

Putting a Finish on Small

BY JEFF JEWITT

Whether you have a handful of Shaker pegs for a coat rack or 60 door and drawer pulls for a large kitchen, finishing small items can be a tricky business. Small, irregularly shaped parts present a challenge when applying the finish, and just holding them in place can be half the battle.

Over the years, I've developed some techniques you can use for holding and finishing small items. They will speed up an otherwise monotonous task, and you will get more consistent results and avoid sticky fingers.

By pre-finishing small parts before assembling a project, you can save time and achieve a cleaner appearance in the finished job. One big benefit of pre-finishing is that you can avoid the problem of film finishes pooling up at the sharp corners where two surfaces meet, which causes drips and results in a sloppy-looking finish.

The concept of pre-finishing is simple; Finish all the parts of your project before you put it together. Be sure to protect areas—such as tenons and open mortises—that will be glued later. You can mask off areas with tape or insert round tenons into holes drilled into a scrap of wood.

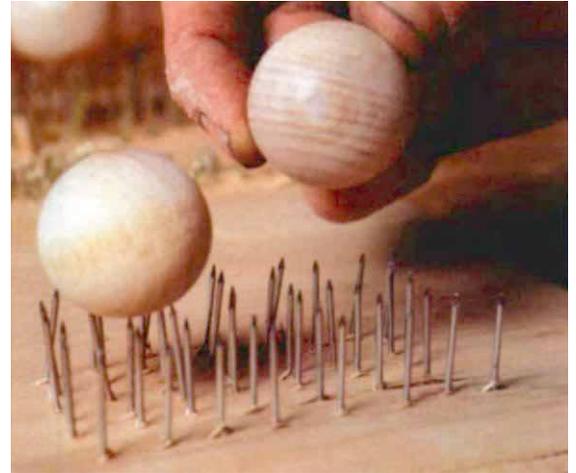
The type of finish you choose and how you lay it on will either make life easy or terribly tedious. Try brushing polyurethane or shellac on two dozen door pulls using a 4-in. trim brush and you'll likely develop a headache along with a lousy-looking finish. I use different application methods—brushes, rags dipping cans and spray guns—depending on the finish.

When spray finishing, if you don't have an explosion-proof booth, do your spraying outside, away from any sources of ignition. And one great little rig to use is a scrap of plywood on a lazy Susan. You can keep the pieces moving as you spray, resulting in a more even finish.

Jeff Jewitt restores furniture and sells finishing supplies from his shop in North Royalton, Ohio.

TRICKS FOR HOLDING SMALL PARTS IN PLACE

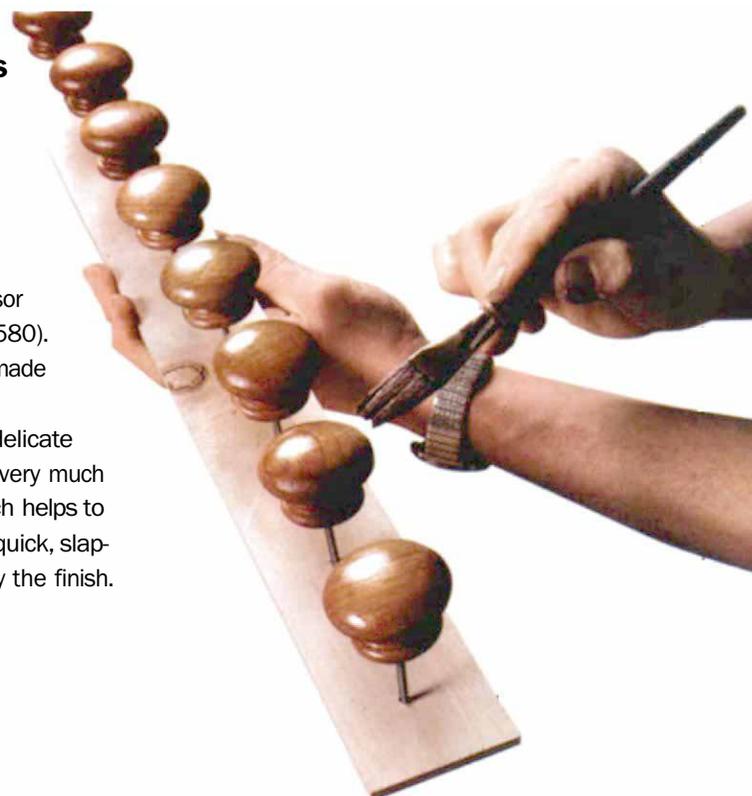
One of the most common methods for holding small or irregular parts is a nail board. This is nothing more than a piece of thin plywood— $\frac{1}{4}$ in. is usually sufficient—with brads, nails, staples or dry-wall screws driven through from the other side. Nail boards allow you the luxury of finishing many sides of an object before the finish cures—speeding up the work and improving the quality of the finish.



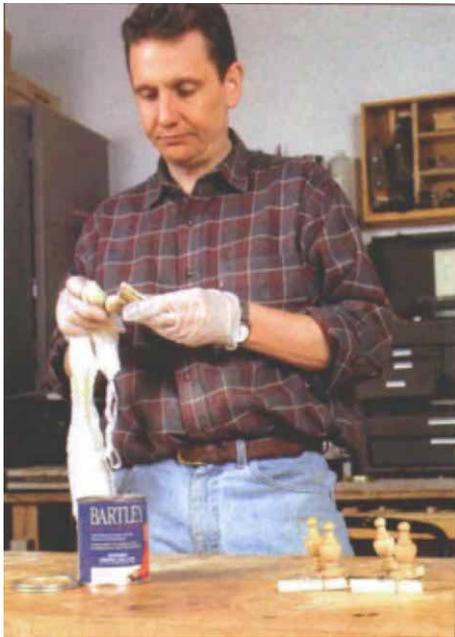
For holding small items, place as many nails or staples as possible in the plywood scrap. This bed-of-nails effect distributes the weight of the object over many fine points, so you don't end up with noticeable marks in the finish. Round balls, small bowls and the like can be finished on one of these.

SMALL OBJECTS

I have a hands-down favorite brush for applying a finish to small shapes—an artist's brush made by Winsor & Newton (series #580). These brushes are made with synthetic filaments, and the delicate bristles do not hold very much finish material, which helps to avoid drips. I use a quick, slapping motion to apply the finish.



Objects Is No Little Task



RAGS ARE BEST FOR GEL FINISHES

Wiping a finish on small parts with a rag is easy and quick. This method works especially well with gel varnishes, as shown being applied to these finials.

DIPPING WORKS WELL WITH STAINS

Dipping is the best technique for staining. And for holding small objects upright on a work surface, clothespins make sturdy little clamps (see the photos at right). Any kind of stain will work using this method, but on large runs, you may experience progressively lighter staining. Fading color is more common with dye-based stains, and it's due to exhaustion of the dye in the solvent. To avoid this problem, replenish the dipping tank with more fresh stain periodically. Dipping also works if you're applying an oil finish, but you'll have to wipe off the excess with a rag.



SPRAYING ON A SMALL SCALE CAN BE SIMPLE AND CHEAP

Spraying is my preferred method for applying a topcoat to a lot of small pieces. You don't really need fancy equipment. A small compressor and a \$24 touch-up gun (see the photo at left) from Harbor Freight Tools (800-423-2567) is the rig I use most frequently for small articles.

The disposable sprayer at right costs about \$6 and comes with a glass canister to hold the finish of your choice. The sprayer delivers a finely atomized finish. You'll have to thin down most finishes designed for brushing to a consistency that will work with this sprayer.

