

# Six simple rules for perfect finishing

All too often woodworkers, and even finishers, think that finishing is a difficult, unpredictable enterprise at best. For many woodworkers just getting the darned thing made is where they run out of gas, and find themselves resorting to the fastest, most brainless way of getting it "finished." Historically almost half of all the effort expended in furniture making was in final preparation and finishing. Let me repeat, whether you are making

something for yourself as a hobbyist or bidding a large job as a manufacturer, you'd better make the finish work about half of the total effort if you want to do justice to the task.

But for many finishing is a trip to the Great Unknown. Even for "old hands" it can be a challenge. As the old saying goes, "Some days you get the bear, some days the bear gets you." In reality finishing is just about like anything else: With knowl-

edge and skill you can just about always get it perfect.

The mantra of perfect finishing is a basic, elegant statement.

"Wood finishing depends on getting the surface ready, selecting and preparing the finishing materials properly,

using the right tools and skills for application, under the right conditions."

Simple, huh?

To get a better understanding of these ingredients for finishing it is useful to break the statement down into its six components. With experience you can usually do pretty good work if you can control five of them or, under unusual circumstances, four. But the target had better be to get each six right if the goal is great finishing.

## FINISHING

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### • Perfect wood finishing depends on getting the surface ready.

It doesn't really matter if you are finishing new work, refinishing old work, or even restoration or conservation; if you don't have the surface prepared, it will come back to haunt you soon. What you need is a surface on which the new finish will flow, adhere, and presumably look good. That means it has to be clean. That means it has to be sound, i.e. not actively flaking if working over an old finish. That means it has to be smooth (especially in new work). Whatever the surface is like before you put the finish on will only be accentuated (or aggravated) by the layers of coatings you are about to apply.

In other words, whatever the surface is like, the finish will likely magnify it. If it is well-prepared, the finish can look terrific. If not, it won't. Sometimes you can overcome certain kinds of poor preparation, but it's often way more work than it would have been had it been done right in the first place. Long ago I learned an important truth:

"You may not have time to do it right the first time, but you always find the time to do it right the second time!"

### • Perfect wood finishing depends on selecting the right finish material for the job.

In other words, are the color, density and gloss going to give you the "look" you want? A lot of this has to do with the molecular weight of the material and any additives contained in the elixir. Does it build the way it should? Does it have the right physical performance properties such as hardness, toughness, elasticity, abrasion and chemical resistance, etc.? How does it dry? The questions are nearly endless, and only you know the answers.

### • Perfect wood finishing depends on preparing finishing materials properly.

How do you prepare the jar of finish? And, how long ago did you do it? Is the finish material fresh or aged? Has it begun to dry/harden, or even degrade while in the can? How does it behave? And speaking of additives, how do you adjust them to manipulate the finish? Have you chosen the right solvents to impart the working and curing properties you want? Have you tested it on a scrap piece to make sure it behaves the way you want it to behave?

### • Perfect wood finishing depends on using the right tools for application.

Are you using the right tool for the task of applying the finish? All too often finishers want to cut corners in choosing the means of application. They might think, "Why should I pay \$50 for a brush when I can get something similar for three bucks in the bargain bin?" My answer is that while it may not be true for all things in life, it certainly is true when it come to brushes — you get what you pay for. With a \$50 dollar brush in a skillful hand with well-prepared materials, you can get a million-dollar look for a final coat. With a \$3 bargain brush, you might get \$2.98 worth of looks (although the cheap disposable brush has its place too, in applications where a disposable brush is all that's necessary).

And what about spraying? Do you use HVLP standard, or airless? Do these tools do the job well, and do you have the technique and materials mastered? Even something as simple as French polishing has "tool" implications. Worn linen stuffed with cotton wadding works best for me. Regardless of which tools you use, take care of them well and they will last a lifetime.

### • Perfect wood finishing depends on using those application tools skillfully.

This is often where we put all our energies, learning to apply finishes with dexterous skill. How skillful are you in manipulating the material? Brushing, spraying, padding, polishing, detailing ... these comprise the lexicon of our art. Matching color, texture, transparency, and gloss to perfection are the yardsticks by which we measure each other and ourselves. Let your hands, fingertips, and eyes tell you how the material is behaving. The infinitely variable feedback loop between the brain's motherboard/CPU and the senses, and the dexterity of coordinated body movement, are what distinguish a finisher from someone who merely applies finishes.

### • Perfect wood finishing depends on working under the right conditions.

Work in a clean space with enough illumination (of the right color) and the appropriate level of air flow. Your finishing space doesn't need to be sterile, but it does need for there to be almost no particulate matter floating about freely. Airborne dirt and paint and varnish do not mix particularly well. Be mindful of the weather, as air flow, temperature, and humidity are integral to how well the application process goes forward. Do you know how to adjust either your work or the finishing material for changing or less-than-pristine conditions?

It sounds simple, and it really is. But as they say, "The devil is in the details."

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Remember, either you experiment with your finish on scrap wood or you experiment on the real object. Take your pick.

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