

BURNISHED

Accentuate carving with color

CREATIVE USE OF MILK PAINT GIVES TEXTURED SURFACES A NEW DIMENSION

BY MICHAEL CULLEN

The majority of my carving ends up under several coats of milk paint. This may seem strange to woodworkers used to “bringing out the natural beauty of the wood,” but adding color to a carving is one of best ways to highlight the design and to define the pattern (see Master Class, p. 84).

Because wood grain is a pattern in itself, there is always the potential for it either to compete with the carved pattern or to wholly overwhelm it. What I like best about milk paint is how it combines with the wood to form more of a patina than an

opaque coating. It doesn’t obliterate the grain; it merely tones it down so that the carved pattern can take center stage.

In addition, the paint and my method of burnishing the high points add a sense of depth to the carving, creating subtle highlights in the piece with the changes of hue between the surface and background.

Several coats of one color and a clear topcoat

Make sure the carving is free of dust and that any non-carved surface due to be painted is well-prepped. The paint tends to highlight imperfections, so remove any machine marks. I buy my paint from The Old Fashioned Milk Paint Company (milkpaint.com). The color selection, inspired by colonial New England, is excellent and foolproof. It’s virtually impossible to create a bad combination.

Use inexpensive brushes because the lime in the paint is hard on bristles.

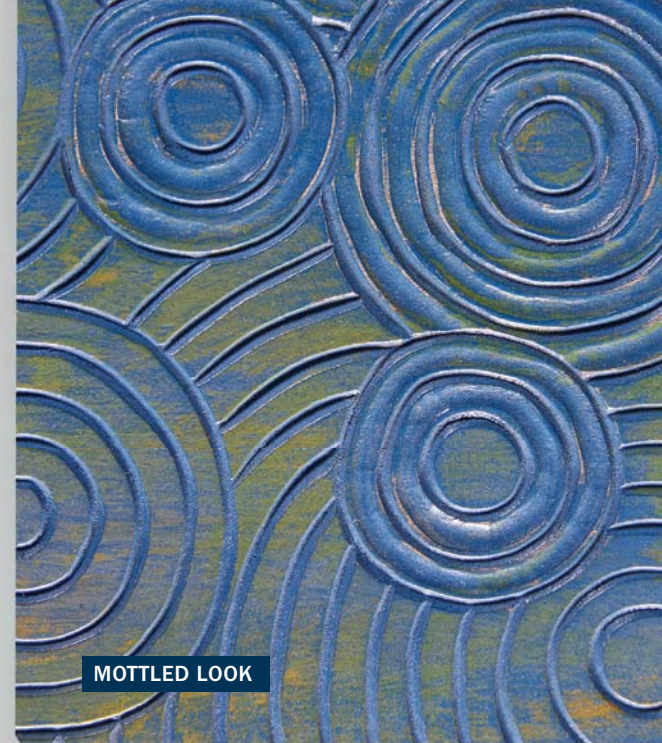
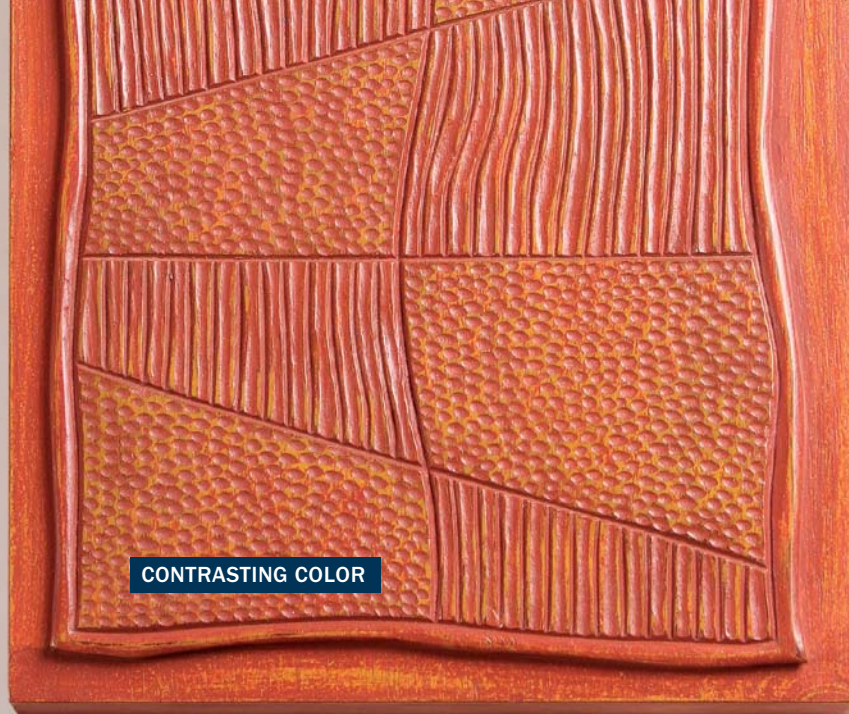
Begin applying the paint in line with the carving, in this case along the grooves of the ripple pattern, making sure the paint is getting down into the grain and that there are no missed spots.

The trick with milk paint is to always maintain a wet edge. If you add wet paint next to dry, the colors will not match, leaving evidence of where you stopped and resumed painting. Touch-

MIX UP A BATCH

Combine water and paint powder in the ratio recommended on the packet. Let it stand for 10 minutes and then adjust the viscosity to that of heavy cream. The quick-drying paint will stay usable for 24 hours, allowing you to apply multiple coats.





The basic burnished look



Apply coats thinly. Work the first coat into the wood. Aim for a thin, even coating but don't expect to cover all the wood.



Build the paint. Sand the surface only if there are brush filaments or chunks of paint stuck in it. Apply the second coat like the first.



Burnish the high points. After two or three coats of paint, rub the dry surface with 0000 steel wool. This will burnish the paint, smooth the ridges, and reveal some wood on corners.



Clear-coat the paint. A thin coat of shellac is Cullen's favorite for sealing surfaces that will be handled only lightly. Tabletops can receive a more durable finish such as polyurethane.

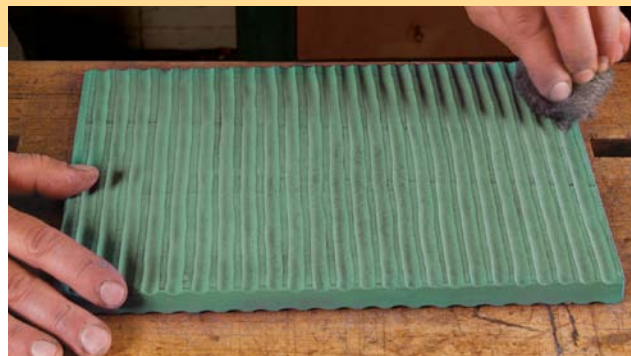


Wax finishes the finish. To lower the shellac's sheen, apply paste wax with 0000 steel wool and then polish the surface with a soft cloth.

Sand the high spots to create two shades from one color



Selective sanding. After the last coat of paint has dried (but before any clear coat), smooth the high points of the surface with P320-grit sandpaper.



Burnish the ridges. Stretch some 0000 steel wool tightly in your hand and move it briskly across the surface, going perpendicular to the grooves. Create a contrast between the darker, burnished ridges and the paler, unaltered milk paint in the grooves.



Finish the ridges. Apply finish just to the flat surfaces and not in the grooves, using a French polishing-style pad.

ups should be avoided for the same reason—it's safer to repaint the entire surface than to risk highlighting a mistake.

When you've finished the whole piece, let the paint dry for an hour or so. At this point, the painted surface should be dull and chalky to the touch. If there are any nibs or bristles embedded in the paint, remove them with a light sanding with P320-grit sandpaper. Add one or two more coats until the surface is thoroughly covered and appears rich and opaque.

With the color complete, I rub with 0000 steel wool in the direction of the grooves. The objective is to burnish the entire

surface and to create an accent of wood peeking through at the carved edges. The burnished paint should appear rich like polished stone and without any cloudiness. As for the exposed wood, lime in the milk paint affects tannins, so mahogany, for example, should appear deep red. If you remove too much paint, leaving too much wood showing through, recoat and repeat the rubbing-out process.

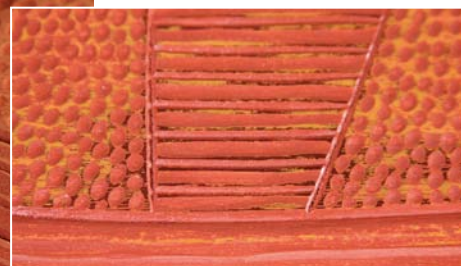
Now apply a clear finish to protect the paint from stains and general dirt. It's important to note that after a clear finish is on, applying more milk paint is no longer an option (milk paint

Layers of contrasting color add interest and character

Contrasting colors. Brush on a couple of thin coats of the base color. Don't aim to get total coverage (right). Once the first color is dry, brush on two coats of a contrasting color (far right).



Reveal the color underneath. Sand the surface with P320-grit sandpaper and then rub the surface with 0000 steel wool to cut through to the first color in places.



Color and carving combined. When a clear finish is applied, it highlights the two contrasting paint colors as well as the bare wood.

adheres only to itself or to bare wood). If the piece is not going to be handled, then just apply some wax—it's fast and the result is pleasing to the eye. Be aware that the clear coat will deepen and change the hue of the paint.

After the clear coat has dried, use steel wool and paste wax to cut the sheen and give the surface a pleasant feel.

Give one color two shades

This is a great technique because it requires only one color of paint but renders two shades. Apply two to three coats of color to the carving. Next, carefully (and I mean carefully) sand only the flat surface of the carving using P320- or P400-grit no-load sandpaper. Sand lightly to burnish the surface without removing too much paint.

Now, further burnish the surface using 0000 steel wool, making sure to touch the sanded surface only. The top surface should appear polished and the recesses (the carved areas) should appear slightly lighter in hue with a chalky appearance.

You can accentuate the color difference further by applying finish to the burnished areas only. If you get finish in the wrong area, sand it off and apply more milk paint to the carving. This technique should be used only on pieces that will be handled rarely, such as picture frames or candlesticks.

Apply one color over another

Apply two or three coats of the base color as above; then apply a contrasting color until it fully covers the previous one.

Rub the surface with steel wool until both the first color and the wood show through. The idea is to achieve balance and harmony among all the colors and not have one area appear to be worn more than the rest. When you are happy with the look, add a clear coat and wax.

Apply colors selectively

Apply two or three coats of the base color and don't rub it out. Now dab on streaks of two or more complementary or contrasting colors with a medium-size brush. Blend the colors to give a natural appearance. You can further soften the colors or even remove them by manipulating them with a wet cloth. Sand the surface with P320 or P400-grit paper and/or steel wool until it appears burnished and has the right amount of wood peeking out at the edges. Last, clear-coat and wax the carving. □

Studio furniture maker Michael Cullen's work can be seen at michaelcullendesign.com.

Dab on color for a mottled look



Streaks of color. After the base color is dry, add dashes of complementary colors to the surface. Try to be random rather than deliberate.

Soften the edges. Before the streaks of paint fully dry, dab them with a damp cloth (below) to blend them into each other as well as the base color.



Contrasting carvings. The whole surface was finished in the same way, but the flatter surface of *Spring Rain* on the right retains more complementary colors, while the ridges on *Thousand Suns* on the left are sanded through to the wood.