

Finishing Frustrations – Part II

Bevel Cut – November, 2022

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On the woodworking spectrum between art and science, finishing must place far out on the 'art' side of the curve. If you've ever tried to match the color and grain of any piece seen in a magazine, you realize that every piece of wood is unique and just because a stain worked fine for that piece, it may not work for what you are doing. And of course, a finish that works on one species may yield totally different results or not work at all on a different wood. Maybe that's why so many magazine articles and newsletters are strong on recommendations but vague on the details. A pinch of this or a spoonful (tablespoon or teaspoon?) of that may work in the kitchen but doesn't often lead to success in the wood shop. The bottom line of course is not surprising - the more time and money I've spent on a project the more nervous I get when it's time to start the finishing stage.

As I wrote a month ago, many of the finishing articles in the trade press don't go into enough detail for me. The author recommends a dye but doesn't specify a concentration level although they do say you can make the solution stronger if you want more color. They don't explain why the author chose that specific gel stain or how to avoid incompatibilities if the recipe calls for multiple stains and topcoats. I've had one recent example where stain #2 removed stain #1. One article recommended using a spray-on toner to eliminate blotching or sapwood problems. No other details were provided.

A recent video by Ben Strano: (https://www.finewoodworking.com/2022/08/17/three-arts-and-crafts-finish-recipes?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_content=FW+eLetter&utm_medium=Newsletter&oly_e nc_id=0240C9870712H5U) illustrates the kind of information I am looking for.

The video demonstrates three recipes for finishes on quarter sawn white oak.

The recipe from Tom McLaughlin:

1. Dye 1 : TransTint dark walnut dye (unfortunately the video leaves out a key number – the strength of the dye)
2. Seal with clear shellac (he used a can of spray shellac)
3. Glaze 1: Varathane Mahogany Gel Stain
4. Seal with shellac again
5. Glaze 2: Varathane Black/Ebony Gel Stain
6. Topcoat: Wipe on Minwax high gloss poly diluted 50-50 with mineral spirits

The recipe from Nancy Hiller (also published in FWW October 2022):

1. Sand Oak to 180, remove dust, raise grain, sand again.
2. Dye 1 : TransTint dark walnut stain and sand to 320 after drying

3. Stain: Minwax Ebony 2718 at full strength, wipe off after 10 min, let dry overnight
4. Toner/Topcoat: Bull's Eye Amber Shellac (one coat)
5. Topcoat on video is Wipe on Minwax high gloss poly diluted 50-50 with mineral spirits
Topcoat in FWW magazine is Old Masters Paste Wax 30901

Another recipe from Nancy Hiller with co-author Jeff Jewitt:

1. Dye: TransTint Honey Amber
2. Stain: Minwax Early American
3. Seal: Amber Shellac
4. Topcoat: Wipe on Min Wax high gloss poly diluted 50-50 with mineral spirits

The video shows results for the three recipes. You can decide which result is closest to your own tastes. At least this information is helpful if you are using quarter-sawn oak.

I don't have any real color sense. So, for example I don't know why Nancy Hiller selected TransTint Honey Amber out of the vast array of TransTint options or whether she would make the same choice for cherry or maple. I'm sure there might be some science behind her thinking. Perhaps it's related to the unstained color of the wood, or the tannin content, or some heartwood/sapwood ratio, or maybe she just likes amber waves of grain. I suppose I should dig in on this technical issue, but ultimately the finishing process is determined by the customer, which in my case is usually my wife or daughter.

What the world needs is three examples of successful and practical (I don't consider fuming to be practical) finishing recipes for multiple woods like oak, cherry, maple, ash, pine, etc. Of course, this assumes that there is an acknowledged definition of what is finishing success.

So, send me your recipes and be specific. Maybe we can publish a Betty Crocker cookbook-style guide to finishing wood.