

FRENCH POLISHING

Replacements to antique parts should be French polished to build up their surface and fill the woodgrain. French polish is simply shellac with various hardeners and gums added to a base of alcohol or industrial spirits. Historically the earliest finishes for wood were either a simple waxing or an oil varnishing made by dissolving copal resin in Linseed oil or poppy oil. By the middle of the seventeenth century shellac made by dissolving lac in spirits of wine became popular. The technique of French polishing appeared in the 1820's and gradually replaced other finishes. French polishing takes a little time to learn and it is recommended that you first practice on scrap timber.

The more dense a material is, the greater the likelihood of achieving a deep shine. Heavy woods like ebony, which consist of 80% wood fibre, and 20% air will take on an amazing gloss appearance with one coat of polish.

At the other end of the scale, woods like balsa which are 80% air 20% wood fibre require several coats before any kind of depth can be achieved.

In all polishing the secret lies in filling the grain of the wood until a hard and completely flat casing is laid around the surface.

First of all you have to make a polisher's rubber, by taking a piece of raw cotton (available from upholsterers suppliers) and folding it into a firm egg-shaped pad. A pointed and a blunted, round end should be made. This pad is then wrapped in a small square of old but clean linen such as a handkerchief. (Show me)

Gather up the cloth around the absorbent cotton and twist it slightly by hand; the rubber should be held so that the thick end rests under the palm while the pointed end is guided by the forefinger.

Before starting polishing, your piece should be thoroughly clean, the workshop warm, dry and dust free. Open the pad and pour the French polish in from the back, not through the cloth at the front. Rewrap the rubber and press it against a smooth surface to bring the polish to the front. Avoid over-filling the rubber with polish as too much can cause it to pile up on the surface. Add the merest smear of White Oil to the face of the rubber to lubricate the rubber.

Start to cover the surface in a series of straight lines and then work in circles and figures of eight. It is important to bring the pad into contact and of the surface as if you were landing a model aeroplane held in the palm.

Plunking the rubber down or lifting it straight off results in a marred surface. Do not expect immediate results, it is a slow process. If the surface appears a bit rough after the first coat it can be rubbed down with fine pumice powder applied to a rag, or run over with fine steel wool.

All the fine dust from this operation has to be wiped of before carrying on to the next coat.

Your pad will need to be replenished from time to time. Polish until the grain in the wood is completely filled. By continually sanding with pumice between coats, the grain fills up without having a thick coating of polish.

Allow at least half an hour between coats; it is a good idea to make a new rubber while waiting. When working the polish, a dab of oil can be placed on the rubber (white polishing oil or linseed will do).

Do not use too much as in the later stages the oil can prove difficult to remove. Smears left by the oil can be pulled out by pouring some methylated spirits into the rubber and continuing work by rubbing a little harder than before in a figure of eight.

As the body or depth of the polish develops, add just methylated spirit to the rubber and keep working the surface until all the oil has been removed. It is possible to judge this by breathing onto the polish and seeing how rapidly the mist left by your breath evaporates. The quicker it evaporates the less oil there is left on the surface. Perform this test as you start to polish to establish a benchmark at the end.

All work should be left for 24 hours before the final waxing.