

# **Oil Finishes**

By Christopher A. Amatos

One of the easiest, yet most satisfying finishes to apply to a finely crafted project is an oil finish. Oil finishes project everything that we like to associate with fine woodworking - hand craftsmanship, a sheen that reflects the time and care we put into our work, indeed, the entire aura of creating something by hand.

Oil finishes are popular in part because they are so easy to apply and care for. They don't require expensive or potentially harmful spray equipment, are inexpensive, are not particularly flammable, don't capture dust, and look great. But they are not suitable for everything. Their ease of application is the flip side of not being a particularly durable finish when it comes to moisture or wear. I think oil finishes are ideal for small projects such as boxes, hand mirrors, small pieces of furniture that will never be subjected to moisture, etc. Oil generally is not suitable for dining table tops that will see a lot of use, counter tops, chairs and other high-use items.

One of the fatal flaws I've seen with many oil finishes is that they simply didn't get enough coats. Oil is a build-type finish - each coat builds upon the last one. To get a true luster, you need at least four coats.

There are several types of oil finishes. Hardly a year goes by without one or more articles appearing in the most prominent woodworking magazines about when to use oil finishes, their characteristics, why they work, and how to apply them. The most common oil finishes on the market today are Danish oil finishes, which are actually part oil and part varnish. Sometimes you'll see articles that include formulae for different types of oil finishes that are composed of varying proportions of oil, wax and varnish.

Regardless of the type you use, to get the sheen and luster of a fine oil finish, you need to prep your work carefully and follow a few steps during application.

Like any project, you need to prepare the surface to accept the finish. I won't get into the debate about whether to scrape or sand your finish. If you decide to sand, finish to at least a 220 grit surface. Once you're done sanding, carefully clean your surface with a tack cloth.

One of the benefits of applying an oil finish is that you don't have to be careful about how it goes on. You can spray it, brush it, wipe it, pour it, even dunk your work into it (not recommended for open-pore woods such as oak) and get similar results. I prefer wiping it on, usually after pouring a little puddle onto the surface. Depending on the type of oil, you want to keep the surface wet for at least 30 minutes. This means going over it periodically during that time with a moistened applicator so you that can see a wet surface.

After the allotted time, wipe off the excess oil carefully and put the piece aside to dry. Some manufacturers recommend you reapply another coat in an hour, others suggest you let the work dry for a day. Whichever route you take, it's important that you check the work periodically and wipe off any oil that leaks back out through the pores. If you don't, you'll have little spots on your project.

Applying the second coat is one of the most important steps, in my opinion, to a good final result. Apply the second coat the same way as the first, but, with plenty of oil on the surface, rub it vigorously with 400-grit wet/dry sandpaper. Always sand with the grain and be sure to keep the surface moist.

Rubbing with sandpaper does two things: First, it creates an oil/dust slurry that fills the grain and gives you a finer finish. Second, heat you build up by sanding helps "cauterize" the oil to give it additional sheen. After sanding, keep the surface wet for the specified time, wipe it off and set it aside to dry. Again, check for leakage from the pores.

Now it's simply a matter of adding more coats, allowing the project to dry 24 hours between applications. With each coat you'll see the luster build and the surface start to gleam. I find that four coats works well on most projects, but it depends on the ultimate use. Too many coats can give you a finish that almost looks like varnish because, in fact, you are applying a little varnish with each application.

Three days after the final coat you can wax the surface with 0000 steel wool. Be careful not to cut through your finish. Be aware that the steel wool will reduce some of the luster of the final finish. Let the wax dry and buff your project to complete the hand-oiled glow.