finish line

Easy finish ages a classic cherry piece

BY DAN FAIA

ike many furniture projects, this porringer-top tea table in cherry (see pp. 60-67) won't be the first piece of furniture in its new home. There is a spot all picked out for it in the living room, between pieces of age-darkened cherry and stained pine. So my first goal was to tone down the table's bright natural cherry a little to help the new piece blend in.

Cherry's tendency to blotch can make dyeing tricky, but this staining method helps to minimize the problem. For a topcoat afterward, I chose Waterlox Original Satin Finish because it allowed me to build a durable finish quickly, with a minimum of fuss.

Surface preparation is important to all finish

important to all finishes, but especially when dyeing and staining. Coloring wood highlights and magnifies minor imperfections like overlooked glue squeeze-out or small areas of tearout. Glue will absorb less dye and appear lighter than the surrounding wood. Sanding scratches and tearout will do just the opposite.

Begin the process by handplaning to level the surfaces and to remove mill marks. A thorough scraping will refine the surfaces, helping to clean up any tearout. How the wood is scraped will determine the sanding grit to begin with—P180-grit is most likely. To preserve the feeling of hand-worked surfaces on this period reproduction, I sanded only by hand, without using a sanding block.

Even though I seal the surface before applying the water-based dye, I still start by raising the grain. After sanding, slightly dampen the surface with distilled water. If you use tap water, be sure to test it on a piece of scrap first. Some tap water has a high iron

content that can stain the wood, leaving black or yellow spots. Allow the wood to dry thoroughly and resand the wood lightly with P220-grit paper.

The first coat is shellac

1

Sealing the piece with a washcoat of shellac will even out the wood's absorption properties, resulting in a more uniform color throughout the piece.

Whether you're using premixed shellac or flakes, adjust the heavy cut with denatured alcohol until you have roughly a 1-lb. cut.

Apply the shellac with a brush. It will dry quickly, so don't do much reworking as you go. Sand lightly with some used P220-grit paper or 0000 steel wool to level any fuzzy fibers.



Washcoat. Brush on a thin coat of blond shellac (above). Try to avoid drips and puddling. Level any raised fibers with sandpaper or steel wool (below).



Photos, except where noted: Tom Goffe; this page (left): John Tetreault

COPYRIGHT 2007 by The Taunton Press, Inc. Copying and distribution of this article is not permitted.

The key to applying dye: Keep moving

Water-based aniline dye is easy to mix. I used Homestead Finishing's TransFast dye powder in antique cherry red. Start with a capful (about ¹/₂ oz.) of dye powder in a pint of warm water and add small amounts of dye or water to adjust the color. Always test the color on a scrap piece of project lumber that also has been sanded and sealed.

To achieve a uniform color when applying the dye, it's best to be methodical. Brush dye on one element of the project at a time, then mop away the excess with a rag.



If the dye puddles or sits too long, it could darken the piece unevenly. You can make the overall color darker by applying further coats. The dye shouldn't raise the grain enough to require any additional sanding, but you can smooth the surface with 0000 steel wool.



Brush on the dye, then mop it off. Keep a rag handy to wipe away any excess quickly after applying the dye. Any puddling will result in darker areas.

Full-strength varnish builds quickly

I apply Waterlox Original without thinning. It is heavy and flows slowly, but the advantage is that it is self-leveling and leaves very few brush marks. Be sure to use a high-quality brush for fewer stray bristles. Brush on three or four coats (maybe more for porous woods), rubbing out between coats with 0000 steel wool.

If you are nervous about brushing, you can apply the finish with a rag. Ragging requires the product to be thinned. The downside is that this means more coats—and more rubbing out—to achieve the same build of finish.

After the final rubout, apply a coat of paste wax for a uniform sheen and an extra layer of protection. Use a lint-free rag and work on a few sections at a time. If the wax hardens for a long period of time, it will become very labor-intensive to rub out.

Finally, use a clean rag to buff the piece to its final luster.



Unthinned varnish builds a finish quickly. Apply the varnish with a high-quality brush and count on applying three or four coats. Rub out the surface with steel wool between coats. After a final rubbing out, apply paste wax and buff with a clean rag.





Photos, this page (bottom center and right): Steve Scott

MAY/JUNE 2007 109

COPYRIGHT 2007 by The Taunton Press, Inc. Copying and distribution of this article is not permitted.