



*A limed finish can effectively simulate the look of age, even on new woodwork, such as this lauan mirror frame re-finished by the author. After staining the frame dark brown, he applied a white limed finish, highlighting the carved areas.*

## Creating a Limed Finish

*An old look for new wood*

by Michael M. Dresdner

**W**ith its soft, ghostly white appearance, a limed finish imparts instant history to any new piece of furniture. And although it's one of the most common techniques used to create antique reproductions that mimic the appearance of aged furniture, in recent years, limed or "pickled" finishes have also become popular for new furniture, cabinets and flooring. A limed finish creates the look of a once-finished piece that was later painted over and then redeemed through an incomplete job of stripping. For the most part, it looks like a natural wood finish, but it has telltale traces of white, off-white or even colors trapped in the wood's pores or in the corners of carvings and moldings. Fortunately, a limed finish is easy to create, and the application techniques are accessible to even the neophyte wood finisher.

Traditionally, the limed finish was used to artificially age and darken oak (hence the often-used name "limed oak") to make it resemble a richer and more expensive wood, such as mahogany. The process involved soaking the wood in a mixture of lime, ammonia, lye and water until the color of the wood darkened. The name of the finish comes from the lime (calcium oxide) used in this mixture. Curiously, a modern limed finish has just the opposite appearance, with its "age" added by making the piece appear to have been painted and stripped, rather than just darkened.

In spite of its affiliation with oak, a limed finish works on almost any light-color wood. You can apply a coat of paint, usually white, and then wipe or sand off the bulk of it to allow the wood to show through. The finish can be applied to a raw, stained or sealed wood surface, depending on the desired final look. When

the paint is dry, a light topcoat of satin or matte lacquer seals and protects the finish.

**Selecting the paint**—Because relatively little paint remains on the surface, almost any paint or pigment can be used for a limed finish—even those that are normally incompatible with the intended topcoat. Hence, you can use oil, Japan colors (available from Wood Finishing Supply Co., 100 Throop St., Palmyra, N.Y. 14522; 315-597-3743), latex, or enamel paints, pigmented white shellac or universal tints in virtually any vehicle, including lacquer. On raw wood, I prefer white latex or enamel paint, depending on what stain or dye I am using. On sealed wood, I like to use either white enamel or, for a faster-working finish, BIN, a white-pigmented shellac made by William Zinsser & Co., 39 Belmont Dr., Somerset, N.J. 08875; (201) 469-8100. BIN cannot be used over a shellac sealer, as it will redissolve it, so I generally use it on a piece sealed with a lacquer sanding seal. If you're working on a large surface and need lots of time before the paint dries, try using artists' white oil colors dissolved in mineral spirits and linseed oil.

Although white or off-white paint is most commonly used, most any light color creates a limed finish. In south Florida during the early '70s, pastel versions of limed finishes on pine became so popular that they were whimsically referred to as pickled pink pine. For convenience, I'll refer to the color as white throughout this article.

**Applying the finish**—After finish-sanding the wood, you must decide if you want to apply a stain, which will influence the color of

the translucent white paint that will be applied over it; for example, a raw umber will give the white a grayish cast, while burnt umber or sienna will yield a warmer pinkish or orange tone. In some cases, you may need a colored stain to counter the natural tint of the wood, which itself will affect the color of the white layer. If you do not seal the wood as part of the finish (as I'll describe), make certain you avoid compatibility problems: Applying a white latex paint over a water-soluble dye or an oil-base enamel over an oil stain will cause the colors to bleed through into the white material. Sealing the wood after applying the stain will prevent these problems.

Even though most limed finishes are applied directly over raw wood, you can also use the finish on wood that's been sealed first. Each approach yields a subtly different look, but the results are equally satisfying. For a limed finish on raw wood, liberally apply the white paint to the sanded surface. If a stain has been used, make sure it has dried completely. The white paint is handled rather like a glaze: It is first applied and then selectively wiped off while it is still wet. The paint that isn't wiped off settles into the pores and crevices of the wood, creating the aged look. If you take off too much paint, you can simply apply more. If you leave too much on, wait until the paint dries and sand some of it off with 120- or 220-grit paper. Rougher sandpaper will give a more consistent, visually textured look, while finer paper will create a more patchy appearance.

The limed-finish process is virtually the same for sealed wood. Seal the piece with one thin coat of shellac, lacquer or varnish, but do not sand afterward; the roughness gives the white overcoat a little more bite. Apply the white as before, but be certain to choose a paint that won't redissolve the sealer coat. Since the sealed surface lacks wood's absorptive qualities, you'll have a bit more time to work the glaze, and you can usually leave the right amount of white in the corners and low spots of the carvings before the paint sets up. If you want to remove more paint after it is dry, you can generally do it with steel wool or an abrasive pad, as the white won't adhere to the sealed surface as well as it does to raw wood.

When you're satisfied with the dry white layer, seal it with two coats of flat or matte lacquer or varnish, and smooth it with sandpaper or steel wool between coats.

**Antiquing finishes**—If you would like to further age the look of your finish, mix a bit of rottenstone into some paste wax and apply it over the completed finish. Wipe off the excess, but leave some of the residue in the corners of moldings and carvings to simulate the appearance of years of collected dust and grime.

One rather attractive variation of the antique finish is called "scrubbed oak." This involves distressing the wood before finishing by dinging it up with wrenches, short lengths of chain or a wooden mallet bristling with exposed nails and screws. To impart realism, limit the damage to surfaces that would be worn with normal use. Sand the surfaces lightly to remove any raised, broken wood fibers around the distressed areas. Stain the wood a very light burnt umber color, and then lightly seal it with one thin coat of vinyl sealer or shellac. Next, brush on white enamel paint and wipe off most of it, leaving just a bit more white than you would like to have.

**Highlighting details**—Another method of mimicking the furniture aging process is dry-brushing, which uses a paint brush that's lightly loaded with pigment to add dark highlights. Perhaps the best way to approach dry-brushing is to think of it as glazing in reverse. When you glaze a piece of furniture, you apply a colored liquid glaze and then wipe it off, leaving paint in the pores and details. Dry-brushing, on the other hand, highlights or darkens the sharp



*Although it's often referred to as a limed-oak finish, a limed finish can be applied to any type of wood. Here, a white ash sample, shown unfinished above, received a limed finish, which was applied directly to the raw wood.*

edges and raised surfaces of furniture. Anyone who has handled old furniture will tell you that once the protective layer of finish wears off the sharp edges of a nicely carved maple or walnut piece, the exposed wood quickly picks up dirt and oils and gradually darkens.

Dry-brushing needs a rough surface to work on, so it's most often done either on raw wood or on chalky surfaces painted with white undercoat or BIN. On open-pore woods, such as mahogany, dry-brushing the flat surfaces will define the pores of the wood as the bristles catch on the edge of each pore and leave a tiny dark line. This allows you to intensify or even add realistic-looking grain patterns by creating thousands of small lines of color. Carvings, high spots and the sharp edges of panels and moldings pick up a color line that highlights the details. Often, a weak carving can be made to appear more crisp with careful dry-brushing.

My favorite brush for dry-brushing is black hog's hair, commonly known as China bristle. The brush should be rather springy and fit the hand comfortably, with the thumb on one side of the ferrule, the fingers on the other and the handle resting in the crook of the hand. I prefer a brush that is 2 in. wide, a full 3 in. long, and  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. thick, or what is referred to by brush makers as double thickness.

The first step is to mix the desired color by adding naphtha or mineral spirits to Japan colors until you have a fairly thick but smooth liquid. With a small, stiff brush, such as a bridled glue brush, transfer a small amount of color from the can to a disposable mixing board; a scrap of wood will do. Load the brush by getting a small amount of almost-dry color on the tip by holding the brush at 90° to the surface and *lightly* scrubbing the tip in a circular motion through the dab of color until it appears dry. The brush will also appear dry, but it will be loaded with the Japan color. With light, sweeping movements, skim the tip of the brush across the surface of the wood, first on the flats and then on the carvings when the brush is slightly less loaded. The white surface will pick up color from the brush and impart a warm, translucent quality. When the brush stops transferring color, reload it with another dab from the mixing board. Each time color is added to the mixing board, give the color mixture a quick stir, since pigmented colors tend to settle rather quickly in the can. If no color transfers, load the brush a little heavier; however, if streaks show up, your brush is too heavy. When the dry-brushing is complete and the colors are dry, apply a protective topcoat as described for a regular limed finish. □

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