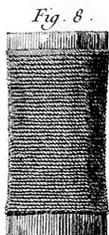


Practical Hints for Using Your Polissoir



In *L' Art du Menuisier*, A.J. Roubo is simultaneously laconic and elegant when describing the art of woodfinishing in an 18th century atelier. His few words and descriptions are so powerful that they have reoriented my thinking about finishing even after more than forty years in the trade. Most resonant with me were his presentation of the tools of the trade, and they have become part of my tool kit as well.

For me there was no more exciting discovery in studying Roubo accounts than his description of the tool he calls a polissoir, or what we would call a burnisher or polisher. Used as both a preparatory and application tool, it transforms a well prepared piece of wood into an exquisite presentation surface. And what does he say to describe and instruct on the use of this remarkable tool?



The polisher, figures 8 & 9, is a sheaf of ordinary grass or straw, about 4 thumbs long, by about 2 thumbs in diameter. This sheaf is bound tightly along its length. Before making use of it, one soaks it in molten wax, which one lets cool, after which one rubs the polisher on a piece of wood to smooth it and make it proper to polish the work. There are polishers of diverse forms and sizes, in order to be able to get into all parts, nooks and crannies.

(From "To Make As Perfectly As Possible;" Lost Art Press, 2013)

That's all. Fewer than one hundred words.

Thus with virtually no instruction I was left to rediscover many of the applications for this tool, but since I have only been using it a few years surely there is much more to learn. I have used a polissoir for several purposes, and found that over time I increased the number of polissoirs in my kit, since my experience leads me to conclude that each finishing task should have its own dedicated tool.

Preparing the Polissoir

Each polissoir is a unique, hand made tool, and there may be slight variations between them. For general use, I first examine the tips at the end of the cylinder, to make sure the surfaces are as smooth as possible. With a sharp edge tool, usually a bench chisel or utility knife, I trim any irregularities and shape the tip to whatever contour I desire (usually either perfectly flat or slightly domed).

Even now the new polissoir is not quite ready for use on a finished piece. There are still minute undulations to the burnishing surface, and these need to be smoothed out. You can accomplish this by rubbing it on a piece of waste scrap wood until the tip of the straw bundle gets smooth and shiny itself. At this point the tool is ready to put to use on a fine surface.

Polissoir as Burnisher

The tight bundle of broom straw polissoir makes a near-perfect burnisher for raw wood. By “burnisher” I mean a tool that can compress and smooth the surface it touches.

Once the wood has been prepped for finishing -- planed with a smoother or scraped, or straight off the gouge for carving (I increasingly avoid sandpaper in finish prep) -- simply take the polissoir in your hand in such a way that it is comfortable. Press the end of the cylindrical tool against the wood and start rubbing.

For simple burnishing, rub the tool along the grain until the surface sheen is uniform. How long this takes and how successful the result depends on how well the surface has been prepped beforehand.

The harder and tighter the grain of the work piece, the more even and lustrous the



burnished surface. Depending on the desired final finishing scheme, the burnished surface can be left *au naturale*, waxed, or varnished. One pleasing effect for those craftsmen working with softwoods in a naive or country style, is that burnishing pine or similar woods wallows out the early wood grain resulting in a pleasantly worn, antiqued surface.

Polissoir as Grain Filling Tool

It is as a grain filling tool that the polissoir truly excels. Used in much the same way as the burnisher, here the main difference is that the polissoir combines the burnishing function and grain filling with a spectacular result.



Roubo talks about using beeswax as a grain filler, and describes the process for doing so. Here is my summary of his process, along with some observations based on my own use.

First, take a polissoir and soak it in a vat of molten wax to fully saturate the tool, in essence turning it into a block of wax/fiber composite. Remove the polissoir from the molten wax with a pair of tongs, and carefully mop the excess wax from the surface and allow the polissoir to cool and harden.



Taking a block of beeswax, rub the surface of the work piece until there is a generous deposit of the wax.

Again taking the polissoir in your fist, rub the surface vigorously to warm the wax and push it into the voids of the grain. I find the best results are when I work slightly off-parallel to the grain, perhaps by only a few degrees. When the grain is completely filled, you can stop.

Any excess wax can be removed either by buffing with a piece of worn linen or scraping with a sharpened edge of boxwood or some other similar close

grained, hard wood. In many instances the task of finishing the surface is now complete.

However, additional options of buffing with flannel, spit polishing with paste wax or varnishing with oil-resin or shellac are compatible with these preparations, but solvent release lacquers or waterborne coatings are not.

For video demonstrations of these methods, you can go to

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5al4CtLFebU>

or

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LWePTM6M7Q>

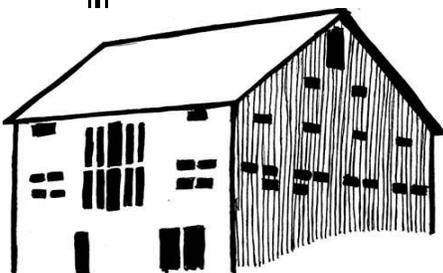
Wax Options for Grain Filling

While block beeswax is the standard starting point for the grain filling foundation of the finish, there are times when other formulations are desired for either coloration or hardness. In those instances, I add variety of materials to molten beeswax to create whatever blend of block wax I need, including:

- ❖ pigments (my preferred choices are ultra-fine powdered artist or lithography pigments)
- ❖ resins (pulverized colophony or shellac are typical, but other resins are certainly acceptable to achieve the desired color and hardness)
- ❖ waxes (shellac wax and higher molecular weight paraffin can impart additional hardness).

These molten mixtures are decanted and cooled, supplying me with chunks of block wax to use as I described above. By using a range of these wax based blocks on the surface, I get exactly what I want.

Thanks again for your interest in my work. I hope that together we can take a step back in time for the craft of woodworking and art of wood finishing.



Don Williams
The Barn on White Run
Monterey, Virginia