

Project Ideas & Information

Refinishing Timber Furniture



Before purchasing tools, timber and materials, read every step thoroughly then talk to one of our experts

Furniture eventually reaches a point where it needs more than dusting and polishing, however, stripping and refinishing old furniture is no longer the norm. An aged finish, with a patina that only time can produce, can greatly add to the character and value of an object. Sometimes all that is needed for such pieces is a thorough cleaning and as different kinds of furniture call for different cleaning methods advice on cleaning or other restoration should be sought from an expert.

If you have no concerns re the above and you simply want to remove the old finish and re-apply a new one, then use the following steps to guide you through the process.

Step 1 : Remove And Repair

If the piece has doors, drawers, shelves or any other timber fittings that are easily removed and replaced, remove them to provide easier access to the majority of the work piece. Likewise remove hinges, handles and any other hardware and store them in a separate container.

Check for any loose legs, spindles or joints and repair or tighten as necessary. This is best done now as the existing finish offers some form of protection of the underlying timber from any over-run of the glues you may have to use. Check your woodwork for protruding nail heads and countersink them using your nail punch.

Step 2 : Identifying Old Finishes

Paint is an obvious finish, but to determine what type of paint is on your furniture, brush some stripper on an inconspicuous spot and observe the result. Oil based paint will wrinkle and bubble. If it just softens and goes slimy, it is acrylic.

On clear finishes, test in an inconspicuous spot, by dabbing with a clean cloth soaked in White Spirit. White spirit removes oiled and waxed finishes and both are easier to restore than to remove

If the above test doesn't achieve a result, repeat the test with methylated spirit. Methylated spirit will remove French polish, and high-gloss finish traditionally used for pianos and fine furniture. Cheaper Shellac polish responds to the same treatment.

Most other clear finishes respond to chemical or heat stripping, however plastic resin coating (a modern finish found mainly on floors and furniture) only responds to heat.

Step 3 : Removing The Old Finish

There are three main ways to remove paint and varnish from wood. The options are:

Chemical Stripping.

Although Methylated and White Spirits are indeed chemicals they are excluded from this explanation.

The most commonly used chemical strippers are available as a thick gel, best for vertical surfaces, and in liquid form. When using chemicals always wear gloves and safety goggles, and make sure the area is well ventilated.

Use an old paint brush to apply stripper to the piece, a section at a time, don't attempt to strip the entire piece in one step. Leave the coating undisturbed as per the manufacturer's recommendation and when the finish begins to bubble up, remove the softened finish with a scraper. Depending on the amount of finish to be removed, you may have to repeat this procedure several times.

When the bulk of the finish has been removed use a pad of coarse steel wool dipped in stripper to scrub off the last bits of remaining finish.

Finally rinse the surface as per the manufacturer's instruction to avoid problems when sanding and staining.

Some sanding or scraping is generally always needed after using chemicals, but let the work piece dry completely before proceeding.

Sanding or scraping with hand or power tools.

Sanding and scraping aren't generally recommended for removing old paint or finish as they are destructive by nature. Beware that they can damage the wood if not used with care.

However, on large flat areas, particularly where there is only a thin coat of paint, sanding can be an option.

- Use the least abrasive paper that will do the job. Change to finer grits as the job progresses.
- Always work along the grain.
- Work in slow stages as it is easy to damage the surface, especially with thin veneer or fine mouldings.

Heat Stripping.

Hot air strippers are the most popular in this category for stripping large areas and simple mouldings.

The amount of heat you need to apply depends on the age and thickness of the paint, but the golden rule is to "keep moving", to avoid scorching the wood.

Hold the nozzle of the hot-air gun 5 - 10cm from the painted surface, the paint should bubble and blister without burning. As the paint bubbles under the heat, use a scraper to lift it off. Remove as much paint as possible and then finish by sanding.

- Use with care near glass.
- Protect the area below with plenty of layers of damp newspaper.
- Use shaped shave hooks to remove paint from mouldings.

Step 4 : Final Sanding

All stripped furniture must be sanded as smooth as possible before any finish is applied. What may look like a perfectly smooth surface can change dramatically once a clear finish is applied.

If an electric sander is to be employed, use a finishing sander and only on flat surfaces. Belt or orbital sanders should be avoided for this type of work. Sand with progressively finer grades of either garnet or aluminium oxide paper and always sand with the grain.

When hand sanding on flat surfaces prevent unevenness by using a sanding block. For curved or more difficult surfaces use sandpaper strips without a block. Pads of medium to fine steel wool work well too.

It is important on completion to remove all dust from the furniture surface using a tack cloth.

Step 5 : Staining

Stains provide a see-through effect, the colour of which varies on the type of stain used and from timber to timber.

Basically, there are two different types of stains: Dye Stains and Pigment type stains.

Dye stains penetrate into the timber and actually dye the wood to give superb colour clarity and transparency, however, they are less suitable for use on pine and whitewood timber. These woods are best treated with Pigmented stains that literally add a pigment to the timber without penetrating into the grain.

Stains are not finishes in their own right and need to be clear-coated for protection and durability.

Stain is applied using brush or cloth, applying a wet coat and then wiping off the excess before it dries. Darker shades can be achieved by applying additional coats.

Step 6 : Choosing & Applying A Finish

Different finishes offer varying degrees of protection, durability, ease of application, reparability and aesthetics.

If you want to display the grain of wood that is bare or has been stained, choose polyurethane, shellac, or one of several clear, water-base coatings. Most come in a range of finishes, from flat to gloss.

Polyurethane

Polyurethane is ideal when durability is a primary concern. Brushing needs good technique to avoid bubbles and streaks. To overcome this problem thin the finish 10%-15% with mineral spirits or paint thinner. The thinned finish will take longer to cure and allow more time for the brush marks to disappear and bubbles to escape.

For a superior result, sanding between coats is a must.

Shellac

Applying Shellac results in a very high gloss, deep colour and tough surface, although it is not recommended for areas exposed to moisture because water can cause spotting on the finish. Alcohol will also mar the finish.

The technique involves applying many thin coats using a rubbing pad. The rubbing pad is made up of wadding inside a square piece of cotton. The process is lengthy and very repetitive but well worth the result. Unlike

Polyurethane finishes, mistakes are easily reversible using methylated spirits.

Water-based polyurethane

Offer good protection and are generally non yellowing. They can be used on bare or stained wood as well as on painted surfaces, specifically to protect decorative finishes.

Oil Finishes

While oil finishes do not provide as much protection as more modern finishes many people prefer the natural look they impart on wood. Oil finishes seep into the wood and penetrate the wood's fibres where they harden over time.

Linseed Oil and Tung Oil are both oils that cure and work well as finishes.

To use these finishes swab on a liberal amount with a rag in any direction, let it soak in for about half an hour, then wipe off with a cloth in the direction of the grain. Wait until the finish dries fully, then add another coat. Linseed Oil generally requires three coats to achieve the "hand rubbed" look, whilst Tung Oil may require 5-6 coats to achieve the same results.

Danish and Teak oils take less time to dry than linseed and also provide a more resilient finish. Teak oil provides a slight surface sheen while Danish oil leaves a low lustre.

Apply these oils with a soft cloth or brush and do not apply too much oil at a time. In between coats of oil, sand the wood down with a fine silicon-carbide paper. Typically, it is best to use four coats of oil.

Finishing Hints

- Beware of stripping veneered furniture. Most methods which remove the finish tend to lift the veneer as well.
- Use sharpened dowel, toothpicks or a toothbrush to get residue out of the corners and carvings. String is good for removing paint stripping residue from spindles.
- To remove dents try placing several layers of damp fabric or damp, brown wrapping paper over the dent. Touch the fabric or paper with a warm iron. The steam will often cause the wood fibres to swell back into place. NOTE: Don't use this treatment on veneers. The steam can soften the glue under the veneer and cause it to come loose.
- Residue from stripping paint is both toxic and highly flammable. Dispose of it in a responsible manner.

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