

# One Fast Finish

Luster of oil and sheen of shellac—in a day or less

BY JEFF JEWITT

I've had to learn to do quick finishing jobs and make fast fixes in my refinishing business. This method is both fast and attractive, whether you're working on a holiday gift on Christmas Eve or you just prefer no-fuss finishes. I came up with the technique based on necessity, but I'm sure it will save you when time is tight.

This finish is ideal for a low-build, "in-the-wood" type of look, where durability

is not the key factor. However, you can build the shellac to increase the level of protection. The ingredients—boiled linseed oil, denatured alcohol, a can of amber shellac, and a few rags—can be found in most woodshops or at the nearest hardware store. The wipe-on technique avoids the hassle of most oil finishes, which can take days to complete. In fact, it works so well that it might become your favorite finish.

## A thin coat of oil lays the foundation

For surface preparation, scrape, plane, or sand the wood with the grain to P220-grit. Wipe with naphtha or denatured alcohol to remove dust, dirt, and sanding debris. The solvent will highlight potential problems like glue spots and scratches.

Applying boiled linseed oil is the first step in French polishing, a more tedious and time-consuming technique from which this finish is derived. In fact, you could call this a "down and dirty" French polish.

I'm a big fan of boiled linseed oil for this step, because it contains driers that cause it to cure faster than tung oil. Pour a small amount onto a small cotton cloth. Apply just enough oil to make the wood appear "wetted," which is about a teaspoon per square foot depending on wood species. Don't use the "flood on, let sit, then wipe" method. If you do, the oil will seep from figured areas through the thin shellac that is applied in the next step.

Remove excess oil with a clean rag, then lightly buff the surface with a gray synthetic abrasive pad such as 3M Scotch-Brite or Mirka Mirlon. The pad will pick



## THREE-STEP FINISH

Oil, shellac, and wax are easy to find and just as easy to apply using this simple, three-step process. Don't be surprised if this fast finish becomes one of your favorites.



## BEGIN WITH A LIGHT COAT OF LINSEED OIL

*Because this finish does not provide time for the oil to dry, compensate by using a whisper-thin coat. Use just enough to bring out the beauty of the wood. Immediately remove any residual oil with a clean, lint-free cloth (left). A good rubdown with a synthetic pad (below) will smooth the surface and add a nice sheen.*

up residual oil and will smooth the wood surface further.

### Pad on shellac right away

Normally, you would let the oil cure for 24 to 48 hours. You can wait, but if you go directly to the shellac application, it will speed things up and the oil will provide a bit of lubrication for the shellac. The thin coat of oil cures fine below the shellac.

Plain, orange, waxy shellac (sold in a can as amber shellac) works well and is easy to find. The brand I use comes in a 3-lb. cut that I dilute by mixing 2 parts denatured alcohol with 5 parts shellac. Put the mixture in a squeeze bottle with a dispensing spout.

I use a padding cloth to wipe on the shellac. It should be as absorbent, clean, and lint-free as possible. Old, clean T-shirts work fine. Cotton is preferred, because polyester does not hold or absorb liquids as well. Wad up the cloth so that the bottom part is as smooth and free of wrinkles





2 parts  
alcohol

5 parts  
shellac

## WIPE ON SHELLAC

*Thin the shellac you'll use by mixing 5 parts shellac with 2 parts denatured alcohol. This thinner shellac is easier to apply, especially on small or intricate surfaces. Wipe it on thinly with a cloth pad, starting with flat surfaces (above) and then working the sides and edges (right). Use 600-grit sandpaper to smooth out application marks or remove debris (facing page).*

as possible. Make the pad a manageable size. Large pads are great for big, flat surfaces but don't work for smaller and more intricate projects.

Dispense about 2 oz. of denatured alcohol into the pad and compress the pad with your hand several times to work the solvent through it. Then squeeze the pad to remove excess solvent. Pour about 1 oz. of shellac solution onto the pad bottom.

Padding shellac simply means wiping it on thinly with this cloth pad. It is best to practice on a flat surface to get a feel for applying it smoothly and evenly.

### Finishing different surfaces requires an assortment of techniques

For flat surfaces, bring the pad down lightly near one edge and drag it across the top and off the opposite edge, like an

airplane landing and then taking off again. Come in from the other side and repeat the stroke. Continue down the board in alternating stripes, with the grain. When you've reached the bottom, start again at the top. One of the great benefits of shellac is that it dries quickly enough for you to repeat the sequence rapidly. Work the sides and edges in a similar fashion. As the pad starts to dry out, reload it with shellac.

For complex surfaces such as furniture interiors, tight corners, or other challenging areas, you'll need to modify things a bit. Start with the pad anywhere that's convenient and move it toward corners, right angles, and such. Always keep the pad moving. When you recharge, make sure you don't put too much shellac in the pad or you'll pool it. Bring the pad down on the surface and immediately begin to

move it using just the pressure of your fingers or the weight of your arm.

To finish routed or other three-dimensional surfaces, wad up the cloth and compress it into the profile of the edge. Use a small, well-wetted portion of the pad to get the shellac into small or tight areas. But again, don't get the pad too wet or you'll create problems.

It probably took you longer to read about the shellac application than it will to actually do it. For a medium-size project like a small cabinet or table, I spend only about 30 minutes with the shellac. Smaller projects are a little harder, because you risk returning to an area before it dries, and dragging the gummy shellac. Move the pad more slowly, or try using a smaller pad.

You may encounter streaks or fibers in the sticky shellac. Any application marks



or debris can be rubbed out with some 600-grit (CAMI grade) sandpaper followed by 0000 steel wool after the shellac has cured for about eight hours. Because there are no “coats” of finish in the conventional sense, just keep applying the finish to achieve the look you want.

### Applying the final touch

Near the end of the process, if you use all the shellac in the pad and keep rubbing with the dry pad, it will burnish the surface and give it a nice soft glow. For a lower luster and extra protection, wait a day and then apply some paste wax with 0000 steel wool. Buff the wax with a soft cloth. □

*Jeff Jewitt is a professional finisher and author of Taunton's Complete Illustrated Guide to Finishing (The Taunton Press, 2005).*



### FINISH WITH STEEL WOOL AND WAX

*Paste wax adds a more even sheen and a nice feel to your project. Apply it with 0000 steel wool. When the wax appears hazy, buff it with a soft, clean cloth.*