



# An Antique Finish for Tiger Maple

Four hand-applied steps  
give your piece a period look

BY LONNIE BIRD

I've always admired the distinctive stripes, three-dimensional depth, and rich amber color of antiques made from tiger maple. The challenge is to replicate this century-old appearance on creamy-white, fresh-cut maple. The steps I take to transform tiger maple aren't difficult and can be done by hand, but the process will stretch over days as you wait for each step to dry. Of course, that's a lot quicker than waiting for the piece to become an antique.

## The finish rewards good surface preparation

It's important to remove all marks left by saws, planers, and jointers because this finish will display them prominently. A bench plane is the fastest way to get rid of these marks and beats the tedium, dust, and noise of machine sanding. However, be cautious when hand-planing tiger maple as the dramatically figured grain tears out easily. I avoid this problem by using a razor-sharp plane equipped with a high-angle frog to give a cutting angle of 50°, sometimes referred to as a York pitch. You can achieve the same angle by grinding a 38° edge on a bevel-up low-angle plane.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you still will get minor tearout. I use a sharp card scraper to smooth it away and blend the area with the surrounding surface. Of course, some surfaces, such as curved legs and moldings, can't be planed. I scrape these areas and then lightly hand-sand with P220-grit sandpaper to smooth the surface further and remove any facets left by the scraper. I use the same paper to lightly sand the flat areas that were planed; otherwise they'll accept the dye differently than the sanded areas.

## Dye and then oil the wood to develop the figure

The widest selection of dye colors comes in powder form in formulas that can be mixed with water, alcohol, or oil. I use water-based dyes because they make it easier to control lap marks and streaking than faster-drying, alcohol-based dyes, and they are reportedly more lightfast than oil-based dyes. The disadvantage is

## STEP 1

# Pop the figure with dye

### RAISE THE GRAIN

To prevent a water-based dye from raising the grain, pre-raise it by wiping the wood with a damp cloth (right). After the wood is dry, lightly sand the surface (far right).



### APPLY THE DYE

A quick way to test how the dye will look is to use a stirring stick made from the same wood as the workpiece (below). Then brush on the dye (right) and wipe with a clean cloth while still wet.



### A tip for end grain



To keep the end grain from absorbing too much dye and becoming too dark, wet it first with water and immediately apply the dye. This will dilute the color.

## STEP 2

### Add luster with oil



Apply a generous amount of oil to the wood, let it soak in for a few minutes, and then wipe off the surplus. This gives greater depth to the appearance of the wood.

that the water in the dye raises the grain, so I pre-raise the grain by wiping the wood with a damp cloth. Once the surface is dry, I lightly sand the wood with worn P220-grit or P320-grit sandpaper to smooth the fuzzy grain before applying the dye.

Another advantage of powdered dyes is that you can control the intensity of the color. The manufacturer recommends 1 oz. per quart of warm water, but I start with half that strength. Experiment on scrap tiger maple until you find a color you like. Two of my favorites from the Moser brand ([www.woodworker.com](http://www.woodworker.com); 800-645-9292) are russet amber maple and honey amber maple. Both yield the golden color of old maple furniture. For this project, I prefer the redder tones of the russet dye.

I dye the edges of floating panels before inserting them into their frames. This way, if seasonal movement causes a panel to shrink, I'm spared the embarrassment of undyed edges appearing. To reduce the chance that drips or runs will go unnoticed, I dye small areas one at a time and wipe spills immediately. If you do have faint drip or lap marks, go over the entire piece with a damp cloth when you've finished dyeing it. Don't get the wood dripping wet, as too much water can cause surfaces to warp and panels to swell. When satisfied, let everything dry overnight.

One reason oil finishes are so popular is that they enhance wood's natural appearance. They have the same effect on dyed wood. I flood the surface with an oil finish such as Waterlox or Formby's Tung Oil, making sure to cover all the crevices and details. After a few minutes, wipe away the excess. Let the finish cure overnight and dispose of the oily rags in a safe manner.

### Amber shellac topcoat adds more color

The amber shellac I use is made by Zinsser and comes as a 3-lb. cut. I reduce it to a 1-lb. cut by combining one part shellac with



## STEP 3

### Seal with shellac

Use several coats of thin shellac to give the wood a thinner, more natural topcoat (left). After the shellac has dried, smooth the surface with 0000 steel wool (below).



## STEP 4

# Bring out the details with glaze



Use the pigment from oil-based stain as a glaze (above). Push the glaze into all the corners and crevices of the workpiece with an artist's brush (right). Wipe away the surplus before it dries (far right). If the glaze becomes too tacky, dampen the cloth with mineral spirits or turpentine.



two parts denatured alcohol. Adding more alcohol will allow the finish to flow out better before setting up. It also lets the shellac flow into the grain, giving more of an in-the-wood finish, which I prefer over a film finish.

After each coat of shellac has dried, I rub the finish with 0000 steel wool, being careful not to rub through the finish. I then vacuum the surface thoroughly. Two or three coats of shellac are usually enough. Any more and the finish may begin to look thick, especially in crevices and details.

### Glaze, shellac, and wax complete the finish

It's the details that often make a piece of handcrafted furniture successful. Moldings, corners, and even simple carvings catch light and create interesting shadowlines for a visual treat. Glazing can accentuate these details even when the lighting doesn't cooperate. Although you can mail-order ready-made glaze, an easier source is an oil-based stain from the local paint or hardware store.

It's important to choose a stain that is darker than the dye yet complements its color. For my maple finishes, I use Moorish Teak stain from Zar. With the contents unstirred, pour off the excess oil, leaving an oil and pigment mixture with the consistency of mud at the bottom of the can.

Apply the glaze to the moldings, carvings, and other details with a small artist's paintbrush. Long before the glazing dries, wipe away the excess. A cloth moistened with mineral spirits or turpentine speeds the process or enables you to wipe away all traces of the glaze should you change your mind. Because the shellac is dissolved with alcohol, the mineral spirits will have no effect on it.

After the glaze has cured overnight, I apply another coat of shellac for a protective seal. Finally, I rub out that coat using 0000 steel wool and complete the finish with a coat of paste wax. □



**A final coat of shellac.** After the glaze has cured overnight, seal it with a final coat of thin shellac. Finish with a coat of wax.

Lonnie Bird teaches woodworking at his shop in Dandridge, Tenn. For information on classes, go to [www.lonniebird.com](http://www.lonniebird.com).