

How to Refinish Antique Wood Furniture

By Karen Rowley

The scene has played itself out for more than a generation. Unsuspecting antique furniture enthusiasts find the buy of a lifetime in a shop or estate sale, and can't wait to get home with their prize. Others are lucky enough to become owners of Grandma's favorite rocker or chest of drawers. Upon arriving home with their prized possession, they decide to remove what could amount to years and layers of paint or stain, and refinish the piece to its original wood. Some folks surrender quickly and haul their piece out to a professional for stripping and refinishing. But for people intent on perfecting their own masterpiece, simple rules and steps for refinishing can make the project much easier. The sense of satisfaction that comes with a refinished antique piece is unlike any other, and the result is an heirloom quality furnishing destined to last for generations to come.

Chemical strippers and sanding are the two key factors in stripping old paint or varnish from antique wooden furniture. When using a gel or liquid stripper, brush the substance on with a clean paint brush. Be sure to brush all strokes in the same direction. Do not brush in a back and forth motion. When all of the surface substance—paint or varnish—appears gone, apply one last coat of stripper and use a very fine, #00 steel wool pad. This will help ensure that all traces of paint or varnish are removed from the pores of the wood.

Sanding is a safe and reliable method of stripping antique wooden pieces of furniture—but only when one owns or has access to good sanding equipment. Yes, hand sanding is always an option—and a viable one when sanding small or delicate areas. However when sanding an entire piece of painted or varnished furniture, belt and disk sanders are the most efficient way to proceed. It is of utmost importance, however, to seek advice in handling such tools. Although they can quickly and easily remove stubborn finish from your furniture, they can also impair the natural beauty of the wood if not used correctly, and with a very discerning hand.

Heat guns are a third—although considerably less used method of removing finish. They are sometimes used to supplement a job when traditional methods like stripping and sanding haven't been completely successful.

It is imperative to let a stripped piece dry thoroughly for one to two days prior to continuing the refinishing process. Do not sand a stripped surface. This will only serve to remove any traces of natural distressing, which often are the defining points of a piece of antique wooden furniture.

Some pieces will require only partial refinishing. For example the top of a table may require stripping and refinishing, but the legs and base of the table may in fact be in good shape. This requires some finesse, but is quite doable—even by novice refinishers. Be sure to cover any areas not in need of stripping prior to stripping the top or one area of a piece. Sheets secured with masking tape work well for this process.

Stripped surfaces can be a bit more difficult to work with than finishing a brand new piece of wood. Purchase a pigment wiping stain to begin the process of refinishing your piece. You can purchase lacquer shading stains and lacquer colorants to use in color correcting situations. An amber stain works well on medium to darker wood. Water-white lacquer is perfect for lighter colored wood.

Once the piece you're refinishing is free from its old finish, and the wood has dried, it is time to gently sand the wood. This is when hand sanding comes into play. Use a 120 grit sand paper first. This will remove any unseen traces of finish that may remain. Next, smooth the entire piece using a 220 grit piece of sand paper. Be sure to sand with the grain and not against it when sanding by hand.

Some wood has a very tight grain and will appear flawless. Other types require a grain filler. Use of this grain filler will help achieve a smooth and even finish on your piece of furniture. Grain filler is most commonly purchased as a pigmented paste, and is easy to find in a variety of colors. It may be applied wither before or after applying the stain.

There are a few options when purchasing stain for your project. Oil based stain penetrate deeply and easily into the wood and are permanent. An accurate color can be achieved by using multiple applications. Oil based stain has a very strong odor, however, and is best safely used in a well ventilated environment.

Water based stains are a bit easier to use, but typically raise the grain of the wood. To lessen the possibility of this occurring, dampen the wood with a moist towel. Allow the wood to dry and then finish again with fine sandpaper. Repeat the process a second time. This will condition the wood to be more accepting of a water based stain. Water based stain is far more environmentally friendly and typically cleans up with simple soap and water.

Gel stains are thick and typically are oil based. The thickness of the stain is a plus for anyone who wants to ensure the strictest of color control. Gel stains don't swell the wood grain and don't

run like liquid stains. They do, however, require a vigilant wiping process to ensure that all excess stain is removed from the wood.

Most stains are applied with a rag or a brush, and then wiped off as necessary. Repeat the process in order to achieved your desired color.

The final step in refinishing a piece of wooden antique furniture is the sealing process. Water-based polyurethane is becoming very popular, as it is the easiest finish to use and is also environmentally friendly. Regular oil-based polyurethane is extremely durable, however, and probably remains the most widely used of all sealing substances. Lacquer is sometimes used, but costs time and effort, as multiple coats are used, requiring drying and sanding between each layer.

Indeed, refinishing a piece of antique wooden furniture is work. However the fruits of one's labor are typically admired for years. Many hobbyists have turned refinishing furniture into a business. Nearly all refinishers agree that this labor of love is indeed an art form.

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