

Antique Finish that Holds

BY PETER GEDRYS

Building any reproduction involves a great deal of time, effort, and expense, so when the last drawer is fitted you might be tempted to apply the finish as quickly as possible. After all, you've put a lot of hours into the piece and you just want it done. You might also be afraid that anything more than the simplest of finishes could ruin all your hard work.

However, just as your cabinetmaking skills have progressed from butt joints and basic boxes to dovetails and desks, so you should expand your finishing horizons beyond wiping on oil. Finishing is no harder than woodworking, just a different skill set.

I'll show you how to imitate a century or three of use and age to form that unique surface known as a patina. It involves choosing and using dyes, filling open-pored woods, adding depth to the color with a glaze, applying a clear topcoat, and using surface tricks to age a piece. Unquestionably, it takes longer than applying a wipe-on varnish, but when you are already months into an heirloom project, what's a couple of weeks more? Give your reproduction the finish it deserves, one that creates a wow factor each time someone sets eyes on it.

Practice and experiment—but not on the piece

Start by looking at finishes that you'd like to replicate. This is similar to getting ideas when you design a piece. Look at books, magazines, auction catalogs, and websites and see what colors and finishes please you.

Once you've settled on the look you want, see where you're starting from. Take the sample boards from each



USE THE FIVE CLASSIC STEPS

You'll need five fundamental finishing techniques to create a period patina, but none is very hard, and each is worth learning. You can use them in different combinations to create an infinite variety of effects on many styles of furniture.

1 Dye the wood



Antiques often have deep, dark colors. Tiger maple goes a rich golden brown, and to imitate this look, begin by dyeing the bare wood.

2 Fill the grain



When using any film finish on open-grained wood, you should fill the grain. While antiques may have some visible pore structure in the finish, there are no deep voids.

Nothing Back

How to turn your reproduction into a masterpiece



part of the piece and wet them with a solvent to see the base color of the wood. You can use alcohol for a quick preview or slower-drying mineral spirits for a longer study.

On this Federal desk, built by *FWW* Managing Editor Mark Schofield, I wanted to darken the main veneer, which had a strong, pinkish-red base to it. On the first sample board, I applied Chippendale Red Brown dye (all the dye powders I used are water-soluble) and when it dried, applied several coats of shellac. This left the wood darker but still with too much red, so then I used Georgian Brown Mahogany instead. This cool, greenish-brown dye neutralized the base red to a more pleasing brown.

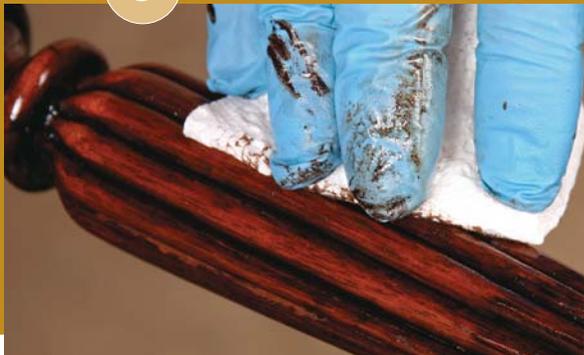
I also experimented on samples of the tiger maple on the legs and the bird's-eye maple drawer fronts before settling on a combination of colors.

Sand the whole piece but seal it selectively

It's better to spend a little extra time fine-tuning the surface than to discover flaws after you start applying the dyes. After a final hand-sanding with P180-grit paper, I remove the dust and wipe the surface with alcohol. This reveals any areas with glue residue that require a little extra sanding.

Once I'm satisfied that all is well with the surface, I clean it well, blowing out the pores with compressed air, vacuuming it, and giving it a good wipe-down

3 Glaze selectively



To simulate wear and tear in the carved areas, apply a translucent color over a sealed surface, leaving more in the recesses.

4 Lay down a topcoat



Shellac is the traditional clear finish for period pieces. Padding it on greatly reduces the need to rub out the final coat.

5 Leave wax in the corners



Dark wax applied in crevices and corners imitates centuries of dust and dirt. Don't go overboard; a little wax is all it takes to fool the eye.

Dyes add decades of darkening

SEAL SELECTIVE AREAS BEFORE YOU DYE



Stain controller. Before applying any dye, washcoat end grain with a thin coat of shellac to prevent it from absorbing too much dye.



Protect light-colored woods. To prevent the holly stringing from being discolored, use a narrow brush to seal it with a thin coat of varnish.



TIP You don't have to dye every species of wood in a particular piece, but for each one you do dye, use a sample board of the same species to select the dye colors.

with clean, dry, lint-free cloths.

If you have the steady hand of a marksman, you can try to apply the dye up to but not onto the holly stringing and banding. For the rest of us, it's safer to isolate the areas you don't want to dye. I've found that masking tape, even when burnished, isn't effective because the thin dye seeps under the edge.

Instead, I dilute varnish to a water-like viscosity, and use it to seal the stringing and banding. Apply it with a small sable artist's brush. You should be able to go 8 in. to 10 in. before having to reload your brush. When you begin again, land the brush gently like a plane, overlapping the previous stroke about an inch or so. This ensures you don't miss a spot on the stringing.

APPLY THE DYE

The whole surface of this desk was dyed, with the exception of the inlays, which were presealed to resist the dyes and retain their color. Dye numbers refer to W.D. Lockwood's catalog.



Apply the dye. A flat artist's brush works well in confined areas (above), while a folded paper towel covers large areas quickly (right). Try to even out the color while the dye is wet. (For more, see "Success with Dyes," FWW #201.)



Georgian Brown Mahogany (#22)
Carcase veneer

Solid mahogany

Metal Acid Yellow (#194)
and Medium Yellow Maple (#142)
in a 3:1 ratio.

Tiger-maple leg panels

Rosewood banding

Bird's-eye maple drawer fronts

It is a good idea to practice with denatured alcohol before trying it with varnish. One trick I have for areas close to an edge is to use my baby finger as a kind of guide fence. Don't be in a rush: With all the stringing on the base, drawers, and top of this desk, this took me the better part of a day. It is exacting work but no more so than laying in the stringing or the fans in the first place.

Let the coloring begin

Once the inlays and stringing are isolated, apply the dye. For confined spaces I use a #20 bright artist's brush, but for larger areas I use a non-embossed industrial paper towel folded over a couple of times. I like these because they hold a lot of dye, flatten out nicely to a sharp edge, and give me a great deal of control. Even though the inlays are coated, try to avoid running the dye over them. You know the old saying: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

I used the same yellow dye on the rosewood that I used on the maple because it creates color harmony to the eye. Later, I'll tweak the rosewood's appearance

TOUCH UP TROUBLE SPOTS



Sand away mistakes. If dye strays onto the wrong wood, wrap medium-grit sandpaper around a credit card and sand that section. A straight edge helps guide the sandpaper.



Pigment trumps dye. If you can't sand away errant dye, use opaque artist's watercolors to cover the affected area.



Seal in the dye. Before filling the grain, seal the dyed wood with a coat of dewaxed shellac. Otherwise, the filler will discolor the surface.



Stains replace dyes. If you discover a section that wasn't dyed after you've sealed the surface, use a pigment stain to apply color over the sealer. Two choices are gel stains or universal tints. If using the latter, mix it with a binder such as shellac.

Use filler on open-pored woods



Tint the grain filler. Gedrys likes to use uncolored, oil-based grain filler that he tints using artist's oils.



Filter the filler. After adding the colors, squeeze the filler through layers of cheesecloth to mix in the color and remove lumps.



Pack the pores. Use an old paintbrush to force the filler into the pores. Let the filler cure for a few minutes and then pull a plastic squeegee across the surface perpendicular to the grain to remove the excess.



Clean the surface. A white abrasive pad does a great job scrubbing any remaining filler from the surface while leaving the pores filled. Don't wait or the filler will harden on the surface.



Fill grain on carvings, too. A clever way to fill the pores on carvings is to take a pad used to remove surplus filler from flat surfaces, and rub it over the carving, working it into the recesses, too.

by glazing it (see facing page). After I've dyed the whole piece, I let it dry overnight and then look for areas either missed or dyed by mistake. You can try sanding any dyed sections of holly, but if this doesn't work, apply a matching gouache (an opaque artist's watercolor) with a #2 artist's brush.

I next rub the surface very sparingly with boiled linseed oil. I used less than 3 oz. for the whole desk but this is enough to set the dye in the wood. After the oil has cured overnight, I apply a 1½-lb. cut of blond, dewaxed shellac. This can be done by brush, pad, or spray and serves to isolate the base colors you just applied from the color in the grain filler applied next.

Finish alone can't fill open-pored wood

A formal finish needs to have a flat surface. If you apply a film finish to open-pored wood, it will leave the surface with a hungry look. Instead you need to

apply a grain or paste filler. You can get paste filler already colored, but I prefer to tint my own to get a better match with the wood. I use an oil-based filler from Sherwin Williams, which in this case I tinted with raw umber and a dash of black artist's oils.

Paste filler requires thorough mixing to be effective. Once I have it colored, I'll pour it into a cup lined with cheesecloth folded over a couple of times. Then I gather the cheesecloth at the top and pull down on it, forcing the paste filler through it. This ensures my filler is lump free and the color is well incorporated.

You can apply the filler with a brush or a plastic blade. The pores on this wood are large and pronounced, so I used a short-bristle brush to force the filler in. Be sure to apply filler in manageable sections; otherwise, it will become very difficult to remove as it dries. Start with an area of a couple of square feet.

Although burlap is often recommended for removal, I've never liked it. I scrape off most of the excess with a plastic spreader going at 45° or perpendicular to

Glazing simulates wear and tear



the grain to avoid pulling filler out of the pores. Then I use a white abrasive pad to erase any filler that remains on the surface. These work great, and I can use a clogged pad to apply filler to carved areas such as the reeded legs. I simply rub the pad around the leg a few times, and then come back with a sharpened dowel to remove any filler from the groove between each reed. After letting the filler cure for five or six hours, I wipe all the surfaces with a clean cloth dampened with mineral spirits and let the piece sit overnight.

Don't be surprised if very open-pored wood requires a second round of filling. Don't skimp on this step or you'll find yourself trying to compensate later with the clear coat.

Once the pores are filled, let the piece dry for a few days and then seal the surface with a 2-lb. cut of dewaxed shellac in preparation for glazing.

Glazing adds depth to the color

If you study antiques closely, one of their major differences with modern pieces is the subtle darkening found on some surfaces, particularly on carvings. The best way to imitate this combination of buildup in the recesses



Seal again, then glaze. Tint an oil-based glazing stain to the desired color or use diluted asphaltum. Apply it to the sealed surface.



Wipe the high points. Use a paper towel to remove the glaze from the prominent surfaces, which are lighter on antiques.



Blend the transition. Use a dry brush to soften the line between the glazed and unglazed areas.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

Dyes

wdlockwood.com

Shellac flakes,
SealCoat shellac,
white pads,
grain filler and
plastic spreaders,
natural or tinted glazes,
Behlen's Rockhard
Tabletop Varnish,
paste wax,
rottenstone,
patinating wax
woodworker.com

Artist's brushes,
artist's oil colors,
asphaltum
dickblick.com

Topcoats seal in the beauty

It is fine to use one type of finish such as shellac on the base and add a more durable one such as varnish or lacquer to the top.



Color with shellac. If you choose shellac as your finish coat, tweak the final appearance by selecting a color ranging from super blond to garnet.



Make your pad. Gedrys uses a cheesecloth core inside a linen wrapping. Add the shellac to the core for a consistent release onto the workpiece.

and greater wear on the high points is by a technique known as glazing.

Glaze is a translucent color applied over a sealed surface. It is a versatile tool in the finisher's arsenal because it is very forgiving. If you don't like what you see, simply wipe it off before it dries.

In this case I used asphaltum as my glaze. A black, naturally occurring, tar-like substance, it mixes well with mineral spirits to produce a rich golden brown. It's easy to adjust the color strength by adding more asphaltum to the thinner. During application, less is more. Light applications read better to the eye than thick ones. Remember, you can always add more glaze if required.

I apply the glaze with a pad, paper towel, or brush on flat areas such as the rosewood banding, but for carved areas I use an artist's fan brush to reach into the recesses. This brush has short, stiff bristles that allow me to quickly apply a thin coat of glaze to, in this case, the reeded legs. Next, use a paper towel to remove the glaze from the high points. To feather out or blend the resulting unnaturally sharp line between the glazed and unglazed areas, gently go over the surface with a dry artist's brush to give the glaze a harmonious appearance.

You have a choice of clear finishes

Set the piece aside for a few days to dry well before you apply the clear topcoat. You have a number of choices based on the application method you feel most comfortable with and the amount of use the finished piece will receive. It is perfectly fine to use two different types of finish on a single piece. On this desk, I padded shellac onto the base and used wiping varnish on the top for extra protection, but you could also brush on either of those finishes or spray the top with lacquer.

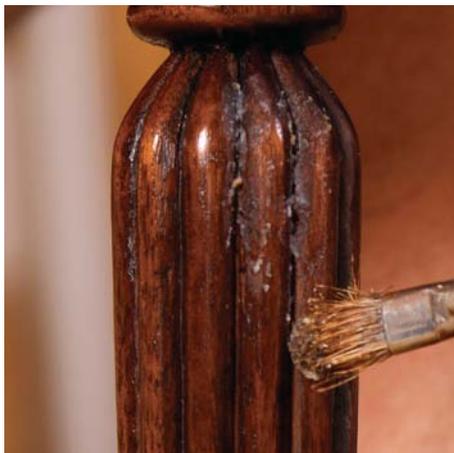


Build the finish. The advantage to padding on shellac over brushing is that you end up with a smooth finish (devoid of brush marks) that doesn't need rubbing out.



A durable top. To give the desktop extra protection, Gedrys wiped on some thinned varnish over the shellac sealer.

Wax and dirt add the final touches



Wax the recesses. To imitate dust buildup, begin by using an old artist's brush to push clear paste wax into the recesses of carvings.



Add your dust. Brush rottenstone onto the freshly waxed areas. Rottenstone's pale blue/gray cast mimics dust well.



Complete the effect. After 20 minutes, use a piece of folded newspaper to remove most of the rottenstone but leave traces deep in the recesses.

On the base, after I sand the sealer coat well on the non-glazed areas with P320-grit paper, I pad on shellac. I use an identical pad to one used for French polishing (see "French Polishing Demystified," *FWW* #217), and basically the same technique. This includes the same circular and figure-8 patterns, but I lay down slightly thicker coats and finish by going with the grain. The advantage of the pad is that it doesn't leave any brush marks and the surface is refined during application, eliminating the need to rub it out afterward. Take the time to practice this technique. You'll be happy you did.

On the top, I sealed the surface with a 2-lb. cut of dewaxed shellac and then wiped on four coats of Behlen's Rockhard Tabletop Varnish, thinning the varnish by about 40% with mineral spirits. This is enough protection for a desktop, but dining tables would be safer with three brushed-on coats, thinning the finish by 10% to 15% and sanding between each coat.

The finishing touches

When all the finish coats were done I set the desk aside for a week prior to any rubbing out. This also gave me the chance to look at the piece and to consider whether it needed any more aging.

There are some subtle surface techniques done with a little wax and rottenstone that imitate the buildup of dust, grime, and polish. Whether you wax the whole piece is entirely optional. In this case it doesn't affect the look of the piece but it does give a uniquely attractive quality to the touch.

The beauty of this finish is its visual depth. Once you've tried it, experiment with some of the steps and colorants to create your own patinas. □

Peter Gedrys is a professional finisher. You can view his work at petergedrys.com.



Dark wax in the corners. Wipe on some dark wax, letting it build up in the corners to imitate antiques.



Patinating pulls. To add contrast to the antique-finish pulls, first use brass polish to give shine to the wear points, then rub some dark wax into the recesses. Finally, buff the whole surface with a clean cotton cloth.