A Spit-Shine Wax Finish

This polishing technique gives you a glasslike surface that is easy to repair

BY MLADEN K. VRANJICAN

Polishing is one subject that's familiar to me. Since adolescence, one of my hobbies has been making telescope optics, and, having been in military service for 18 years, I've put a spit shine on my shoes and boots on many occasions. So naturally, when I first took up woodworking as a hobby, the art of putting a French polish on furniture piqued my interest.

After some experimenting, I concluded there are two things about a French polish that I don't like: It's extremely time-consuming to apply, and the finished surface damages easily. Then it occurred to me that it might be possible to create a high-gloss, French-polish-like finish using just paste wax instead of shellac, denatured alcohol, boiled linseed oil, and naphtha. After all, wax requires only a little bit of water to produce an exquisite shine, and it's a lot less messy.

Like shellac, a wax finish also is subject to damage from water, heat, and scratches. But there's a world of difference in the repair process. A new coat of wax simply will blend in with the older, damaged surface. The result is a seamless repair in a very short time, without the need to move damaged furniture back into the shop.

Seal the surface first

The key to making a wax finish durable and easy to repair is what goes on the surface of the wood before wax is applied. On the mahogany end table shown here, I sealed the surface with Danish oil and then applied several coats of a wiped-on polyurethane. I filled the grain on the tabletop between the sealer coat

Wipe on a durable topcoat. *An oil-based varnish or polyurethane makes a good topcoat for furniture because the film finish greatly enhances moisture resistance. The tabletop shown here received seven coats of wipe-on polyurethane before the wax finish was applied.*

and the topcoat, but I've experimented since and have achieved almost comparable results without using any filler. Many layers of a built-up wax finish have essentially the same effect of leveling out the surface of woods such as mahogany or walnut, but I'm not sure the built-up wax would work as well on oak or ash.

Apply the wax with a little water

The key to a successful wax finish is to apply only a very small amount with each coat and to use a spritz of water. To make the applicator pad, wad up a paper towel into a ball, spray it with a plant mister, and cover it with a clean cotton cloth. Then load up the pad with a slight amount of wax for each application, working it first against the grain and then in small circular patterns. It is essential to keep the pad moist, but not wet, throughout the process.

A shine begins to come up almost immediately. As the pad starts to grab more of the surface, friction causes the small amount of moisture present to evaporate quickly. You can feel the pad's slight resistance as the shine develops. Lightening the pressure will carry the polish one step further, and you can achieve an almost glasslike surface if you keep at it. □

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Photos: William Duckworth

APPLY THE WAX SPARINGLY

The single, biggest mistake many people make with wax is to apply too much, too fast. Apply many thin coats with only moderate pressure.

Keep the pad damp but not dripping wet. A clean cotton cloth wrapped around a damp paper towel works well as a wiping pad (1). Load the pad sparingly with wax (2). Apply the first two or three coats by wiping quickly back and forth against the grain, allowing each coat to dry a few minutes before moving on to the next. Then work the wax into the surface in small circular motions (3). You can feel a slight resistance as the heat generated by rubbing evaporates the moisture, and a sheen develops (4). Recharge the pad with a misting of water as necessary.