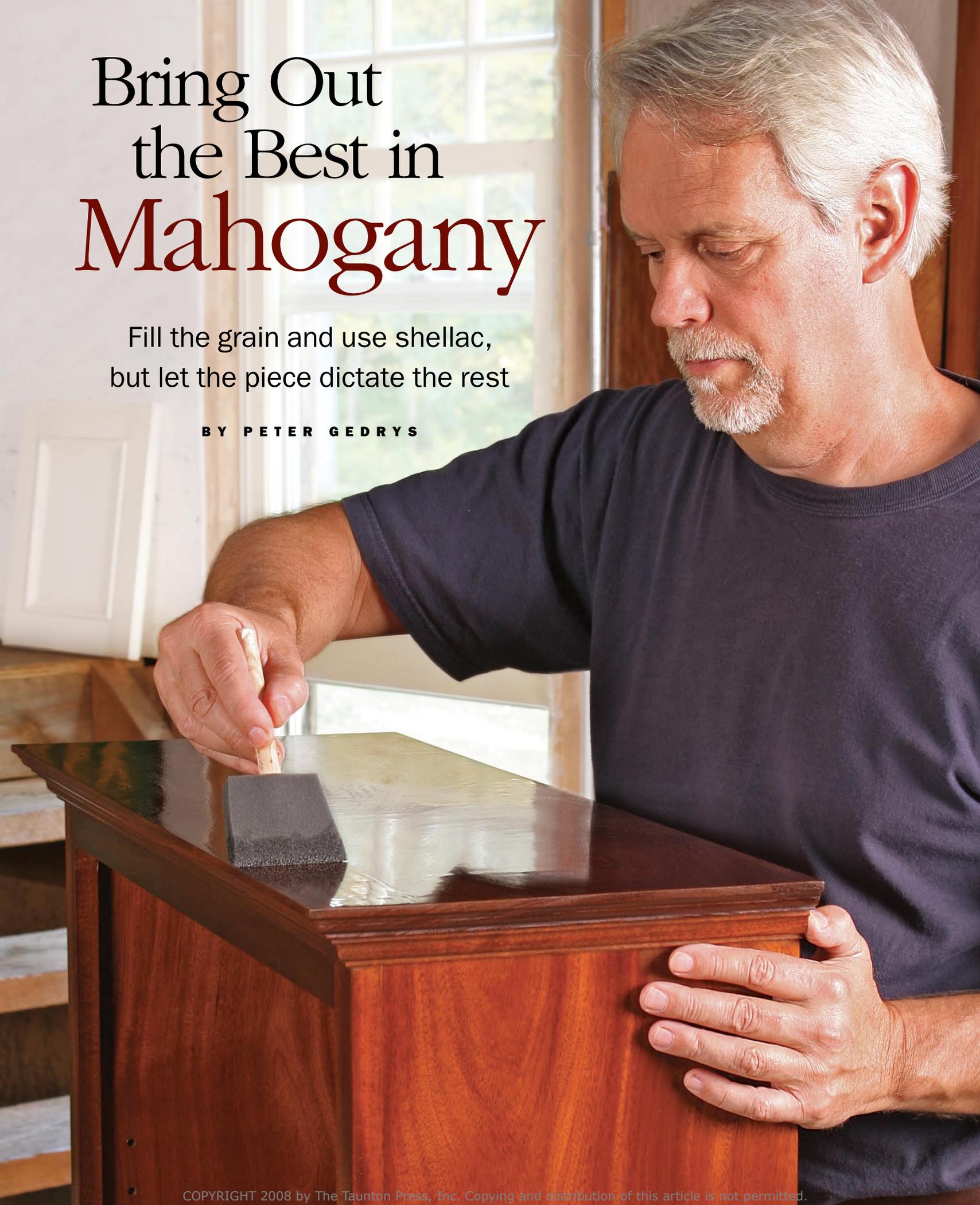


# Bring Out the Best in Mahogany

Fill the grain and use shellac,  
but let the piece dictate the rest

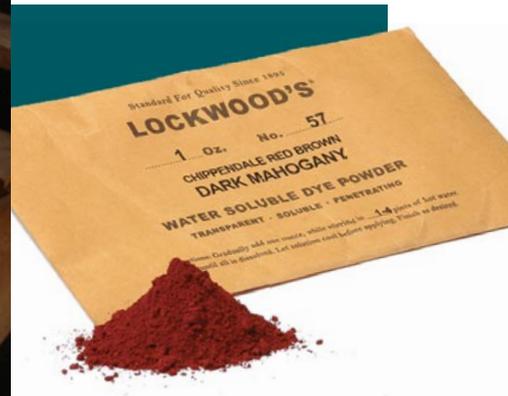
BY PETER GEDRYS



## 1 APPLY DYE IF NECESSARY



**Reading the wood.** To get an idea of what the wood will look like under a clear finish, wet the surface with denatured alcohol.



**Harmonize the color.** To merge the pale face frame with the rest of the piece, Gedrys applies a water-based dye using a folded paper towel. Look ahead of your hand to get a nice, straight line.

Before I start a finishing project, I always let the wood tell me what it needs. I wipe the surface with denatured alcohol to preview the appearance of a clear finish. There are times when dyes and stains are called for, perhaps to enhance otherwise plain boards. On this bookcase, the top and sides had beautiful figure and color, and the piece had been left unfinished for a long time, allowing the wood to develop a rich, natural hue.

So I knew I could use my basic mahogany approach for most of this bookcase: Fill the open pores and then apply a thin coat of shellac for a warm, even glow. Leave out the grain filling, and you get a hungry, half-finished look. Put a thick film finish everywhere, and the topcoat is the star, not the wood.

However, like all pieces, this one had specific needs. A characteristic of mahogany is its wide range of colors. After wiping the surface with denatured alcohol, the face frame was much lighter than the rich, warm tone surrounding it. The solution was to dye it to match. Finally, some varnish on the top would give that most vulnerable surface some added water resistance. One of the big lessons here is that not all parts of a piece need the same finish.

### Harmonize color inconsistencies

To give the face frame a subtle color change, I started by dampening the wood to raise the grain and sanding it lightly when dry. Then I used a water-based dye, W.D. Lockwood's Chippendale red brown #57 ([www.wdlockwood.com](http://www.wdlockwood.com)). A quick note on mixing dye: I mix new batches

into a concentrated or "saturated" color: 1 oz. of dye to a pint of very hot water. Once cooled and filtered through a fine paint or coffee filter, just add it incrementally to clear water for the desired strength. For the face frame, I used the dye at approximately half strength. Be sure to test the dye on scraps from the same board.

An industrial-strength paper towel makes an effective application tool. Fold it over a couple of times to create a reservoir. Wet it well with dye and squeeze out the excess.

### Fill the grain with paste filler

Prior to filling the pores, you need to seal the wood with a thin washcoat of finish.

This washcoat acts as a barrier so color in the filler doesn't stain the wood. The goal is to seal the wood yet still leave the pores open enough to accept the filler. I used Zinsser's SealCoat, a dewaxed clear shellac compatible with any topcoat.

I prefer the speed and control given by a pad, but you also can apply the shellac with a brush. I use a fairly large pad that will cover the surface quickly. It consists of a high-quality cheesecloth core wrapped in a piece of smooth cotton such as a well-used bedsheet or a piece of linen. Whatever size pad, the one rule is to have no wrinkles on the bottom that will leave lines on the surface of the wood. To charge



## SEAL WITH SHELLAC 2



**Seal the wood.** Go over the surface a couple of times with a pad to apply a thin coat of shellac. Keep the pressure light to avoid filling the pores. It is easier to get into corners, carvings, and moldings by applying the shellac with an artist's brush (above).

### 3 FILL THE GRAIN



**Color the grain filler.** Use artist's oils to color the filler to match or to be slightly darker than the wood.



**Wipe on, scrape off.** Use an old brush or a cotton pad to cram the filler into the pores (above left). Then push a plastic scraper diagonally across the grain to remove as much filler from the surface as possible. The filler is ready to be removed when it wrinkles up onto the scraper (above right). A white pad ([www.woodworker.com](http://www.woodworker.com), #850-518) removes residual filler from the surface but leaves the pores filled (right).



the pad, wet it with a little alcohol first and then add the shellac, which becomes slightly diluted. Go over the wood with the pad once or twice but no more. When dry, sand lightly with P320-grit sandpaper or a gray abrasive pad, and clean the surface and pores thoroughly with a vacuum.

In the past, most commercial paste fillers were made with quartz as the main filling component. Many fillers on the market today contain cheaper and, in my opinion, less-effective ingredients. Sherwin-Williams still uses 100% quartz, but it's sold only in gallons. Pore-O-Pac uses some quartz, but is cheaper and comes in quarts. Both these fillers are oil-based, which I find easier to apply and control than water-based filler.

In either case, buy the uncolored or "natural" filler; it enables you to customize the color to suit the wood. Stir the filler thoroughly to get the solids off the bottom. Pour some filler into a small container and add mineral spirits to get it to the consistency of heavy cream.

The filler's color is a matter of personal choice. I like the pores somewhat darker than the lightest part of the wood, but not dark enough to make them stand out. For this project, I added equal parts of burnt umber and Van Dyke brown artist's oils. I first mix the pigment with some mineral spirits and a portion of the filler. This way, when I mix the color concentrate into the filler, they will readily incorporate.

On large, flat surfaces, apply the filler with a pad, squeegee, or brush, working in small sections. For carved or curved surfaces, use an old brush and apply filler sparingly. For this bookcase, I filled all the outside surfaces (except the back) and the tops of the shelves.

As the solvent evaporates and the filler begins to dry, it will change from shiny to dull. Run a plastic scraper across the surface, slightly diagonal to the grain, to see if the surplus is ready to be scraped off. If it hasn't set enough, it will be slightly runny. If it's too dry, it will come off in flakes. When it rolls up in wrinkles onto the scraper, it's just right.

You need to get all the filler off the surface or the residue will show through the topcoat as unattractive gray spots. After removing the bulk of the surplus with the scraper, wait

## 4 TWO OPTIONS FOR TOPCOATS

### SHELLAC IS FAST AND EASY



**End with shellac.** A few thin coats give the filled mahogany a beautiful glow. This can be done with a pad or a brush.

about 10 minutes (less on a hot, dry day), and then do the second removal. Wiping the surface with burlap is the traditional way, but I prefer a white woven pad. Again working slightly diagonal to the grain and using moderate pressure, remove the filler left on the surface. As the pad starts to load, switch to a clean section. I also use the pad to remove all the surplus filler from the moldings. The object is to remove only the surplus, not pull filler out of the pores.

When finished, wait about an hour and inspect the surface. If there are areas not completely filled, reapply the filler. If everything looks good, lightly wipe the surface with a dry cotton rag going with the grain. If there's any dried filler on the surface, lightly dampen the rag with mineral spirits to rub it off. When the rag comes up clean, all the filler is removed.

### Two topcoats for one piece

I give filler at least two days to dry, longer if necessary, before applying a topcoat. If the piece smells of oil, wait.

For this bookcase, I again reached for the SealCoat to be the body of the finish and applied it with a pad. You only need to go over the surface a few times for an effective finish. This is where filling the pores fully pays off. You can keep the coating thin, maintain a close-to-the-grain look, and still have the wonderful glow that shellac produces on a smooth surface. I brushed the interior with a couple of unthinned coats of SealCoat.



### VARNISH ADDS PROTECTION

*Two coats of varnish over the shellac will protect the top of the bookcase from spilled liquids.*



### Rub out varnish for a low luster or a high gloss



**Low-luster look.** After the varnish has cured, you can rub the surface with 0000 steel wool. Then apply a coat of paste wax, wait 30 minutes, and buff the surface with a soft cloth.



**For a glossy surface.** First sand away any dust nibs using 600-grit (CAMI) paper lubricated with water (top). Then use an automotive compound to rub the surface to an even shine before applying wax (above).



To give the top added protection and water resistance, I used an alkyd varnish such as Pratt & Lambert's 38. I used a foam brush to apply two thin coats, lightly sanding between the coats. Once the varnish has cured for a few weeks, you can refine it by rubbing it out. For a soft sheen, rub the surface with 0000 steel wool going with the grain., and then apply some paste wax. For a higher sheen, lightly abrade the surface with some 600-grit (CAMI) wet-and-dry sandpaper lubricated with water. Then rub the surface with a fine-cut automotive rubbing compound, and finally, apply some paste wax. □

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