Special Effects

Traditional Finishes Series

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Introduction

Two of the most important aspects of any piece of furniture are its colour and surface patination. Exposure to light, plus years of waxing causes the original wood to develop a wide range of tones and also a surface skin, or patination, which is highly valued by collectors and valuers of fine furniture.

In this e-book, I will touch on a few techniques that have been used to create special effects on timber furniture in their creation and repair. Whilst there are a myriad of different special effects that can be applied, the focus here will be on:

1. Staining wood - those applications which change the colour of wood permanently.
2. Graining - which is a technique of making lesser quality wood like beech take on the appearance of highly regarded timbers like rosewood.
3. Soap finishes - made from elemental soaps which results in a soft sheen finish on timber.

Finally, I will cover off an important tool for creating most finishes on timber, that is the rubber. A well made rubber is one of the most valuable tools in the toolkit of the furniture refinisher. We well made rubber can last a long time and be used across many refinishing mediums.

Wood Stains

Paints and varnishes adhere to the surface of the wood, but stains penetrate it, changing its colour permanently. For this reason, stains are favoured by furniture restorers because they can enrich a dull-looking wood or change the colour of a new wood used in the restoration so that it blends in with the rest of the piece of furniture. Wood stains come in two forms - water based and spirit based. Spirit based stains thinned with methylated spirits are the best stains in my opinion because they dry very quickly. They are however, harder to find and can be more difficult to use than water based stains. The process of staining generally follows the following steps:

1. Wrap a cloth around a dowel and apply stain to small areas. Large areas can either be rubbed or brushed.

2. Check the stain is even and either add another layer or draw in the grain with a fine brush.

3. Cut back the polish with a rubber charged with a little methylated spirit until completely blended.

4. Use a soft brush to apply a thin coat of wax to give a soft, even sheen. Leave to dry. Give a final wipe over with a clean polishing cloth.

Graining

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, rosewood was imported from India, South America and the West Indies for use in the manufacture of furniture in Europe. It was an expensive wood, and so only the finest pieces of furniture were made from solid rosewood. In other cases, beech was commonly used, which was hard-grained, cheap and freely available. The beech was often "grained' with a finish to look like rosewood. The process of repairing a grained area include the following steps:

1. Apply a base coat of light brown stain mixed to match the existing colour. Charge a rubber with polish and apply a thin layer..

2. Apply dark brown stain to match the grain of the simulated rosewood, using a fine brush to replicate the pattern.

3. When the graining is dry, distress the graining with a screwdriver to blend the pattern. Use the rubber to apply a final coat of polish and wax with a soft cloth.

4. The chair on the left is grained beech and the chair on the right is rosewood. Both chairs were made around 1810.

Soap Finishes

When you think about it, finishing a piece of furniture with soap is no stranger than covering wood with a bug excretion (shellac), tree sap (varnish), bee stuff (wax) or rendered flax seed (lacquer). All finishes seem odd when you consider their sources. So when I first learned that soap was a traditional finish for floors and furniture on light-coloured woods in northern Europe, I was intrigued because of what soap is and is not.

A Danish soap finish uses natural soap flakes that are mixed with hot water. Soap flakes are a pure form of soap that doesn't include additional detergents, fragrances or other modern chemicals. It is simply an oil that has been mixed with an alkali solution to create a salt of a fatty acid. You can still buy this important and elemental soap from a variety of sources including supermarkets. Look for 'natural soap flakes'.

When you mix equal parts soap and boiling water you end up with a waxy solution that gives furniture a semi-gloss sheen and mild protection. When you mix a little soap and a lot of water you make a mayonnaise-like solution that is easy to apply and gives furniture a matte finish with mild protection.

I prefer a whipped cream like consistency.

Rag it on with a lint free cloth so that the wood is wetted and a bit foamy. Let it stand for a couple minutes. Then take a clean rag and wipe off the excess. Let it dry for an hour then sand the surface – I use a #320-grit or similar sanding sponge or paper – and repeat.

Repeat the process a couple times until you get the look you want. This soap polish can be renewed at any time. You can use either solution at any point – use the watery solution over the waxy solution if you want to experiment with a flat look. Or vice versa. You will find it very flexible and give a great finish on a range of timber items.

Making and Charging a Rubber

A rubber is an essential tool for applying a range of finishes and polishes. All you need is some wadding like a batting or an un-medicated cotton wool and a square of linen or similar lint free cloth. The rubber acts like a sponge by absorbing finish which is squeezed out onto the surface. This is how I make a rubber:

1. Lay a 15 cm long piece of wadding on the centre of a piece of linen the size of a large handkerchief.

2. Fold the ends of the linen inward and grasp them in the centre of the palm of your hand.

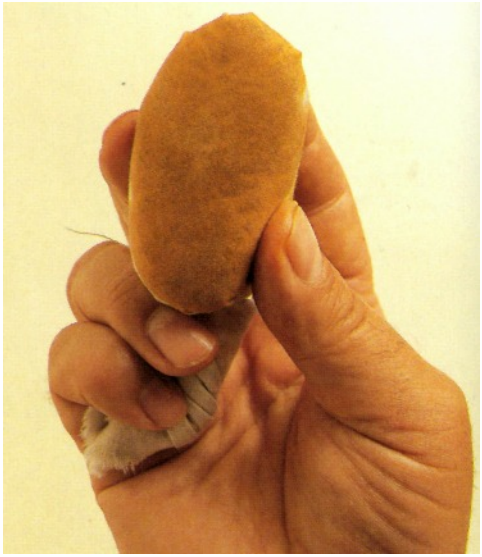
3. With all the outer edges gathered together, twist the ends of the linen to form a tail.

Making and Charging a Rubber

4. The rubber is complete when the tail is completely twisted. For a smaller, more intricate polishing job, make a smaller version of the rubber to suit.

You will find however that this size will be suitable for the majority of your applications.

5. To charge the rubber, open out the linen to expose the wadding, then pour a small amount of polish onto the wadding. With practice you will be able to judge the correct quantity. Note: if the rubber is too dry, it will not run smoothly over the surface.



6. Refold the linen around the wadding. Squeeze the tail to apply pressure to the wadding to force the polish through the linen. The more you tighten the tail, the more polish will flow.

After polishing, you can store the rubber for another day. I store them in an air tight container.

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