



Revive a Finish

Don't rush to strip; a simple cleaning and renewal can work wonders

BY JEFF JEWITT

READY FOR REVIVAL



After 30 years, the original penetrating oil finish on this table is still intact but has become dull and is obscured by a layer of dirt and grime. The fix isn't refinishing, but cleaning and renewing the finish.

Stripping a piece of furniture must be the nastiest finishing task. Not only are the fumes unpleasant, but it's messy and requires cumbersome safety equipment. Yet for many, stripping is the first thing that comes to mind when they see a piece of furniture whose finish is worn or damaged. However, stripping is the nuclear option of refinishing.

In many cases, if the finish is just worn but still in good shape, you should consider cleaning and reviving it. This approach is used extensively in the antiques and museum trades and uses simple materials and surprisingly few tools.

I'll show you several no-strip methods for refreshing different

Evaluate the finish

Is it beyond repair?

To see if any finish is worth reviving, wipe it down with some paint thinner or mineral spirits. Wetting the surface not only helps you preview what the piece will look like under a revived finish, but more importantly, it reveals any major flaws in either the finish or the wood that can be fixed only by stripping the piece.



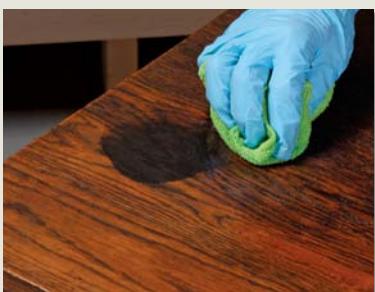
MISSING FINISH

You can't revive a finish if it's missing. The mineral spirits will darken areas with no finish.



DAMAGE TO THE WOOD

Cracks and blisters in veneer make reviving a finish pointless. On solid wood, if long, deep scratches and gouges have gone through the finish into the wood, cleaning and reviving may make them look worse.



BLACK/GRAY AREAS

Cleaning and reviving will not remove gray or black areas. These problems usually indicate water damage to the wood and not the finish.



STICKY FINISHES

Finishes around pulls that are routinely in contact with skin will become sticky over time. If you press a cotton swab on the finish and parts of the cotton remain, go right to stripping. Cleaning and even putting new finish over a sticky finish will never harden it.



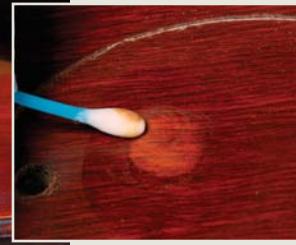
ALLIGATOR SKIN

Some finishes that have been applied thickly become brittle and crack as they get older. The resulting finish is rough and bumpy. Don't bother trying to clean or revive these finishes.

Which type are you dealing with?



Oil finishes are easy to spot, but a film finish could be a number of things. Rub a cotton swab soaked in lacquer thinner on an unobtrusive area. If the finish comes away, it is lacquer. If it doesn't, try denatured alcohol to see if it is shellac.



kinds of finish. I'll discuss which finishes respond well and which don't. Go ahead and experiment on an old piece. You'll most likely be amazed at the results, but if you aren't, you can always strip it afterward without having invested a great deal of time.

Evaluate the damage and determine the finish

Woodworkers usually get to finish new furniture, but there are a couple of reasons why it is good to know how to refinish a piece. The finish on your early creations may have deteriorated; or perhaps you own an heirloom or two, or couldn't resist a flea-market bargain. The first step is to see if the finish has damage that puts it beyond reviving (see photos at left).

If it looks like a good candidate for reviving, the second step is to see what type of finish you're dealing with, because this determines the method. The best finishes to clean and revive are old oil, oil/varnish, shellac, and lacquer finishes. The first two types are generally wipe-on, penetrating finishes with little to no surface build and will have a flat, dull look when old. You may even have applied them yourself when you built the piece.

With a film finish, test to see if it is lacquer or shellac (above). If the finish responds to neither solvent it is probably oil-based polyurethane, a waterborne finish, or a high-tech catalyzed finish, none of which revive very well. However, you can still put these finishes through the two-step cleaning process explained below.

A good cleaning reveals the finish

First, remove any loose dust from the surface. Next, take a rag, ideally with a little texture such as terrycloth, and wet it with

Start with a two-step cleaning



1

Remove the wax and grease. Dampen a cloth with paint thinner, and rub the surface. This will take off any residual wax polish.



2

Now clean the surface. Warm water and dish detergent remove the accumulation of dirt from sticky fingers, spilled food and drink, and any leftover paint thinner.

mineral spirits or paint thinner. Rub the surface in small circles, paying attention to crevices and corners that might contain old wax as well as areas that get contact with hands and fingers, such as around knobs and pulls. I often wear a respirator when using either solvent indoors, but if you work in a well-ventilated area (as I am above) you can probably get by without one. Or you can substitute odorless mineral spirits (Klean-Strip is one brand) or naphtha, which evaporates faster and doesn't have a lingering solvent odor.

If you don't see a lot of grime on your rag when you do this step, all that means is that the finish probably wasn't waxed often or exposed to oil-based products such as lemon oil. However, if there's some grime on the surface that doesn't seem to be coming off with the cloth, you can use a piece of 0000 steel wool.

For the second cleaning, put about $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. of dish detergent in a pint of lukewarm water. I like to use Dawn because it contains grease-cutting chemicals known as surfactants. Dampen a cloth (don't get it dripping wet) and wipe the surface in the same manner as before. Most of the grime and dirt is removed with this second step because the soapy water pulls off the oily residue from the first step and also removes water-soluble grime like sugary food spills. Change the cloth frequently to a clean part. When you're done, lightly wipe the surface using distilled water to remove any soap residue.

How to revive a wipe-on, oil-based finish

One of the most popular finishes used by non-professional woodworkers is some type of an oil finish. This includes pure tung oil

or boiled linseed oil, one of the Danish oils, a wiping varnish, or an oil/varnish mix. All these finishes are popular because they penetrate deep into the wood, accentuate figure and detail, and provide a very natural, low-luster finish that woodworkers like.

A downside of these in-the-wood finishes is that over time they get dull and the wood loses its luster. The steps below are a good way to really liven these finishes back up. This was probably the first finish you used, and luckily for you, it is among the easiest to revive.

Wet-sand to remove minor scratches—You're bound to find minor surface scratches on pieces that have seen normal household use, but this next step should repair them. You'll need some type of wiping varnish such as Seal-A-Cell, Waterlox Original, or Minwax Antique Oil. If you know the original finish was a pure tung or linseed oil and you want to avoid adding any kind of film finish, you can substitute Danish oil.

Pour a small puddle of the finish onto the surface and then use a small piece of wet-or-dry sandpaper (600-grit CAMI or P1000-grit FEPA) to wet-sand in circles or with the grain. Sand until any slight scratches are gone and the surface looks uniform. Remove the excess with a dry cloth and let it dry at least six hours.

These penetrating finishes aren't usually used with dyes or glazes so you probably won't need to touch up any missing color (see p. 71), but if you do, let any color repairs dry for about an hour and then apply a coat of the same finish you used for wet-sanding. Using a small piece of paper towel or old cotton T-shirt, I apply just enough to make the surface look wet and then allow it to dry. Apply another coat or two if you want a deeper luster to the wood.



Restore an oil finish

Thin, wipe-on finishes don't offer much protection, so over the years the surface becomes scratched. Fortunately they are easy to revive.



Step 1. Wet-sand and wipe

Pour on a liberal amount of a wiping varnish and then sand the surface with fine sandpaper. This removes most of the scratches and leaves an even sheen. Once you've sanded the whole surface, wipe off the extra finish and let the piece dry.



or more protection. As a final step, you can apply and buff out a coat of paste wax.

Sand and wax shellac or lacquer

Reviving a shellac or lacquer finish is even quicker, because you don't have to add finish. You could, of course, as new shellac or lacquer will melt right into old, but it's easier to level what is already there than try to brush on a new, level coat. Do the two-step cleaning process, then instead of wet-sanding, dry-sand the finish lightly with P600-grit stearated sandpaper like Norton 3X or 3M Fre-Cut. If the finish is slightly crazed (rough and cracked), sand it back as much as you can without sanding through to the stain or bare wood.

Touch up any missing color—If the piece was originally dyed or stained, or if you sanded through to lighter wood underneath, you may need to repair some colors. I mix dry furniture powders with SealCoat dewaxed shellac. You can blend a custom color and it dries very fast, so you can proceed to the next step without waiting. Use a No. 4 artist's brush (from art and crafts stores) and

Step 2. Wax and buff

Dark wax can enhance a dark wood by concealing minor scratches and not leaving a cloudy residue. If left a little heavy in corners, it can add an aged look. Buff the wax to leave the restored piece looking beautiful again.





Revive lacquer or shellac

These thicker film finishes can be sanded smooth and then just waxed. Although unsightly, most surface scratches and dull areas are only skin deep.



Step 1. Sand it smooth

Use 600-grit sandpaper to remove the damaged surface of the finish, leaving a more even appearance.

Step 2. Retouch missing color



Any old piece that was originally dyed or stained is likely to need the color touched up. The edges of pieces are often worn down, revealing bare wood. A single brush stroke of color instantly restores their look. Combine different shades of furniture powders and some dewaxed shellac on a piece of white paper until you get a good match.



Step 3. Finish with wax

After sanding away the damaged finish, apply a coat of paste wax and then polish it to an even sheen.

play with the colors on a piece of white paper until you get a reasonable match to the wood. Apply it sparingly, just enough to disguise the problem. Avoid the temptation to make it perfect, because you are more likely to make the touch-up obvious.

Instead of more finish, I find that a coat or two of paste wax works better and is a lot easier. It adds a bit of luster and lends that silky feel that old furniture gets over time when it has been cared for. If you deliberately leave a little dark wax in corners and crevices, it adds an antiqued look. Always use tinted paste waxes on dark finishes. Clear wax can dry whitish and look bad on open-grained woods like oak.

Thick film finishes can only be cleaned

Film finishes like oil-based polyurethane, waterborne finishes, or high-tech, two-part finishes often found on kitchen cabinets don't revive very well. If you try to sand them, you are likely to go through a layer of finish and leave a witness line that can only be covered up by applying a new topcoat to the whole surface. However, these tough finishes are harder to damage, so there is a good chance that after the two-step cleaning they will be ready for many more years of useful service. □

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