



Use Vintage Glass for Cabinet Doors

Old panes bring vibrancy to new furniture

BY STEVE LATTA

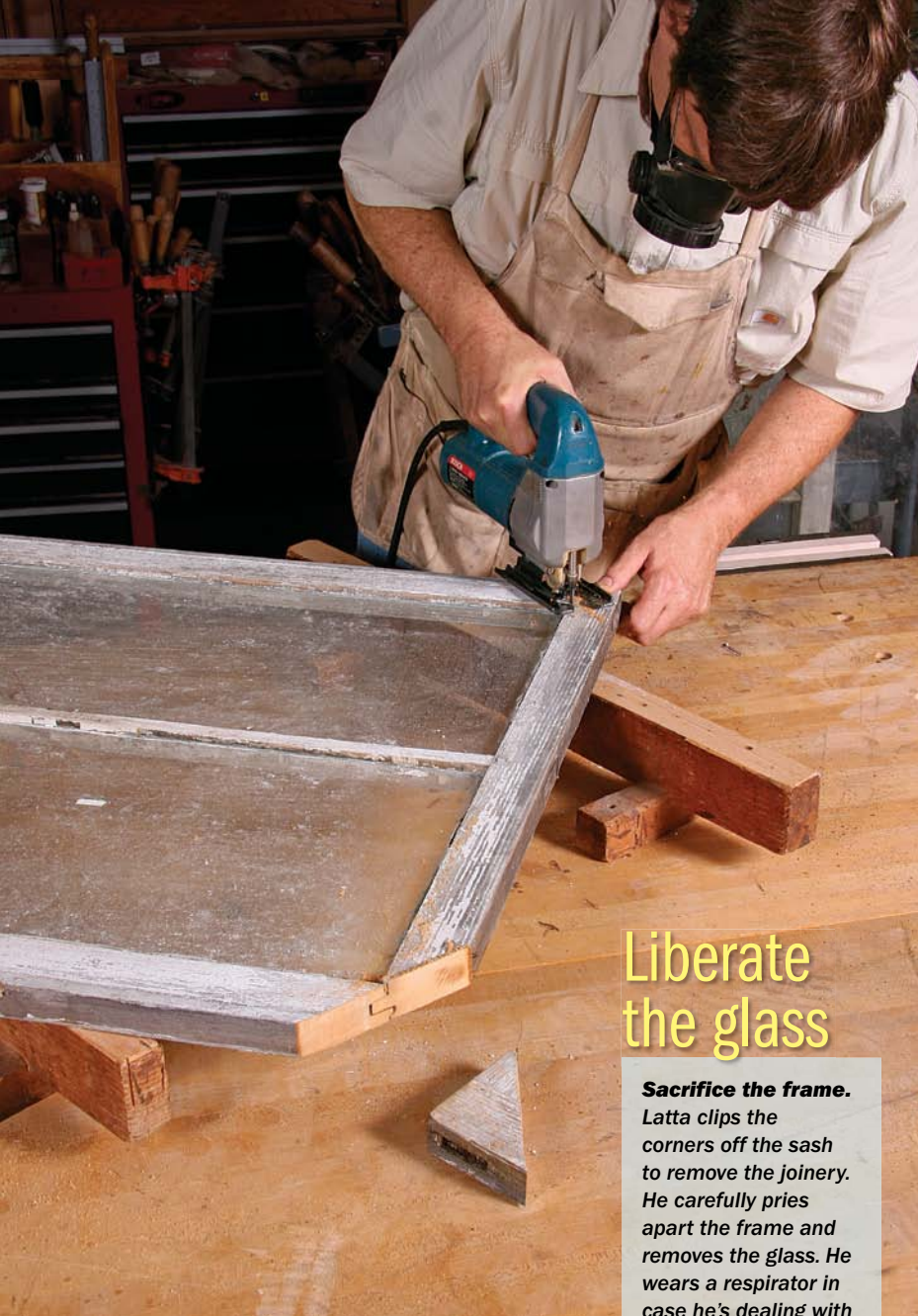
You took great care when you selected the wood for your new cabinet, and then you poured yourself into the milling, joinery, and assembly. Now that the divided-light doors are built, what will you do about the glass?

Glass purchased from the hardware store is sterile and lifeless; it takes more away from your piece than it contributes. Vintage glass, by contrast, has a vitality that adds something extra to the finished piece. Old processes of making window glass produced panes with ripples and bubbles and varying thickness, and it is these blemishes that make old glass so vibrant. Old panes reflect and refract light unpredictably, creating glints and shadows that make it a pleasure to open a door. In this article, I'll tell you where to get old glass, how to salvage it from window frames, and how to work with it.

Reflections tell the tale. An outdoor scene reflected in three types of glass shows the difference between a clear new pane, new-made antique-style glass, and vintage glass, with its subtle waves and distortions.

Glass forager. Great old glass for your next glazed cabinet is as close as the nearest flea market, antique store, or architectural salvage company.





Liberate the glass

Sacrifice the frame. Latta clips the corners off the sash to remove the joinery. He carefully pries apart the frame and removes the glass. He wears a respirator in case he's dealing with lead-based paint.

In search of old glass

The search for old glass is part of the fun of using it. Antique stores, junk shops, and flea markets often have old windows, and I typically pay between \$15 and \$25 per sash. Architectural salvage companies are another good source and often have a broader selection. Once you're on the lookout, you'll also notice windows on the side of the road waiting for the garbage truck—this may be less predictable, but you can't beat the price. My current favorite source is a local company that installs replacement windows. They had hundreds of old sashes out in the weather, leaning up against their building, and they told me to take whatever I needed, no charge. Nice!

When you're on the prowl for glass, bring along paper towels and glass cleaner so you can see what you're getting. Once you have the panes clean enough to get a reflection, make sure the glass has a nice ripple by looking at it from an angle. Raking light can help reveal the character of the glass as well. Every now and then you'll get some bubbles in the glass. These are simply gorgeous, but much less common than a good ripple.

Roughly speaking, the older the glass the better. Most window glass made in the last 60 years or so—called float glass and made by pouring liquid glass onto a bed of molten tin—is perfectly flat, perfectly free of blemishes, and perfectly boring. Prior to that, most window glass was made by first creating a large glass cylinder, closed at both ends. The ends were removed and the remaining sleeve of glass was slit along its length, reheated, flattened, and then cut into panes. Before the 20th century, a blowpipe was typically used to make the cylinder, producing panes that were full of character. The blowpipe technique was supplanted by a mechanized method of pulling a cylinder of



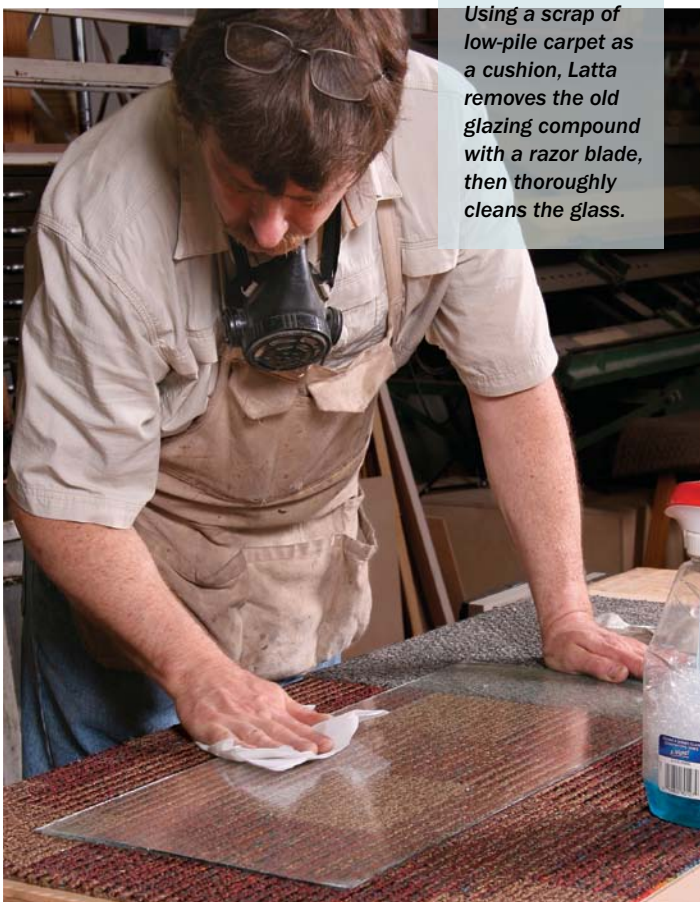
Photos, except where noted: Jonathan Binzen



Clean it

Careful cleanup.

Using a scrap of low-pile carpet as a cushion, Latta removes the old glazing compound with a razor blade, then thoroughly cleans the glass.



glass; the resulting panes were more uniform, but still showed some ripple and irregularities.

Check all the panes in a sash. You don't want to buy a nice old six-light sash and get home to find that one or two of the panes are originals and the rest are recent replacements. Not all replacements are useless, however. In one large, twin-light sash I found, I could tell that both panes were old glass. When I got them out of the frame and cleaned, however, I discovered that one pane was older than the other. One had a brown tint, the other green; they differed in thickness and one had more ripple. Still, they were both very desirable, and I used them in the same cabinet.

Occasionally you'll find a pane with good ripple but with some clouding that simply will not come off. I'll



Cut the glass to size

Mark, score, snap. Cutting old glass is no different from cutting new. Latta marks it with a Sharpie and scores it with a glass cutter guided along a straightedge. His Master Force straightedge (menards.com) has a rubbery strip underneath to keep it from slipping on the glass.

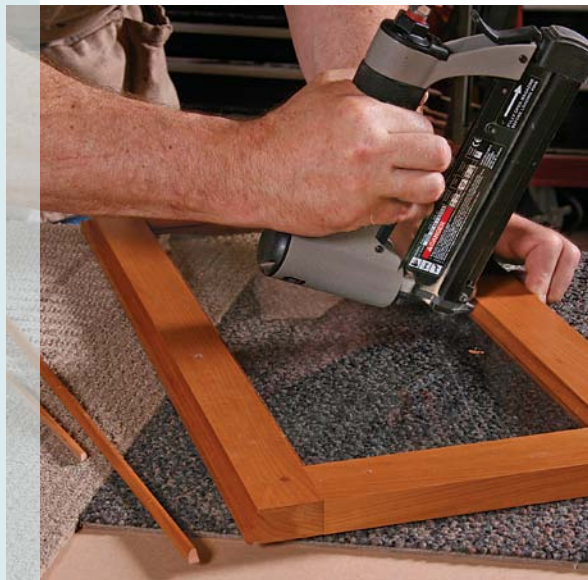
Two installation options



Solid wood retaining strips

Silicone seats the glass. Whether he's using glazing compound or wood strips to secure the glass, Latta starts by tacking the pane in place with a few spots of silicone glass sealant (above).

Fit four sides, fix three. Latta cuts the miters on all four strips, then tacks all but the bottom piece in place with a brad nailer (right).



Bisect the bottom. To make the strips easier to remove in the future, Latta cuts the bottom strip in half with a thin-kerf razor saw. Then he tacks the two halves in place.



sometimes use a clouded pane anyway, if the cabinet I've built has a dark interior; but if it is a light contemporary piece where the blemish might show, I won't.

Retrieve and cut the glass

To harvest the glass from an old window, I first cut the corners off the frames, removing the joinery that holds the window together. Then I gently pull the stiles and rails apart and take the panes out. Once the glass is removed from the frames, clean it before cutting. The old glazing compound usually comes off readily, and I use a razor blade to remove the residue. If the glazing is stubborn and your glass is large enough, you can simply cut the edges off, glazing and all.

To cut the glass, I use a glass cutter and glass running pliers, available at the hardware store for under \$10 each. Old glass cuts like new glass, except that it is a little more fragile and tends to have a greater failure rate. If I need 16 panes for a set of bookcase doors, I'll make sure I have five or six extra panes on hand.

With a Sharpie, mark a couple of points to establish your first cut line. Moisten the cutter wheel with light oil and, using the cutter and a straightedge, score the pane in a single pass. Tap along the underside of the score line with the ball at the end of the cutter. Then use glass pliers to snap off the waste piece. Next, cut a perpendicular edge. Then fit the glass into a corner of the opening to mark the other two edges.

Installation

When the pane is cut to size, tack it in place using tiny dabs of clear silicone. You don't need a whole bead; just a few dabs will hold it securely. Once the silicone sets, you can use either solid wood retaining strips or glazing compound to finish the installation. □

Contributing editor Steve Latta scavenges for old glass in Lancaster, Pa., where he teaches at Thaddeus Stevens College.



Glazing compound

1

TINT THE COMPOUND

Latta colors the glazing compound to match the cherry door frame, combining various hues of universal tinting paste—burnt sienna, burnt umber, and ocher (1,2). The tints thin the compound, so Latta adds calcium carbonate, or whiting (3), to thicken the mixture.

2

3

Pressed in place.

After kneading the glazing into ropes and pushing it into place with his fingers (right), Latta uses a laminate sample to press it home (far right). He uses a chisel moistened with jojoba oil to produce the final, clean bevel on the glazing (below).

