

Oilcloth and Painted Accouterments

by Jack Cox

“Painting” was a 1800’s method of waterproofing cloth for such items as knapsacks, haversacks, belts, cartridge boxes and ground cloths. Properly done, the fabric does become very waterproof, but retains its flexibility.

There are many different recipes for both "period accurate" oilcloth and for a modern version that looks the same, but without some of the problems of the 1850's recipe. The paint is generally applied over cotton drill or linen canvas.

The instructions below discuss the making of ground cloths, but the same procedure applies to all painted goods.

Modern Recipe:

While this recipe is obviously not authentic, it produces the same look and feel as the original methods. The final product looks, feels and wears as close to the original as most of us can approximate today. However, you need to make a decision as to whether you want to "fake it" with a modern approximation when a good period recipe is available.

Materials:

- Wallpaper sizing. Get it pre-mixed and ready to use.
- Flat black or semi-gloss interior latex paint ***
- Boiled linseed oil
- Mineral spirits paint thinner
- Japan dryer

(All of these materials are available at any good paint store)

Method:

1. Using a roller, paint both sides of the cloth with the wallpaper sizing and let it dry. It should take an hour or less. The sizing will prevent the paint from soaking the cloth, and it will give it some "tooth" for paint adhesion.
2. Using a roller, paint one side of the cloth with the black latex paint. Let it dry overnight.
3. Mix 2 parts of mineral spirits with 1 part boiled linseed oil. Add Japan dryer. Use 1 oz. (2 tablespoons) per pint of paint.
4. With a brush, paint the sized side of the cloth with the linseed oil mix. Let it dry. This may take several days, depending on temperature and humidity. It's NOT wise to let it dry in the house.
5. Paint on two additional coats of the linseed oil mix. Let it dry between coats.

*** There is a variation of this recipe that works very well also. Instead of using plain latex paint, mix 2 parts of latex paint with one part of boiled linseed oil. Stir it thoroughly, then follow the instructions above.



Period Recipe:

This recipe is an approximation, since the original recipe specified "litharge," or lead monoxide (PbO) which is extremely poisonous.

 **Bright Idea:** Leave out the lampblack, and you have a recipe for a nice civilian waterproof cloth.

I strongly recommend this recipe because it is about as authentic as you can get without putting life and limb in danger.

Materials:

- Boiled linseed oil
- Mineral spirits paint thinner (or turpentine)
- Lampblack (comes in tubes or dry powder)
- Japan dryer
- Corn starch

Method:

1. Make a sizing by boiling about a quart of water and adding cornstarch mixed in cold water until the mixture becomes a little syrupy.
2. Paint the cloth with the cornstarch sizing and let dry.
3. Mix one part of boiled linseed oil with one part of mineral spirits. Add lamp black until the paint is a very opaque black. Add one oz. (2 tbsp) of Japan dryer per pint.
4. With a brush, paint the cloth with the blackened linseed oil and let dry. This can take several days.
5. Mix one part of boiled linseed oil with two parts of mineral spirits. Add one oz. of Japan dryer per pint.
6. With a brush, paint the cloth with the clear linseed oil mixture and let it dry. This can also take several days. Two coats of this mixture should give the results you want.

(You can omit the cornstarch sizing if you want, but the oil-based paint will pretty much soak the cloth.)



Confederate Ordnance Manual Recipe:

There is a recipe from the 1863 Confederate Ordnance manual which I have not tried. Use at your own risk.

Materials:

- 28 Parts lampblack
- 1 Part Japan varnish
- 73 Parts boiled Linseed oil
- 1 Part spirits of turpentine
- 1 Part litharge (substitute Japan Dryer for this.)

Litharge is lead monoxide, and is very poisonous.)

Method:

1. Mix the ingredients, using 1 oz. (2 tbsp) of Japan dryer per quart of paint.
2. If you don't want the paint to totally soak the cloth, size it with cornstarch as in the period recipe above.
3. Apply 2-3 coats until the desired sheen is obtained.



Turpentine-base Recipe

This recipe comes from "*Young's Demonstrative Translation of Scientific Secrets - 1861.*" This recipe will sound familiar in materials and proportion, but uses turpentine instead of mineral spirits for a thinner. **Hazard Warning: The recipe uses litharge*** (poison hazard) and the mixture is boiled (fire hazard).**

I DO NOT RECOMMEND OR ENDORSE USING THIS RECIPE.

Materials:

- 1 pint of spirits of turpentine
- 1 to 1 1/2 pints of linseed oil
- 1 lb litharge

Method:

1. Combine all materials in a large metal bucket. **Litharge reacts strongly to aluminum and zinc. Do not use an aluminum or zinc coated vessel.**
2. Boil and stir until thoroughly mixed and dissolved.
3. Paint on the cloth.
4. Let dry in the sun.

This recipe will give a clear to reddish or yellowish color, depending upon the base color of the litharge. The first coats could be tinted with lamp black to make a glossy painted oilcloth.

*** Safety data (MSDS) for litharge.

