

Touch-up

These small, inexpensive guns are good for more than their name implies

BY JEFF JEWITT



SIPHON-FEED GUN



GRAVITY-FEED GUN

Several choices, two basic styles

Touch-up guns are basically smaller versions of regular spray guns, but they're really available in only two styles: a siphon-feed, overhead trigger design (above left) and a gravity-feed version (above right). Both styles are available in either conventional air-driven or high-volume, low-pressure (HVLP) designs, with the HVLP models priced a bit higher.

The most expensive siphon-feed HVLP touch-up gun costs about \$200, but you can get a conventional air-driven, Taiwanese-made, overhead trigger gun for less than \$50. With the gravity-feed models, you can expect about the same price range. However, some of the gravity-feed models are available with adapters for airbrush bottles, which increase the versatility of these guns, particularly for touch-up work.

Touch-up guns can be a valuable asset to small shops. For one, they usually require only 4 to 5 cu. ft. of air per minute, which is a fairly small air demand that is within the range of almost any compressor. Also, the smaller size of touch-up guns makes them easy to maneuver in tight spaces and while putting a finish on small items. This is a real asset when you have to apply stain or a finish inside small cabinets.

They're smaller and less expensive.

The standard 1-qt. cup HVLP spray gun at left sells for about \$170, while the small HVLP touch-up gun on the right holds about ½ pint of finish material and sells for \$80.



Spray Guns

Some woodworkers are addicted to power tools and collect routers. Others prefer hand tools and may have hundreds of planes or chisels. I have to confess an addiction to spray guns—I love them. At one time I counted more than 15 in my collection, and after selling half of them last year, the collection has grown into the double digits again. Out of all my spray guns, the one I reach for most often is a touch-up gun.

The touch-up gun is capable of jobs other than what the name implies. I routinely use these little gems for applying finishes to smaller projects, spraying stains, shading and toning finishes and, of course, touching up finishes that need minor repairs. And because some of these guns are dirt cheap, I don't care whether I muck up one of them by inadvertently leaving something in the gun that I shouldn't, such as milk paint or catalyzed lacquer.

I often apply stains in more than one layer. My favorite first (or ground) stain color is a water-soluble dye stain. And I've found that there is no better applicator than a touch-up gun, particularly on large pieces where brushing on a dye stain can cause lap marks (see the top photo at right). For a simple dye stain, atomization isn't critical, so I just use the gun to wet down the wood with a dye and then blot up the excess. For intricate inside areas, I can easily adjust the angle of the fan so I hit the corners first. I also cut back on the amount of air, so the vortex of the spray pattern doesn't prevent the dye from getting into tight corners.

Coloring sapwood to match heartwood is a snap with a touch-up gun. You can cut back on both the fan pattern and the amount of fluid to lay down a subtle line of color to match the sapwood to the heartwood. When I do this, I usually start by wetting down the whole area with solvent for the stain that I'm using—alcohol, water or mineral spirits—to get a better idea of the color I need to use.

Shading and toning are typically done after the base stain colors have been applied. My favorite toner is made by adding dye to a finish, creating a translucent effect. It can be used for the overall application of color (toning) or a more selective application (shading). Most standard-size guns and touch-up guns can be adjusted for the fairly wide fan pattern you need to apply a toner, but shading is definitely best done with a touch-up gun. If you want to shade an edge molding darker, or add a bit of dark color around the perimeter of a drawer or a tabletop, the touch-up gun is your best finishing tool (see the middle photo at right).

It's rare that I ever finish a piece of furniture without encountering some sort of problem, and one of the most common is rubbing through the finish and the stain when the job is nearly completed. If you have a gravity-feed gun with an airbrush attachment, you can literally "draw" some color or patch the finish on a particular problem area. If you don't have this attachment for your regular spray gun, the small spray pattern of a touch-up gun allows you to feather in finish or color so that it blends in invisibly.

When I do this, I take a piece of cardboard that's larger than the affected area by several inches on all sides and put a slit down the middle by raising my tablesaw blade up into it (see the bottom photo at right). This mask is taped or held over the spot that has been rubbed through, and then I use my touch-up gun to apply the missing stain. I let it dry, then apply some clear finish. But before that dries, I lift up the mask and gently spray several coats of clear finish in the correct sheen with the gun set for a small pattern. After the repaired finish is completely dry, I can blend or feather-in the finish as necessary with 0000 steel wool. □

Jeff Jewitt is a frequent contributor to Fine Woodworking on finish-related topics.

APPLYING STAINS



With a touch-up gun you can apply stains fast and evenly. Here, Jewitt uses the gravity-feed touch-up gun with a plastic cup to spray a water-based dye stain on an oak bookcase.

SHADING AND TONING



Before spraying a shading finish tinted with color, use a scrap of cardboard to set the size of your spray pattern.

TOUCHING UP



A mask makes a cleaner touch-up repair. A piece of posterboard with a sawkerf cut through it limits the amount of stain and finish applied to an edge on which the color has been rubbed through and removed.