

TGIF Saving the Finish

Many times we plan (or dread) refinishing something to restore its beauty. But sometimes that's not necessary or even advised. It's quick and even if it doesn't work, you have not wasted a lot of time and expense and you can fall back to the ultimate mulligan – strip and refinish.

Clean

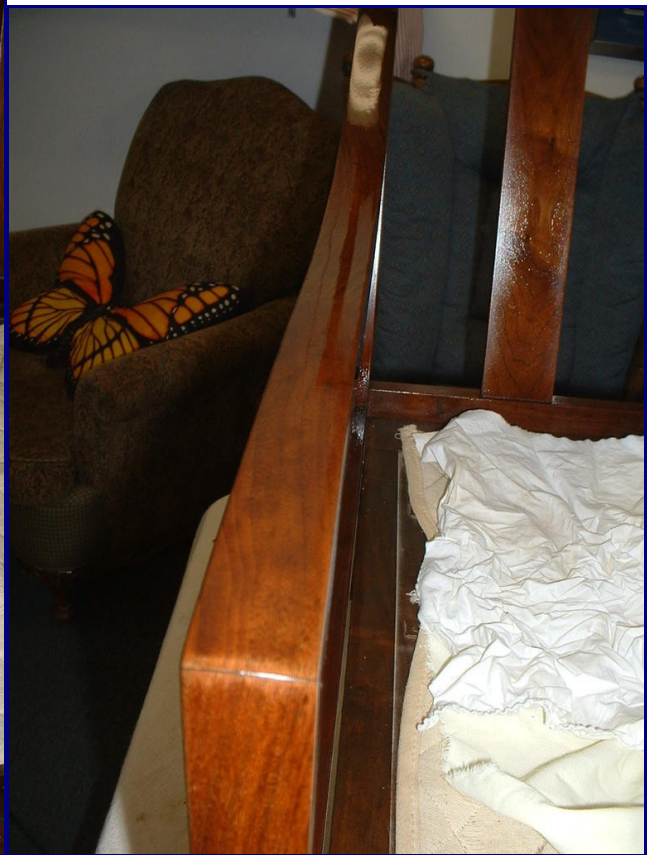
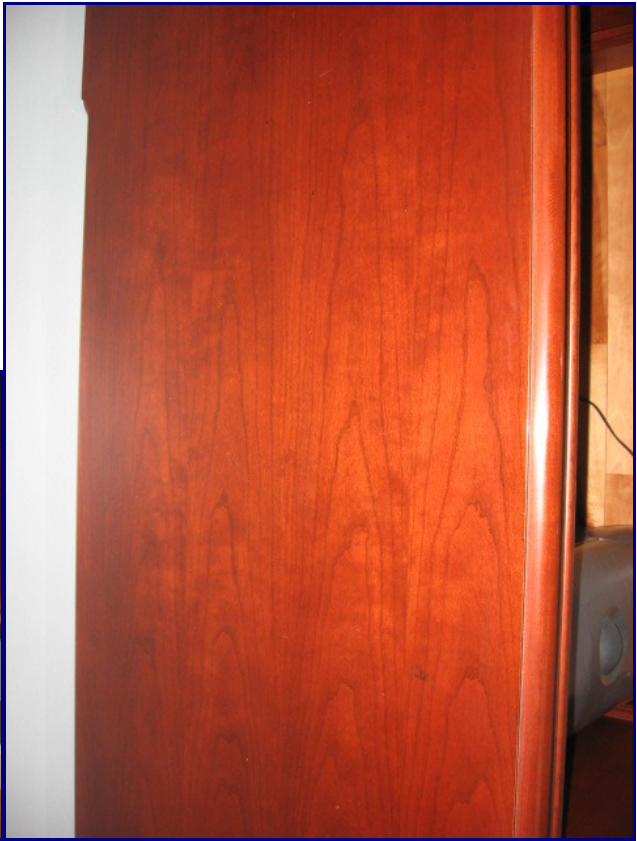
First off remove the dirt and soiling. The first law of solubility is that "likes dissolve likes." ("Chemistry for Dummies") There are two kinds of soiling, things that are soluble in water and those that are not. (Duh!) Water is known as "the universal solvent. It is a "polar solvent" meaning that its molecules have a positive side and a negative side. Water does a good job dissolving things based in water – food, sweat, general dirt, smoke and soot. Solvents like mineral spirits are known as "non-polar" solvents and are good for dissolving things like ink, grease, wax.

So the first approach is to clean the most common soils, the stuff that cleans with water. Adding a bit of detergent, like Dawn, will help remove the common soiling. Get a bucket of warm water and add a squeeze of Dawn to it. Wet a rag, ring it out, and go to work wiping off the dirt. In extreme cases, I've used a cleaner like Formula 409 to clean.

When finished and dry, get another rag damp with mineral spirits, or naphtha (similar to mineral spirits, but faster evaporating) and wipe with that.

Exceptions

If the finish is soft and gooey, it has likely been degraded past the point of repair. The most common occurrence of this is due to chronic exposure to acidic body oils such as on the edge of a desk or table or arms on a chair. If you clean this off, you can remove the goo that used to be finish, sometimes down to raw wood. Here are examples of that.



If the finish is flaking off, there is little chance to repair it. Adding more on top is what my finish instructors call, "putting on a new roof when the basement is collapsing in." There are some products like Formby's Furniture Refinisher that are really just ATM strippers (acetone-toluene-methanol). It removes the old finish.

Repair

If the finish is dull or lightly crazed, you may be able to remove some of the irregularities by abrading the top surface. The least aggressive would be with a polishing compound such as available at an auto supply store. More aggressive would be an abrasive pad or steel wool, on up to fine sandpaper. Also, you don't need to stop where you start – you can get aggressive with sandpaper, then move back up the chain to finer and finer abrasives to get higher and higher sheen and a smoother finish.

Restore

Add more finish: Whether or not you have decided a repair is needed, you can restore the finish, especially in worn spots such as feet and edges. You can pad on some shellac (can be sold as "padding lacquer"), brush it on, or spray even with an aerosol can. On a factory-finished piece, you can apply a spray lacquer or a spray lacquer toner. On an oil or oil-varnish blend, you can apply another coat of same. I've even restored some worn IKEA-like pieces by brushing on some Deft Lacquer to restore the worn film finish.





Wax: You can also apply a wax. I'd recommend using a darker wax on a darker wood/finish.

Polish: I keep hearing the hype about Howard's Restor-a-Finish. I've tried it and while it does have a trace of alcohol that can remove water marks, I've found the results are rather short-lived. Not much better than a furniture polish after a few weeks. I've concluded that antique shops use this to "put lipstick on the pigs" and when the customer buys a piece and comes back in a few weeks/months to complain how bad it looks, they'll grab a bottle and "what you need is to apply this to 'feed the wood', 'replace essential oils,' and restore the shine." Oh, and here, buy this this Feed n Wax to follow up.

More reading

Jeff Jewitt's Saving the Finish article.

http://www.woodcentral.com/bparticles/save_finish.shtml

ARS Leave it alone and gunky : (point)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/stories/articles/2004/2/23/tips-trade-leave-finish-alone/>

Flexner : a damaged finish does not protect and leads to loss: (counter-point)

http://www.masterpiecefurniture.com/design_notes/flexner/antiques_roadshow.html

<https://www.familyhandyman.com/woodworking/furniture-repair/how-to-refinish-furniture/?trkid=soc-fhm-facebook>