

Finishing a drawer

BY JEFF JEWITT



When it comes to finishing, drawers seem to cause more problems than any other part of a workpiece. Pitfalls include internal corners that either avoid finish or collect a puddle of it; the drawer's transition from the visible outside of the piece to the less-visible inside; and the need for the drawer to slide smoothly in a tight space. However, if you follow a series of logical steps, applying finish becomes straightforward.

Finish the drawer front first

Most drawer fronts are made from a primary wood, with the sides, back, and bottom made from secondary woods. The stain (if applicable) and the clear coat on the drawer fronts should match the rest of the cabinet. The other parts of the drawer

should get a minimal finish. This leads to the problem of how to make a clean transition, particularly if the sides are attached to the front with half-blind dovetails.

Staining? Isolate it—If the primary wood needs to be stained, do that before anything else. Apply stain first to the front and the top edge of the drawer front using a small piece of cotton cloth. For an even release of stain, dampen the cloth first with a liquid compatible with the dye's solvent, in this case water. Be careful to keep the stain from creeping onto the inside of the drawer front or the tops of the drawer sides.

The next step is to stain the dovetail pins on the drawer front. Don't run masking tape down the drawer sides and stain both the pins and the tails. This time-saving method looks awful. The best way is to use a #2 or #4 artist's brush (available at art-supply stores).

With a steady hand, apply the stain to the pins and the narrow strip at the front, staying just away from the tails. Avoid overloading the brush; this increases the risk of stain spilling over onto the secondary wood.

Applying the clear coat—If you are using a fast-drying finish such as shellac, lacquer, or waterborne finish, apply the finish to the drawer front with a brush or a pad. Using a small brush, apply the finish to the top edge of the drawer front and the thin strip in front of the pins. These may be slightly visible even when the drawer is closed.

If you prefer an oil-based finish, apply it in the same way, but you may have trouble isolating it to the pins because of oil's tendency to flow. If this happens, wipe or brush the finish along the whole side of the drawer. If you don't want a strong smell of finish inside the cabinet, wipe a sealer coat of shellac onto the drawer side when the oil-based finish has dried.

Never try to finish a drawer front with the pull attached—whether wooden or metal. It is a recipe for runs. Instead, drill any necessary holes after the finish is applied, and attach the hardware. If you are

Selective staining



When staining the drawer front only, apply the stain with a small piece of cloth. Then use an artist's brush to apply stain just to the dovetail pins and the thin strip of drawer front beside them.



Finish one section at a time

1. FINISH THE DRAWER FRONT AND PULL

The face, top edge, and strip on the sides of the drawer front receive a finish that matches the rest of the workpiece (left). Pulls should be finished before being attached to the drawer front (below).



turning a knob, the easiest way to finish it is while it is still on the lathe.

A thin finish for the less-visible parts of the drawer

I like a minimalist approach to finishing the sides, back, and bottom of a drawer, particularly those used for clothes and linens where durability isn't an issue. I apply one coat of a 2-lb. cut of shellac, let it dry a couple of hours, and then lightly sand the surface with P600-grit sandpaper. I apply this finish everywhere but the parts of the drawer front just finished, and the sliding surfaces. I'll treat them later.

There are two ways to make this step easier. Finish the drawer bottom separately, as this avoids those difficult-to-finish, three-plane internal corners. And use a larger artist's wash brush with a very sharp, chiseled edge that is great for getting into corners without getting finish on an adjacent edge.

If this is a kitchen drawer, you'll need to apply several coats of a tough film finish such as lacquer or polyurethane to all of the interior surfaces. The procedure is the same.

Two types of wax complete the finish

Apply paste wax to all the drawer surfaces, including the drawer front if appropriate, and buff them with a clean cloth. If you prefer a fragrant wax, Antiquax and Liberon's Black Bison wax have a pleasant scent.

On the sliding surfaces left free of finish, rub a chunk of beeswax or a candle to keep friction to a minimum.

The last steps are to attach the handle, slide the drawer smoothly into place, and admire your handiwork. □

2. SEAL THE REST OF THE DRAWER WITH SHELLAC



Inside the corners. Use an artist's wash brush with a chiseled edge to get the right amount of finish into the corners. Avoid finishing the bottom of the drawer sides.



Finish the bottom separately. It is much easier to finish the bottom before it is inserted into the drawer because you don't have to contend with inside corners.

3. APPLY TWO TYPES OF WAX



Wax the surface. After sanding, apply and buff off a coat of paste wax. This will leave the surface feeling smooth. Rub a block of beeswax or a candle on the bottom of the drawer sides for smooth sliding.