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Finishes for Furniture

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Finishing wood enhances its natural beauty and protects it. A good finish is usually thin and does not give the appearance of being enclosed in glass. A good finish depends on preparing the surface properly. See MU publication [GH2415](#) for information about how to prepare furniture for a finish.

Careful work takes time and good finishes can't be hurried. Work leisurely and enjoy the results.

Penetrating finishes

Oil finish

This is one of the most beautiful finishes for woods of good color and grain such as walnut, mahogany and cherry. This finish does not require stain because the linseed oil darkens the wood. If enough rubbing is done, the finish does not show scratches or water marks and is heat resistant. This may require three weeks to several months, but the furniture may still be used during the process.

Procedure:

- Make a mixture of two parts boiled linseed oil and one part turpentine.
- Warm mixture by placing container in a pan of hot water. Use cold mixture on grooved surfaces to avoid setting too quickly. **Do not heat over direct flame.**
- Apply oil generously with brush or cloth, rubbing into wood until all the oil is absorbed and continue to rub in oil until surface stays moist for several minutes.
- Let stand for 5 to 20 minutes.
- Wipe off excess oil with soft, clean lintless cloth. Particular care should be taken to get all traces of oil out of crevices before oil hardens.
- Rub each piece until very little oil remains — possibly 10 minutes.
- Dry at least 24 hours.
- Repeat process until there are five to 12 coats or until no dull spots remain and there is a uniform clear luster. Later coats may be spaced at intervals of several weeks or months.
- Paste wax may be applied as a finish coat about six weeks after the last coat.
- Repeat the oiling process once or twice a year; first remove the wax with turpentine.

The beauty of the oil finish depends on the number of coats applied and the time and energy spent in polishing.

Penetrating wood seal

Penetrating seal gives a natural finish when little labor is desired. It looks similar to the oil finish. It is durable and resistant to scratches. It is easy to maintain — worn places can be removed without showing lap marks.

Choose the seal without a varnish base. The seal comes in colors or it can be used over oil pigment stain as long as the stain is thoroughly wiped off and allowed to dry 24 hours.

For specific instructions, follow the directions on the can. Generally the seal is applied in the following manner:

- Apply liberally with cloth or brush to bare wood.
- Let stand 15 to 20 minutes.
- Wipe with dry cloth to remove excess.
- Dry 12 to 24 hours before second coat.
- Rub lightly with fine sandpaper because seal tends to raise the grain.

On open-grain woods such as walnut, oak and mahogany, a filler may be needed. It should be applied between the first and second coats and just after the penetrating seal has passed the sticky stage. The filler should be thinned with a mixture of half turpentine and half seal. Oil stain may be used for the desired color.

Surface finishes

Varnish

A clear, dry day is best for varnishing and the work should be done in a room free from dust. Temperature of the room, varnish and wood should be about 70 degrees F.

A beautiful and durable finish can be obtained with a quality product and a good clean brush. Colored varnish is not recommended. Spare varnish is excellent as a last coat for surfaces subjected to moisture and heat. If shellac is used as a liquid filler, excess shellac should be rubbed from the surface; otherwise, the varnish finish may check.

Do not shake or stir varnish before using. Stirring creates bubbles which are hard to brush out and may appear as pitted dents when the varnish is dry.

Procedure:

- Mix 1 part turpentine to 4 parts varnish for the first coat.
- Fill the brush with varnish, dipping it half the length of the bristles into the varnish 4 or 5 times. Each time wipe off surplus on the sides of the container.

- Apply varnish quickly and freely, brushing with the grain of the wood, using only the tip of the brush.
- Let stand one or two days until perfectly dry.
- Smooth with fine sandpaper or pumice stone on damp cloth, taking care not to rub through finish after each coat.
- Dust surface well.
- Apply second and third coats of varnish without thinning.
- Dry at least a week before final rubbing.
- For a satin finish, rub with cloth dipped in linseed oil and pumice stone.

Shellac

Because of shellac's limited durability, it is not recommended for heavily used furniture. This finish is brittle when dry, scars easily and water spots. It is also soluble in alcohol, so it cannot be used for dressers where cosmetics containing alcohol are often placed.

Advantages are that it is easy to use, dries quickly with a gloss and can be rubbed to a satin or dull finish. It is often used as a sealer coat over stains, as a filler on fine grained woods or to cover knots before painting.

- Mix equal parts shellac (4 pound cut) and denatured alcohol.
- Apply with brush, stroking with the grain.
- When dry (24 hours), rub well with fine sandpaper until all gloss disappears.
- Apply the second and third coats the same way, rubbing down each time.
- Rub last coat to a satin finish with pumice stone and oil.
- Wax.

Lacquer

Lacquer makes a very durable finish that resists water and alcohol. It does not darken wood colors and its color does not deepen with age. Lacquer is difficult to use because it dries quickly. For this reason, it is not recommended for amateurs.

Follow the manufacturer's directions carefully.

Opaque finishes

Paint or enamel

These finishes are often used on wood with no particular beauty or to cover old finishes to match furnishings.

Be sure the surface is clean, smooth and dry. Paint will not stick to a greasy surface. You do not have to remove the old finish; sanding the surface will make a foundation for the priming coat. If the article to be painted is new, look for any knots. These should be covered with a coat of shellac.

Mix paint and enamel well before using. Pour a small amount into can to use and keep remainder covered.

Procedure:

- Use flat oil paint or undercoat thinned according to directions.
- Dip brush one-third of bristle length and stroke following the grain of the wood.
- Allow to dry thoroughly, then sand lightly with 2/0 sandpaper.
- Apply second coat unless the surface needs another undercoat. Stir paint frequently while painting.
- When thoroughly dry, sand lightly.
- Use regular paint or enamel as desired. Enamel can not be brushed out as much as paint; therefore keep the brush full of enamel and flow it on without allowing it to run.
- When the last coat is completely dry, rub with pumice stone and oil for a satin finish.

Antique finish for painted furniture

This finish is a two-tone blended or shaded finish achieved by applying tinted glazing liquid over a painted base. Traditionally, the glaze is applied over white or ivory enamel, but color is the modern trend.

- Paint the surface with a mixture of one part ivory enamel and one part flat white paint. Allow the painted surface to dry thoroughly.
- Mix one tablespoon of burnt umber tube color with about one-half cup of glazing liquid or enough to give the consistency of cream.
- Brush the glaze on and allow it to stand a few minutes.
- On a rough surface, wipe glaze from raised parts with a folded cheesecloth.
- On a smooth surface, wipe glaze from the center and leave a small amount on the edge.
- With a brush, blend the glaze from the edge toward the center.
- A cloth moistened with turpentine will remove the glaze completely so one can practice until the desired effect is achieved.

Special light finishes

Light colored finishes are popular today. Old furniture of normally light colored wood can be given a new look by using a finish that enhances the natural color. Much of the golden and Mission oak furniture lends itself to bleaching and remodeling into modern pieces.

After all the old finish has been removed from the surface, it may be bleached. Do not try to bleach wood too light, as a warm tone in furniture is more pleasing and will harmonize better with other furnishings.

Natural finish is obtained by using a colorless protective coat. Procedure:

- Use a coat of white synthetic resin seal, liquid white wood filler, white flat paint or enamel.
- Allow to dry 10 minutes (depending on how fast the product begins to set).
- Use a clean cloth and wipe off across the grain of the wood.
- Allow to dry 24 hours, sand and dust.
- Apply clear finish.

Pickled finishes are made with white or another color over the natural wood color. The effect is similar to the blonde finish and made in the same way except it is usually done on open-grained woods, particularly oak, and a coarser cloth is used to wipe off the pickle coat. The result has more interesting texture.

Care of furniture surfaces

Minimum care can maintain a good finish. If the surface has been waxed, no furniture polish is needed; polishes will dissolve the wax. Dust with a clean soft cloth; fold under soiled sections as dusting proceeds. To remove old wax, wipe surface with turpentine. To apply wax, use a pad of several layers of cheesecloth with a small amount of wax on the inside. Rub on a thin coat of wax. Polish after 20 minutes with a clean soft cloth. Several coats of wax thoroughly buffed between each coat are more durable than one thick coat.

When fine scratches appear, use fine steel wool and turpentine or a cleaning solvent. Rub surface with the grain until scratches disappear and rewax. This is a good treatment for neglected surfaces or for furniture that has accumulated soil from storage.

Rub white spots with a soft cloth moistened with turpentine or spirits of camphor. If the color isn't restored, rub with fine steel wool or sandpaper and repeat the turpentine or camphor treatment. Rewax. If the color does not return, refinishing is probably needed.

Surface checking can be removed with light sanding. Deeper checking requires refinishing.

Checking is caused by:

- Not allowing enough drying time between protective coats.
- Too heavy application of protective coat.
- Extremes of temperature. Hot sun softens the coating. Extreme dry cold dries. The finish loses some of its bond and cracks.

A few deep scratches can be sanded, colored with oil colors or colored wax to match the finish, and rewaxed. Synthetic resin seals can be mended without showing lap marks.

Use trivets or bases under flower arrangements to prevent collection of moisture and mildew. Use pads, trivets and coasters to protect tables from heat and moisture.

Care of brushes

Clean brushes with the thinner required for the protective coating used. For varnish and paint, turpentine; for shellac, alcohol; for lacquer, lacquer thinner; and for penetrating seal, use alcohol or turpentine.

Never let a brush stand on its bristle end. Two spring-type clothespins held together with a rubber band will work to suspend a brush.

Wash finally with warm sudsy water, rinse, press out water and hang in a well ventilated place to dry.

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