase with a flower bouquet as the original ones were of a simpler design (Fig. 4).

This Eyemats project introduces a new chapter for the pavilion floor, adding further creative interest to its history. Hillwood is thrilled to enrich the pavilion for visitors today, providing them a fuller view of the pavilion floor design while protecting the original precious marquetry.

Hillwood's floor covering enhancement project will continue next year and focus on Marjorie Post's dressing room. The goal for the future will be to address the runner in the French drawing room and the large carpet in the dining room. Hillwood will provide further updates with details as these future projects approach installation.

² Collection of Mrs. John E. Rovensky, Parke Bernet, New York (1051 Fifth Avenue), January 15-19, 1957; Parke Bernet, New York (Clarendon Court and 1051 Fifth Avenue), January 24-26, 1957; Parke Bernet, New York (The library), January 29-30, 1957; Parke Bernet, New York (The Jewelry), January 23, 1957.