

From *The College of Wood Finishing Knowledge*  
By Ron Bryze

## SPECIAL EFFECTS - AGING AND DISTRESSING

Anyone who knows the basics of finishing can recreate most of the distressed finishes out there. It is kind of like playing the piano. There are only 88 keys. The technique of pushing down the key is not hard. The art is in knowing what key to push and in what order; that is what wins you a Grammy. When distressing, if you do not have a vision of where you are going before you start, you will never get there. People can teach you the techniques - only you can develop the vision of how to use them.

The first step in gaining the vision is to simply use your eyes. Look not only at old pieces of furniture, but also at sculpture, pottery, and art. Some of the techniques with fancy names would never take place naturally on wood. You have to go outside your medium to find examples of these techniques.

The second step is to use your head. Look very, very closely and, most importantly, analyze what you see. Simplistically, we have only three elements that we use in getting to a desired color: the background color of the wood, pigments, and dyes. That's it. Just like a musical chord, every color element that we use is a note. How we layer them on the wood's surface will determine the color "chord" that we see. We use glazes, stain bases, toners, etc. as the vehicles to build these layers. Each vehicle imparts a unique signature to the appearance of the color.

For instance, a dye used on bare wood will look different than a dye mixed in some lacquer and used as a toner. When you look at color, imagine the layers and the vehicles that were used to achieve it. When specifically looking at distressed finishes, remember you are going to try to recreate finish failure. What would have caused it to look like that in the first place? There are tell tale clues everywhere, but all you have to do is see. Once you figure that out, you can usually come up with some simple ways to recreate them.

The third step is practice, practice, practice or should I say sample, sample, sample. Like riding a bike or being a parent, people can explain it to you all day long, but you don't really understand until you actually do it.

- Manipulating color, texture, and sheen are often more effective in creating the illusion of age than beating the heck out of the piece.
- Use at least three colors on the piece. This does not necessarily mean using three colors on top of each other, but rather variations of color in different areas of the piece.
- Everyone tries to beat a texture into the wood - when in reality, there is usually more texture coming out of the wood caused by wrinkled finishes and the accumulation of crud. Use gesso, acrylic pastes, or even thickened vinyl sealer to build up the surface texture.
- Less is more.

## AGING WOOD AND FINISHES

Think about what makes things look old. Learn to see.

Today we strive for deep rich, even color. Our woods and our finishes are designed to be smooth, flat, and have a nice uniform sheen. By definition, aging requires finish failure.

You are recreating elements from a different time. Things were built using different materials and methods of work. The world was also a very different place in the old days. The indoor environment was harsher, and overall air quality was poorer. Not too long ago, wood and coal were the major sources of heat, while candles and oil lamps provided light. All of this influenced how a

piece would age and the color changes that took place.

## THE BASIC PRINCIPALS OF AGING

*Mother Nature always wins.*

When looking at old work, remember that the early materials and finishes were not as technically sophisticated as they are today. Remember also, that even though natural and environmental changes might be microscopic, they are relentless and unforgiving.

*Finishes are not perfectly flat.*

The spray gun has not been invented. Finishes were mostly brushed or rubbed on, and then rubbed out.

*Finishes are not perfectly smooth.*

The addition of modern day central heating results in dryer indoor air. This not only stresses the wood, but the finish as well. Finishes would often wrinkle and crack.

*Colors are not vibrant*

Most early finishes were either varnish or shellac and by now have taken on an amber color, however, while wood and finishes typically darken with age, stains and paints will fade in color overtime.

*Finishes do not have an even color.*

Most of the early finishes softened with heat, so if soot, dust, and dirt were allowed to accumulate on the piece, they would eventually become embedded in the finish and darken it. Nooks, cracks and crannies would become dark. Areas that got rubbed or worn would tend to be lighter.

*Finishes do not have an even sheen.*

Wherever a surface is handled often or gets worn it will also get burnished to a warm gloss. All other areas turn rather dull.

*Distressing is organized chaos.*

There are two different types of wear that a piece goes through in its lifetime of use. There is the normal wear around handles and openings, and then there is the random wear that occurs from the occasional bumps and kicks. Wood split and cracked, parts got broken, and sometimes repairs were made.

*Old work had a different personality.*

The piece itself might physically look different. Old growth trees produced boards that were wider and with more grain lines per inch. Pieces

were constructed with wood that was of a thicker nominal dimension that we currently use today. Woodworking involved a lot of hand work. Surfaces and joinery were prone to irregularities and tool marks. Doors and drawers were typically



## THE ART OF AGING

THERE IS NO REAL RIGHT,  
BUT THERE CAN BE MANY WRONGS.

We often sense when things just don't look right, even though we may not be able to put our finger on exactly what the problem is.

The art of aging lies in knowing which technique to use, where to use them, and most importantly-when to stop.

If you are asked to match a sample, your job is half done. Ideally, you just need to reverse engineer the sample to figure out what techniques were used/match colors, then recreate the effect. I did not say that the job was easy, only that it was half done. I always found matching a sample a little less stressful because I was not responsible for the creation of the effect - only the execution.

The real fun begins when you or a client wants to make something look old. The best results are obtained when this decision is reached in the early design stage; then we have the best opportunity to look at the big picture.

Acknowledge the fact that you are going to be creating an illusion. Ask yourself two questions.

**1. How perfect does that illusion have to be?**

Is it supposed to look like the real deal or is "kind of old" ok?

**2. How much does the budget allow?**

Often this will make you rethink question one. If the budget is small, sometimes something as simple as a couple of well placed knots and a glaze are all that you might need.

Consider the objects style, function, and size when selecting your options for aging techniques (especially distressing). You will probably distress a Chippendale piece differently than a Shaker piece. You also might not use the same techniques on a set of kitchen cabinets that you would an entertainment center.

Large objects can be easily overwhelmed with detail so use special effects sparingly. The smaller an object is, the more intensely we look for and study the detail.

Think about how an item is used and what areas are most subject to wear to help you put the distressing where it belongs. Burn thru's on an outside corner is common; all over the face of a panel is usually not. Base and chair rail mouldings take heavy abuse, crown mouldings do not.



## HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

In the words of architect Mies van der Rohe, "less is more". Most furniture sustains minimal physical damage over time. By far the single biggest misconception people have about distressing furniture is that you beat it up with chains or a bag of door knobs. This may be the case if you are recreating a primitive or furniture from the Wild West, but for the most part these techniques are used sparingly, if at all.

Make a field trip to a museum or a good antique store. You will see that the basic characteristics of aging are changes in color, texture and sheen.

## THE ILLUSION OF AGE

### *Color*

Use dyes to tint topcoats and pre-stain wood because they are semi-transparent and will not overly mask the grain. Glazes work best to re-create dirt and grime. The most convincing illusions usually show three different colors on the piece.



*Clear finishes turn amber.*  
Add orange / yellow dye to sealer or topcoat.

*Ebonized finishes – beyond dirty.*  
Add black dye to topcoat.



*Woods darken.*  
Use a dye on the bare wood or under a wiping stain.

*Dirt collects in pores get darker.*  
Raw Umber / black glaze is a good replica of dirt.





*Paints get faded by the sunlight.*

Add a tiny amount of white to a thin clear topcoat or use a white glaze over the paint.



*Finishes darken from touch.*

Apply a dark glaze, then remove while leaving more in the required areas.



*Stain colors are usually lightest where they are most subject to wear.*

After staining, highlight area by rubbing with a ScotchBrite or Mirlon pad.

*Dust and dirt get caught in corners, cracks and crevices.*

Apply a dark glaze, then remove while leaving more in the required areas.



*Uneven stain color.*

Apply water to certain areas before staining to raise the grain so that the stain will take darker in these areas.

## TEXTURE

*Finishes are not flat.*

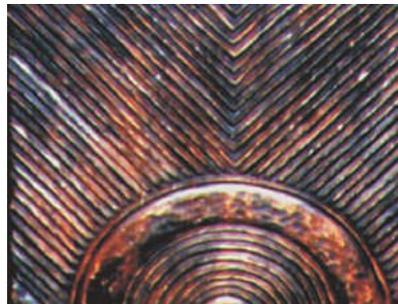
Dip a brush in lacquer thinner and then dry brush the sealer or primer when it is almost setup.



*Finishes can lose their smooth.*

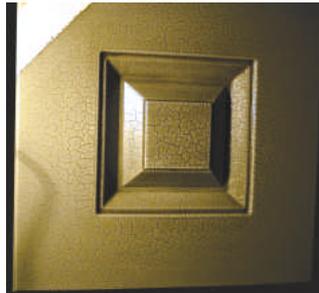
Pour out some vinyl sealer or primer on a smooth surface and let dry. Work a small amount of lacquer thinner into the dry material with a brush to make a thick paste. Then pounce the paste on to the wood to give the surface a texture. Best when done over a sealer coat, but can be done over or under a primer coat depending on the desired effect.

*Surface texture.*  
Wire brush the surface before you stain or paint.



*Surface texture.*  
Sand blast before or after you stain or paint.

*Wrinkle.*  
Cracked finish usually with a darker color in the cracks. Use crackle lacquer and wipe glaze in to the cracks. You can crackle in spots or over the whole piece.



*Burn thru's.*

A. Stain, seal, then paint.

B. Prime, paint color #1, clear coat (optional), paint color #2.

The clear coat makes it a little easier to control the depth of the burn thru.

Use a ScotchBrite to burn thru the layers. You can also apply some crayon in spots between layers to make it easier to rub thru.

*Knots.*  
Hard to duplicate; simply include a few when you build.



*Worm holes*

Use thin sharp awl, or boards with brads pounded through. Occasionally flick your awl to the side to give a little tail. Worm holes are usually in clusters with a few trailing down the grain.