

# Three Finishes for Bird's-Eye Maple

Pop the figure of this wood using dyes, stains, glazes and topcoats

NATURAL

BY TERI MASASCHI

I never would claim that working and finishing bird's-eye maple are easy, but few woods can yield such contrasting appearances. At one end of the spectrum is the natural look, with a clear finish bringing out the wood's three-dimensional quality. In complete contrast is the striking look of antique wood, where a century or more

of oxidizing and accumulated patina gives it that certain glow and prominent grain. In between, there is the medium-tone appearance, with the eyes highlighted by the finishing process. Using a selection of dyes, stains, glazes and topcoats, I'll show you how to achieve the appearance of your choice.

## The natural look, or "bird's-eye lite"

Good surface preparation is especially key to the desired outcome on bird's-eye maple. This wood does have the tendency to tear out during planing. Using a wide-belt sander for larger surfaces and scraping for delicate details, you can eliminate most of the voids. Subsequent sanding with 120-, 150- and 180-grit paper on a random-orbit sander is all that is necessary to prepare the wood for its finish.

If you enjoy the clean, crisp look of unstained maple, wood selection is critical: There can be no sapwood, mineral streaks or widely different colors of stock, because a natural finish can't hide these discrepancies.

For a light finish, use Danish oil or Water-

lox Original Sealer thinned with mineral spirits in a one-to-one solution. Pour a liberal amount on the wood and wet-sand with 400-grit paper or a sanding sponge, creating an oil-and-sawdust slurry. This will be driven into the eyes, leaving the surface smooth. One application should be sufficient. Additional coats can be added, but more oil makes the maple more yellow.

The topcoat should be nonyellowing like CAB acrylic lacquer, a pale solvent finish such as Behlen's Water White Restoration Varnish, or a water-based lacquer or urethane. All clear coats should be gloss because the flatteners used to manufacture satin and semigloss coatings dull the wood's appearance. If a lower final sheen is desired, the gloss coat can be rubbed out.

The idea behind this method is that the oil enhances the eyes, while the film coating creates a deeper and more dimensional surface than the oil alone can give.

## Bird's-eye maple with a medium tone

The first step is to apply a tinted washcoat to the bare wood. This thinned coating,







MEDIUM

ANTIQUE



**Create a penetrating oil.** Mix equal amounts of Danish oil and mineral spirits. To avoid spills when pouring, keep the opening at the top to allow air to enter and liquid to exit smoothly rather than in irregular gulps.

## A NATURAL LOOK



**Fill the eyes and smooth the surface.** Pour a generous amount of the mixture onto the wood and then sand it in with a 400-grit sanding sponge. The oil-and-sawdust slurry fills voids in the bird's eyes, making them more prominent.



**Topcoat with a clear finish.** To avoid adding a tone to the natural-looking wood, use a nonyellowing finish, such as Behlen's Water White Restoration Varnish.





## A MEDIUM TONE



**Combination dye and seal.** This 2-lb. cut of premixed blond shellac is diluted with an equal volume of denatured alcohol (left). A few drops of concentrated dye give this washcoat some color (above).



**First finish layer.** Brush on the dyed shellac. This layer also seals the wood from the next glaze (below).

typically dyed dewaxed shellac, adds a layer of color and creates a barrier coat between the bare wood and a layer of glaze.

Either dissolve some blond shellac flakes or cut Zinsser's SealCoat by 50% with denatured alcohol to form a 1-lb. cut. For each 4 oz. of shellac, add a drop or two (depending on the desired intensity) of a concentrated dye such as TransTint or Wizard Tint. Honey amber or Vandyke brown are beautiful colors on bird's-eye maple. An alternative to tinting the shellac would be to use darker shades of shellac, such as orange or buttonlac. In either case, apply the shellac evenly with a brush or spray gun, let dry and scuff-sand with 320- or 400-grit paper.

Now apply a second layer of color using a shading and glazing stain. These heavy-bodied pigment glazing stains are designed to go over sealed surfaces only, being too thick and opaque for raw wood. Glazing stain has enough oil in it to be wiped off a sealed surface easily, leaving only a thin layer of color or glaze. On large surfaces it creates subtle changes in color tones, and if left heavy in corners and profiles, it gives the appearance of built-up patina. I use a warm brown such as Behlen's burnt-umber shading and glazing stain.

After wiping off the surplus, let it dry for at least three hours. Then add another washcoat of undyed dewaxed blond shellac



**A second layer of color.** Brush on a shading and glazing stain, then wipe it off. Leave a thin layer of color with a little extra glaze in the corners and voids to give a more interesting look to the piece.





## ANTIQUE MAPLE



**Dye, then seal.** Apply a water-based dye (left). When it's dry, seal it with a coat of dark dewaxed shellac, such as buttonlac.



**The first glaze.** Apply burnt-umber shading and glazing stain to the sanded shellac. Allow it to penetrate, then wipe the surface, leaving residue in any voids.

to set the glaze before topcoating with a solvent- or water-based gloss finish.

### Multiple layers of color give an antique look

Woodworkers who have built a beautiful period piece with bird's-eye maple face a challenge to re-create the 18th-century tone and, at the same time, pop the figure in a transparent way.

Begin with a coat of water-based honey-amber maple dye. First wet the surfaces with water, and when they're dry, dewhisker them with 220-grit sandpaper on a felt or cork block. This not only eliminates raised grain but also allows greater stain absorption. The dye stain penetrates deep into the wood, creating a perfect tone that will shine through the subsequent layers of color. Washcoat with a dewaxed dark shellac such as garnet or buttonlac, allow it to dry and then scuff-sand.

Apply a generous amount of burnt-umber shading and glazing stain, let it sit for a few minutes to bite into the surface, then wipe it off smoothly to leave a thin glaze of color on the surface and more color lodged in any details. Let it dry for three hours and then washcoat with dewaxed blond shellac



**The second glaze.** Mix raw-umber and black shading and glazing stain thinned with mineral spirits. Brush on the mixture and wipe it off. Residue left in crevices imitates an antique look (right).



to set the glaze. Antique reproductions respond well to this process, which can be repeated to deepen the caramel tone that antiques usually have. After the desired tone has been reached, a second glaze can be added to age the piece. Mix raw-umber shading and glazing liquid with black shading and glazing or Sherwin Williams' Gilsonite (also known as asphaltum), and thin with mineral spirits to a brushing con-

sistency. Apply this mixture over most of the piece and into all of the corners and crevices. Wipe off the bulk of the glaze, leaving dark lines in the deep recesses. This completes the visual perception of antique bird's-eye maple. Seal with a washcoat of dewaxed shellac and finish with a gloss clear coat. □

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