

Protect inlay with selective staining

BY JEFF JEWITT

Sometimes you want to preserve the natural color of inlay, stringing, and banding when staining a piece of furniture. On other pieces, you may want to selectively darken an area without affecting the majority of the piece. While it would seem logical simply to tape off certain parts, that method is not foolproof when staining a porous material. Unless there is a physical barrier other than tape, the stain will penetrate the masked-off areas of bare wood.

Fortunately, there are several ways to get around this, involving both hand and spray applications. However, before you practice any of these techniques on your hard-earned inlay work, you should make a small piece exactly like the real thing and experiment on it.

Selective sealing isolates inlays

The secret to leaving inlaid areas unstained is to apply a clear finish beforehand. It's best to use a fast-drying finish such as lacquer or a 2-lb. cut of shellac. To avoid redissolving the finish, you must follow it with water-based dyes or oil-based stains. Do not use alcohol-based stains, fast-drying lacquer-based stains, or most premixed water-based stains. They contain solvents that may affect shellac or lacquer.

A steady brush seals stringing—Hand-painting a clear finish on light stringing can be tricky. The stringing is delicate and hard to see, so it helps to work with good backlighting and to use a brand-new #1 artist's brush with a sharp tip.

Apply at least three coats of shellac, with an hour's drying time between each coat. You don't have to sand between coats. Let the last coat dry for at least four hours before applying the stain.

Because liquid stains are more likely to find any breach in the clear sealer and wick up into the inlay, I recommend using thicker gel stains. An alternative to buying a premade gel stain is to use



Brush on the sealer. With a new #1 artist's brush, apply several coats of either shellac or lacquer to the stringing.



Seal before staining

BRUSH SMALL DETAILS



Wipe on a gel stain. Thick gel stains are less likely to seep into the protected inlay areas than liquid dyes and stains.

SPRAY LARGE AREAS

Leave the banding exposed. Mask off areas that will be stained using a tape designed for your choice of sealer (see "New tapes," p. 122). Use a sharp knife and a ruler to achieve a clean break. Masking paper protects large areas away from the banding.



Seal the inlay. Apply several light coats of lacquer to the unmasked banding (left). Then wipe or brush on a dye or stain that won't dissolve the sealer (above).

Tone selected areas



Seal the whole surface. Brush or spray on a coat of lacquer or shellac over the whole project (above). Use tape to protect areas to remain undyed, and then spray over the sealer with toner.



Peel and reveal. After the toner has dried, peel away the tape and masking paper. If toner has seeped under the masking tape, gently scrape it away with a scraper or the tip of a sharp knife. Then topcoat the whole piece.

dye concentrates to tint a clear-gel satin finish. If a spot of inlay gets hit with color, you usually can use the sharp tip of an X-Acto knife to clean it off. Once you are happy with the appearance of the piece, protect it with a clear finish.

Larger inlays can be sprayed—It's time-consuming to seal larger areas of inlay by hand, so instead I tape off the wood around the inlay and then seal the inlay with a spray gun or aerosol. Do not wipe or brush on the clear sealer because it may creep under the tape. Use the correct tape (see sidebar, below) and burnish the edge of the tape with your

fingernail. Protect other exposed surfaces with tape and masking paper, available at auto-parts stores.

The sealer should be compatible with the topcoat and should resist any solvent in the stain. In the case illustrated, I'm using an aerosol version of the lacquer I'll apply later as the topcoat. Spray three or four light coats, wait 10 minutes, and then remove the tape. Let the lacquer dry overnight before applying the stain, in this case a water-soluble dye.

For cleaner edges, try toning

You'll get the sharpest and cleanest edges between stained and unstained areas if you apply the stain to a sealed surface, a process known as toning. Seal the whole project with either lacquer or dewaxed shellac, and let it dry overnight. Then mask off the area not to be toned, using an X-Acto knife and a ruler to trim the tape and get crisp edges.

You can use a premixed toner, but I make my own from dye and lacquer. Spraying several light coats works better than laying on a thick layer of toner. Avoid getting the area you're coloring too wet, or the toner will creep under the tape.

After the stain has dried, remove the tape. The border should be clean and crisp. If necessary, you can scrape off color that crept under the tape, or retape and apply toner to touch up any bad areas.

If you're not able to spray, sand the sealer with P320-grit paper or with a maroon abrasive pad. The rougher surface will allow the wiped-on stain to adhere better. Tape off the areas you don't want to color, and make sure to burnish the tape where it meets the stain. As with selective sealing, a gel stain works best and shouldn't creep under the tape. □

New tapes outperform the old

To get the best results, don't use plain old masking tape. 3M makes a masking tape for every situation, but the three I use are fine line tape (3M part #218, left), which works with any finish; painter's blue tape (#2090, center) when working with water-based finishes; and green lacquer tape (#2060, right) for solvent lacquer finishes. Fine line tape is used for pin-striping in the automobile industry and conforms to curved shapes and surfaces. Furthermore, it's extremely thin, so it leaves a thinner ridge between the taped and untaped areas after a finish or stain has been applied.

Fine line tape is sold at auto-parts stores; blue tape is available at most hardware stores; and green tape can be purchased at professional paint stores. All three also can be found online at www.jamestowndistributors.com.

