

Tinted Shellac Warms Walnut

Few woodworkers consider topcoat tinting, but adding a couple drops of aniline dye imparts a pleasing antique appearance to walnut.

Bell-bottoms, wide ties and leisure suits have something in common with walnut. No, I don't suspect you have walnut stashed in the far reaches of your closet next to the leisure suits. The commonality is that each item was in vogue at one time, then fell out of fashion. And while I'm not so sure leisure suits are going to make a comeback, I know walnut is once again gaining in popularity with woodworkers. So now might just be the time to stock the shelves in your shop.

If we're picking up the pace of creating projects with this favorite American hardwood (the choice lumber for furniture built in the William & Mary period (1690-1730) prior to increased importation of mahogany), we need to find a finish that is more than simply adding a coat or two of linseed or tung oil.

Same Old, Same Old

Oil finishes deepen the color of walnut. That's a nice look and the oil adds protection, but it does nothing to warm the cool characteristics of the hardwood, especially the look of steamed walnut, which is grayish brown when freshly milled.

If you study antique walnut furniture, you'll notice a reddish cast to the older pieces – a look that's much warmer and more pleasing. That's what happens as walnut ages and the gray shading begins to warm. It's a result of time. But, how can we manipulate time to achieve a warm, reddish finish in a relatively short period?

We wanted a finish that was easy to use, simple to repeat and quick to apply. A five- to seven-step process that required hours of work or drying time wasn't going to work. It had to be something that was achievable in just a couple simple steps.

A few samples using dye under shellac were tried. (Orange dyes were suggested by a number



PHOTO BY AL PARRISH

After sampling a few different finishes to warm walnut, we discovered that aniline dye added to amber shellac was the ticket – a simple mixture that's easy to apply, with results that mimic antique furniture.

of woodworkers.) That was close to the color we were searching for, but the finish muddied the wood. We wanted the walnut grain to stand out, not be masked.

Next we turned to shellac. You may wonder how to get a reddish cast with shellac. While there are a few shellacs that are red in color (available as shellac flakes that are dissolved in alcohol before use), most over-the-counter shellac provides an orange or amber tint at most. The amber color undoubtedly warms the grayish brown hardwood. And to gain that slight reddish look found on antique furniture, we focused on aniline dye added directly into the shellac.

I've mixed dyes with my topcoat before and found TransTint liquid dyes (available at any woodworking store) work best. It's easy because the dye is a concentrated liquid. For our new finish, add a few drops of Reddish Brown (#6003) into shellac, mix and the finish is ready.

First, we mixed two drops of dye into 2 ounces of amber shellac, then applied three coats to a sample board with a rag dipped in the mixture,

only to find the red cast was not as strong as desired. Then we repeated the mixture and application process using a four drops per 2-ounce mixture. That did it. After three coats, applied with the shop cloth, we had a red cast that mimicked antique walnut furniture.



Varying a drop as you add the dye to the shellac is not going to create a significant difference in the final look of the finish, but try to keep each batch consistent.

Application is Key

When using tinted shellac or any shellac other than “clear,” a run or sag in your finish will show in the completed piece. The defect shows due to the color in the shellac being thicker at the run or sag. So pay close attention as you apply the finish.

There are three methods of applying finish. You can spray, apply the finish with a brush or simply use a clean shop cloth. Let the project size determine which method to use.

If the project is large, use a spray setup. This method allows the smoothest layering of shellac – provided you are accurate with a spray gun. Spray three coats of shellac. (Each coat must dry completely before adding the next layer.) Thin the shellac to a 1½-pound cut. Store-bought, pre-mixed shellac is generally available in a 3-pound cut. To reduce the viscosity, mix the shellac in a 50/50 ratio with denatured alcohol. Thinner viscosity allows the shellac to atomize into finer particles, producing a smooth coat.

If spraying the mixture is not in the cards for you, by all means, resort to a brush. If you apply the shellac with a brush, it’s not necessary to thin the mixture. Apply the first coat making sure that you keep a wet edge and brush as little as possible, always brushing with the grain. If you attack this as most would in painting a house (a back-and-forth action), you’ll likely create more brush lines and a less-than-smooth finish.

No matter how you apply shellac, it might be necessary to sand between coats to remove nibs. And there is a caveat here. Sand lightly. Tinted shellac shows variations with differences in thickness and layers. If you cut through a layer of shellac to expose bare wood, you could change the look of the finish just as a run or sag does.

Because most of us brush on a thicker coat than we spray, apply a second brushed coat, then assess the color and film thickness. The color needs to be right and there should be a sufficient buildup of finish to achieve a smooth, even layer. If a third coat is needed, sand the second coat before adding another.



A better quality brush translates into smoother finish application because a good brush holds more finish. You’ll have more continuous strokes because you don’t have to stop to reload as often.

“The purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love color the most.”

— John Ruskin (1819-1900)
English writer and critic

Apply shellac with a rag on small projects only. To keep the finish under control, thin the shellac mixture to a 2-pound cut. Adding one cup of alcohol into two cups of shellac does this. The thinner viscosity dries more quickly and reduces any gumming of the shellac. Keep the rag wet. If you experience “drag” (the cloth sticking to previously applied shellac), add shellac to the cloth. Use the same technique and precautions as suggested when brushing.



On large, flat surfaces, #0000 steel wool can knock the high sheen off a shellac finish. Adding a lubricant such as “wool lube” slows the scratching process and provides an even sheen.

Knock Down the Sheen

As shellac builds the sheen also builds – the more coats, the higher the gloss. Of course you can leave the higher sheen as your finish, but a high shine, or glossy finish, amplifies any imperfections. A dull or a medium sheen is better. Rubbing out the finish with #0000 steel wool or applying a different topcoat will dull the sheen.

To achieve a satin finish with steel wool, you’re scratching the surface to no longer reflect light as much. This is a time-consuming step and the results are varied due to one’s ability to get tight into corners, and it’s possible to rub through the finish, again causing variations in the color.

Our choice for reducing the high shellac sheen to a satin or dull sheen is to add a layer of a different topcoat after one final sanding (this also helps level the finish). The resulting sheen is uniform over the entire piece. One caution: Confirm that your topcoat is compatible with the waxy properties of amber shellac. Some topcoats, polyurethane for example, don’t bond to wax.

If you are spraying your finish, a dull-rubbed effect lacquer is great. In addition, a wipe-on varnish is perfect for this step as well. Yes, each adds a small amount of yellowing, but that color increases the warming of the finish.

If you want to add a topcoat such as waterborne polyurethane (because it dries quickly and has a clear, non-yellowing appearance), apply a single coat of Zinsser’s Sealcoat, which is clear, de-waxed shellac. Then apply any dull-rubbed or satin topcoat.

This walnut finish met our requirements. Its two ingredients easily blended into one mixture, it can be sprayed, brushed or ragged on and the final color simulates the finish on antique walnut furniture. If you decide to rag-on the finish, I doubt that old leisure suit is an acceptable shop cloth – but that wide tie might just do the job. **WM**

— Glen D. Huey



Applying a waterborne satin finish is an easy way to reduce the sheen of shellac. But first, you need to add a layer of dewaxed shellac to ensure proper adhesion.