A wax-polished surface has a soft sheen unrivaled by any other finish. *You can see the reflection of the buffing rag in the crotch-mahogany veneered surface of this drop-front desktop.*

Rejuvenating with Wax

Good cleaning and two-step approach give best results

by Tom Wisshack

A coat of paste wax is probably the simplest and safest way of rejuvenating the surface on a piece of old furniture. In the 18th and 19th centuries, varnished, French-polished and oil-finished pieces were all generally wax polished afterward, usually with a mixture of beeswax dissolved in turpentine, sometimes with various resins added for durability and hardness. This wax polish gradually hardened, the wood tone shifted as it aged and a patina developed. Subsequent polishings maintained the finish, which mellowed as it acquired minute scratches, dents and a bit of grime.

A wax polish is compatible with nearly all old finishes, but how well a piece of furniture responds to it will vary depending on how—and how well—a piece was finished originally and on the care (or lack of it) received by the piece since then. Pieces that originally were finished with care but not maintained well will respond to a polishing after being cleaned. Pieces that have either been restored in an insensitive manner (drenched in cheap varnish, for example) or finished poorly to begin with will probably need refinishing before they can benefit from a wax polish. I'll discuss below how I clean a piece of furniture, from the gentlest method to the most aggressive that I can recommend, and how I apply a wax polish, generally beginning with a color coat and then applying a harder clear wax over that. Properly done, a wax polish is the most beautiful surface treatment in the woodworker's repertoire (see the photo above).

Cleaning

Few pieces of old furniture are in perfect condition. If the dirt and grime obscure the grain, the piece needs a judicious cleaning before you polish with wax. I use a naphtha-soaked soft cloth to re-

move dirt, grime and built-up wax, right down to the old finish. (Naphtha is a petroleum-based solvent that's slightly more aggressive than mineral spirits; if you can't find it, mineral spirits will work fine.) I always start in an out-of-the-way place, preferring caution to speed. Finishes on old furniture are always completely cured, so there's very little chance of the naphtha dissolving them. I wipe the surface of the piece until the cloth comes off clean.

I've also removed old wax and dirt with Liberon's wood cleaner and wax remover (see the sources of supply box). As long as it's not left on too long, this solvent won't harm the finish layer either. As with the naphtha, it's best to begin in an inconspicuous area to see how the finish responds to it.

If you find that you need to get more aggressive yet, substituting 0000 steel wool for the cloth will usually do the trick. Sprinkling the surface with rottenstone will increase the cutting action even more and will leave a very fine surface. Whenever I use abrasives, I check the surface frequently (by wiping away the rottenstone and naphtha) to make sure I don't cut through the finish. I've never had a problem, though, probably because the finish layer on most antiques has had a hundred years or more to cure.

If a piece has areas of carving or intricate detail, I make a paste of rottenstone and naphtha and work it in with a soft toothbrush. Afterward, I remove all residue with pure naphtha on a soft, clean cloth. The naphtha sometimes leaves a slight film on the surface, but it will buff right off, and any traces will disappear when I apply wax.

Applying a color coat

After I have cleaned a piece and have given it at least 24 hours to dry, I apply what I call a "color coat" of wax (see the photo below). This color coat is only a preliminary step in preparation for a final coat of clear, harder wax. This first coat of tinted wax will hide minor dents and scratches, enhance the natural wood color and even out excessive differences in tone resulting from repairs or exposure to direct sunlight. A tinted wax will also fill any unfilled pores with darker particles than a clear or white wax will, resulting in a more natural-looking surface. When using a tinted wax, I select a shade darker than the wood tone I'm polishing because most of the wax is removed during the buffing.

I use two brands of colored waxes. One of them, Antiquax's Antique paste wax polish, produces a long-lasting film and doesn't fingerprint. I use the Brown wax most often because it works well over a broad range of wood tones, from light oak to dark mahogany. The other tinted wax I use is Liberon's Black Bison paste wax polish. This wax comes in ten colors (derived from natural earth pigment matter) as well as natural and clear (the natural is slightly amber while the clear is actually bleached—and quite clear). Georgian Mahogany covers quite a range of shades and is particularly useful on old English mahogany furniture, which I see a good deal of.

I apply the colored wax to one surface at a time, using an old cotton T-shirt and working in a circular motion, making sure that everything is covered. The colored waxes are relatively soft, so I apply them quite liberally, really working the wax into the surface. Antiquax recommends leaving its product on for two or three minutes only. Liberon suggests applying its product with steel wool and leaving it on for at least 20 minutes, giving the solvents time to evaporate before buffing. Optimally, leaving the wax on for four to eight hours allows thorough evaporation and will give you the highest sheen when buffed. I've left the color coat on overnight without a problem. It was considerably more difficult to rub out than if I'd followed the directions, but the resulting finish was harder.

I buff out the color coat with an old terry-cloth towel, rubbing vigorously and removing all but the finest layer of the colored wax. The harder I buff now, the deeper the luster of the finish. If a coat of wax does dry out before you get around to buffing it, no serious harm has been done. Applying a fresh coat will dissolve the hardened coat, and you can buff normally. With experience, you'll determine how long to wait before buffing.

I save all my wax-impregnated rags in old cookie tins. A well-maintained antique—or one that you've brought back to life—often will need nothing more than a good rub with one of these cloths to bring back its luster.

For the color coat on the carved areas, I apply the wax with a soft toothbrush, and then I buff it off with a pure-bristle shoe-polishing brush or with one of Liberon's wax-buffing brushes.

Naphtha, steel wool and rottenstone *all have their place in removing dirt and old wax from antiques without harming the finish. Experiment in an inconspicuous place on the piece, and approach the cleaning with a least-invasive attitude, beginning with naphtha (or other solvent) on a cloth. Proceed to using steel wool and/or rottenstone only if the solvent isn't working by itself.*

Tinted wax followed by a clear wax *can make a wood surface absolutely radiant. The author applies a color coat first, and then, after it's thoroughly dried, he applies a clear coat of harder wax. He buffs both the color coat and the clear coat with clean rags—preferably old linen napkins or tablecloth scraps—and buffs carvings and other relatively inaccessible areas with a shoebrush or one of Liberon's buffing brushes.*

A color coat may not be advisable on some pieces. Light woods—fruitwoods or maples, for example—look just fine as they are. On furniture made of these and other light woods, I use Antiquax Clear paste wax polish, which has a slight amber tone, but will not discolor these woods because buffing leaves such a thin layer of wax on the surface. Liberon's Neutral and Clear waxes are also good choices, as is Renaissance wax. Renaissance wax has a stiffer consistency than the other waxes I've discussed and can be difficult to apply evenly, but I circumvent this problem by applying it only to very small areas at a time and then buffing almost immediately. The polish it leaves is beautiful, although not as resistant to water or alcohol as other waxes.

Applying a clear coat

It's essential that you use a clear coat of harder wax over the color coat because even if you've buffed the color coat thoroughly, there's a possibility of color transfer from the furniture to your clothing, especially on chair, table or desk edges. Just as important, though, is the protection the harder wax provides your furniture. I like to wait several weeks after applying the color coat before I apply the clear wax. It doesn't always work out that way, but that's the ideal. For this topcoat, I've been happy with Antiquax's Clear paste wax polish, Renaissance wax and Liberon's Clear Professional wax, which is higher in carnauba content (therefore harder) than the waxes in their Black Bison line.

I apply the clear coat to small sections, using an old cotton T-shirt, working in a circular motion and then buffing a little before the wax has completely set—no more than ten minutes (see the top photo). Old linen napkins or tablecloth scraps seem to work better than anything else for buffing out the clear coat. They produce a superior shine, and the wax-impregnated rags just get better with time.

Problem cases

Occasionally I encounter a piece that does not respond well to a wax polishing, even after a thorough cleaning. Often such pieces will show dull or worn areas when polished with wax, or the wax may seem to sink in without effect. If the finish seems sound, I clean the piece again, removing the wax I've applied and any remaining dirt. Then I melt the wax I'm using (usually tinted) in a double boiler or glue pot, and I add about a tablespoonful of rottenstone (not pumice, which is much coarser) for each 8-oz. container of wax. *After* removing the wax from the heat source, I add about one-quarter cup of mineral spirits to thin the mixture and make it easier to work.

When the mixture has cooled, I apply a liberal amount to one surface at a time, buffing it in with a lambswool pad on an electric drill. I add more of the wax mixture whenever it starts getting thin on the surface. The rottenstone lightly abrades the wood, burnishing the surface and enhancing the effect of the wax. After applying the wax in this manner, I rub it into the surface by hand, using a clean, soft cloth and following the grain. I rub briskly and then buff the wax off when dry, again following the grain of the wood. I let the wax cure in a warm atmosphere for at least two weeks and then apply a clear coat of wax in the usual manner. The result is a surface that will remain beautiful for years. Do *not* use any spray polishes, oils or other maintenance products on the finished surface. The only care or maintenance your furniture needs at this point is a quick rub down with the rag you used for the clear wax polish, and less frequently (it will depend on wear), another coat of the clear wax. □

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With the harder topcoating of clear wax, *work in one small area at a time, and apply the wax polish in a tight circular motion. These polishes contain more wax and less solvent, so their drying times are considerably shorter.*

Carved, multi-faceted surfaces *are ideal candidates for a wax polish. The character of the wax is such that it accentuates the texture of the carving rather than masks it, as is evident in the author's reproduction shown here.*

Sources of supply

Liberon
Liberon Supplies, PO Box 86, Mendocino, CA 95460; (800) 245-5611

Antiquax
Marshall Imports, PO Box 47, Crestline, OH 44827; (800) 992-1503

Renaissance
Available from Garrett Wade Co., Inc., 161 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013; (800) 221-2942