Padding Lacquer

A quick, easy alternative to French polishing

by Mario Rodriguez

For me, French polishing is the finish of choice for the very finest furniture. When done well, a French polish has a soft but brilliant glow that brings out all the depth and color of the wood without the heavy buildup generally associated with a high-gloss finish. No other finish even comes close.

I've taught French polishing for years, and for beginners, it can be a nerve-racking juggling act. The ingredients of a French polish—shellac, oil and pumice—must be applied at the right time and in the proper amounts. The addition of each can improve the finish dramatically—or destroy it. Padding lacquer is an amazing one-step mixture of dissolved shellac, lubricants and nitrocellulose resins. It produces a surface virtually identical to that of a traditional French polish, without the risks. It still requires a lot of elbow grease, but because it's a premixed formula, you can concentrate on applying it and not worry about maintaining a delicate balance of ingredients. There are several brands of padding lacquers from which to choose (see the sources box on p. 50). I haven't found significant differences among them.

In addition to being convenient and easy to apply, padding lacquer dries quickly, so you don't need a special finishing room. It can even be applied on-site, eliminating the need to bring a piece of furniture back to the shop for finish repairs. And because shellac is the primary ingredient in a padding lacquer, it can be applied over other finishes. Finally, padding lacquer has a variable sheen. The more or less sanding you do will increase or decrease its gloss.

Surface preparation

For more formal furniture pieces, which generally look best with a high-gloss finish like a French polish, I scrape the wood until I have a fairly flat, uniform surface (see the photo at left below). Then I sand with 220-grit and 320-grit sandpaper (see the photo at right below).

After wiping the surface with a dry rag, I wash it down with denatured alcohol. This raises the grain slightly and allows me to see sanding scratches and any other flaws (see the top photo on the facing page). If I want to fill the pores slightly for a smoother finish, I wet-sand with worn 320-grit wet-or-dry sandpaper and denatured alcohol. If I want a glass-smooth, nonporous finish, I use a filler (for more, see the box on p. 50). For a moderately porous, more natural-looking finish, just dry-sand with 320- and 400-grit sandpapers once the denatured alcohol has dried.

Applying padding lacquer

When using padding lacquer, all you need is a 6-in. square of lint-free cotton. Old T-shirt scraps work great. Just make sure that there aren't any creases or seams in the center of the pad because they can mar your finish.

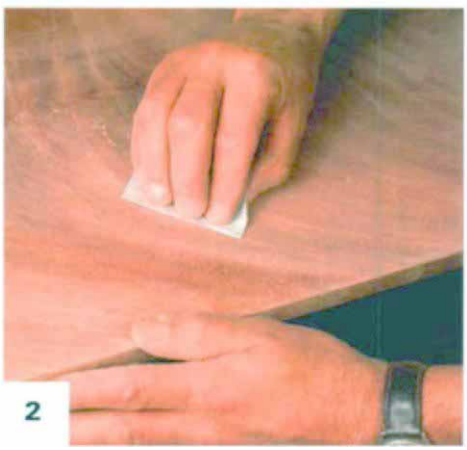
I pour a small amount of padding lacquer into the center of my cloth and let it soak in a few seconds, Then with a small, circular motion, I begin to rub the polish vigorously into the surface (see the center left photo on the facing page). Initially, the surface will

SURFACE PREPARATION

1. *Scrape the surface* *until it's flat and even in appearance.*

2. *Sand with the grain* *using 220- and then 320-grit sandpaper.*

1



2

Photos: Vincent Laurence

APPLYING PADDING LACQUER

3. Check for sanding scratches and other flaws *by flooding the surface with denatured alcohol. This also raises the grain slightly, so follow up by sanding with 320- and then 400-grit sandpaper.*

4. Quick, circular motions bring up a shine. *Move the pad in tight circles in a small area, applying a good deal of pressure. The surface will be hazy at first, but after just a minute or so, a shine will start to come up. Apply less pressure as the shine increases.*

5. Work just a few square inches at a time, *blending adjacent areas. Apply more pressure on unfinished areas.*

6. Polish the whole surface lightly. *Take a clean rag, apply just a little padding lacquer and rub very lightly. The rag should just skate across the surface. Do this until the whole surface has a uniform sheen.*

3

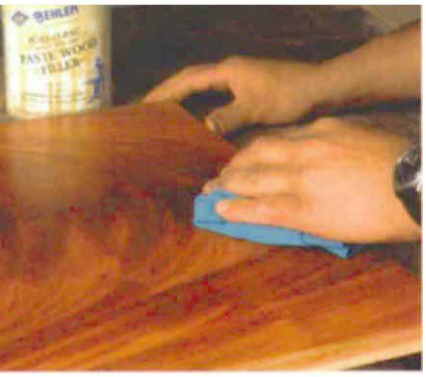
4

5

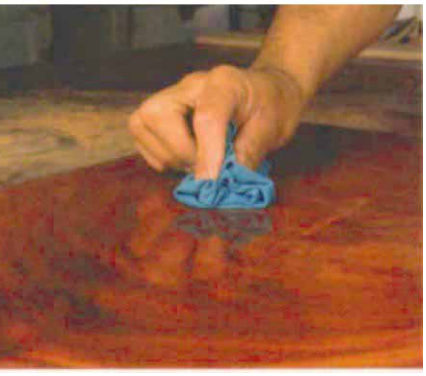
6

Pore filler gives a glass-smooth surface

Pour it on, smear it around. You don't have to be fussy when applying wood filler-just fill all the pores. Move the rag around; then use a scraper.



Filled pores, satin sheen-Paste wood filler dries to a satin sheen even before padding lacquer is applied. The filler dries rock-hard, so wipe the surface clean.



Like a mirror—With its pores filled, this crotch mahogany panel takes on a finish that's a dead-ringer for French polish—a warm but brilliant sheen.

In traditional French polishing, pumice helps fill the pores in the surface. Padding lacquer has no pumice, so the pores don't get filled appreciably, except by the padding lacquer itself. The result, depending on how much sanding you've done, is a relatively open-pored surface.

To get a glassy-looking, nonporous surface with padding lacquer, I use Behlen's pore-filling compound called Pore-O-Pac paste wood filler (see the sources of supply below). Pore-O-Pac is available in six shades.

Applying the filler couldn't be easier. I pour some on the surface I'm going to polish and wipe it all around with a rag (see the top photo). Then I use a scraper like a squeegee, moving the filler across the wood in all directions. This works the filler into the pores.

I let the filler remain on the surface between 30 minutes and one hour before wiping it off. This filler dries rock-hard, so it's important to clean the scraper and the surface you're filling. Otherwise, it will take a belt sander to remove it. I use a clean rag and keep wiping until the rag comes off the surface without any residue.

I wait 24 hours for the surface to dry, and then I fine-sand with 320- and 400-grit sandpaper. After sanding, I wipe down the surface with a rag soaked in denatured alcohol.

I let the surface dry and start applying the padding lacquer. A brilliant gloss will start to come up almost immediately (see the photo at left). *-M.R.*

haze and the cloth will drag a little, but with firm, steady pressure, an attractive shine will quickly start to appear. As I move from one small area to another, I carefully overlap my applications for uniform coverage (see the center right photo on p. 49).

A second coat can be applied almost immediately. As you build up the polish, though, you should extend the time between coats for the best results. When I get to my fourth and fifth coats, I usually wait between 12 and 24 hours.

Feathering out the finish

Even with very careful application, some areas will have more of a sheen than others, and the overall surface may look splotchy. You'll want to go over duller areas and make the surface as uniform as possible.

Then put a small amount of padding lacquer on a clean rag, and apply it over the entire surface, using a broad, circular motion. Bring the cloth just barely into contact with the work surface—almost glancing over it. This will eliminate any small streaks or blotches and leave a consistently brilliant, thin film (see the bottom photo on p. 49).

Repairing mistakes

As easy as padding lacquer is to use, I do run into small problems from time to time. These problems usually appear as rough crater-like patches. If they're not too severe, I simply pad over them. The application of new material usually will soften the area and vigorous rubbing will level it out. If this doesn't do the trick, I'll let the panel dry overnight, scrape or sand the damaged area flush the next day and then repolish. After a coat or two, blemishes will disappear completely.

Finishing on the lathe

I often use padding lacquer on lathe-turned objects, including table pedestals, spindles, cabinet knobs and tool handles. Here the application is even easier. Sand to 320-grit with the object spinning on the lathe. Then raise the grain with alcohol, and sand again with 320- and then 400-grit paper. You can apply the padding lacquer a little more heavily on the lathe, but don't use so much that it's spraying off the workpiece. Use gentle pressure on the rotating workpiece, and watch an incredible gloss develop.

Mario Rodriguez teaches woodworking at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and at Warwick Workshops in Warwick, N.Y. He is a contributing editor to Fine Woodworking.

Sources of supply.

The following companies sell padding lacquers and/or fillers.

Behlen's Qualasole, a padding lacquer, and Pore-O-Pac, a paste wood filler, are distributed through:

Garrett Wade, 161 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013; (800) 221-2942

Woodworker's Supply, 1108 N. Glenn Road, Casper, WY 82601; (800) 645-9292

Behlen's Qualasole and Constantine's own Pad-Lac, another padding lacquer, are available from:

Constantine, 2050 Eastchester Road, Bronx, NY 10461; (800) 223-8087

#77 Lubricite, a padding lacquer, is available from:

Industrial Finishing Products, 465 Logan St., Brooklyn, NY 11208; (718) 277-3333