

Nice Guys Finish Last

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Poor Yogi Berra got misquoted on a lot of things. At one baseball game, he said, "See those guys in the other dugout? All nice guys -- finish last." His words were seized by folks who quoted him as saying "Nice guys finish last". These words take on a new meaning for woodturners. All woodturners are nice guys and the last thing they do to their turning is to apply finish. It is a bad sign when your boss says, "You're finished." When a woodturner says "You're finished" he means it as a complement.

The finest finish forms the finishing fluorescence to your turned art. The finish gives glowing glory to your good gadget. Another quote from Yogi, "It ain't over 'til it's over." Yet how many times do you see a gorgeous piece of wood that has been masterfully turned and given a crummy finish? The turning project wasn't over, the turner just stopped. Unfortunately, a lot of turners hate to sand and apply finish. "Sanding is boring" they claim. They do the woodturning part and then slop a little linseed oil on their project and call it good enough. Then they go on to turning some other poor tree into shavings. Remember that the tree gave his life for your project, the least you can do is to do as a memorial to his sacrifice is to a great job of finishing. Doing a good job of finishing seems to be the most neglected part of woodturning.

Why finish? What is the problem we are trying to solve? Well, it might be one of several reasons. There are lots of reasons you might think about.

- . Beauty
- . Rubbed finish
- . Easy to apply
- . Compatibility with the wood you used
- . Wood protection
- . Abrasion resistance
- . Durability
- . Protection from heat
- . Safety

So, you are trying to do a bunch of different things with your finish. Now add to that the hundreds of different woods, each with its own characteristics and you have a mess, er, ah, you have an opportunity to excel. Lots of choices. To meet all those choices, there are hundreds of different finishes on the market. From those hundreds of different finishes, you have to make a choice. You have to pick SOMETHING and use it on YOUR project. How do you make that choice? How do you get the BEST finish from those hundreds?

Ultimately, your choice comes down to opening a can of something and putting it on wood. YOUR success comes down to what someone else put into that can of paint you bought. More BAD news. Behind every can of paint is some guy called a "formulator". He makes the ultimate choice as to what goes into the can of stuff that you bought off the shelf at Woodcraft. How does he decide what to put in the can? Well that is an ugly thing. The less you know about that decision, the happier you may be. If you love tomato juice,

do NOT ever go to a tomato juice cannery and find out what they put into the juice vat. The same is true of a can of finish. The formulator has to make a lot of decisions. All of those decisions are based on stuff like:

1. What his marketing department thinks will sell
2. The cost of each of the ingredients
3. The amount of benefit an additive gives compared to what the additive costs
4. How the federal, state and regional governments air pollution regulations limit solvents and additives.
5. Toxicity
6. Corporate experience with different suppliers

Add to these hundreds of other constraints and you get a mess. That can of finish you buy is one giant compromise. That compromise is reached with little or no consideration of your needs as a woodturner. In my turning hobby, I might use a pint of finish a month. A commercial furniture factory may use 100 gallons a day. The formulator must compromise his finish choices to the big users needs. Hopefully by accident that can of stuff will meet some of your needs also.

So, to heck with that. Let's start a company to make a finish that is designed for woodturners. As a paint formulator myself, I could design a finish for turners needs that would be FANTASTIC. But, I could not sell it in places like San Francisco Bay Area Air Pollution Control District would have a fit over the solvents I would need to use. The product would be banned in Boston. The health authorities would really come down on the hazards of the solvents. You would probably need a gizzard transplant after a year of using it. Fire Chief's would panic over the flammability of the stuff in the paint. Woodturners would turn the stuff down because the price would be very high. Only the ambulance chasing lawyers would love the product because of all the liability cases it would create. So, no matter how great the results might be on a turned product, almost no one would buy it. Our little company would lose money so fast that the annual report would have skid marks on it. Instead of sending the shareholders a dividend, we would send crying towels like the Pittsburgh Steeler fans carry.

The bad news is that you are stuck with whatever the paint formulator put in the can that you buy. The good news is that there are hundreds of choices. If you don't like one, you can try lots of others. Everything is a compromise, but some of those finishes will likely come close to doing what YOU want done. I have given an open threat to our wood turners club AND to this website that I will write some detailed stuff about some of the different kinds of finishes. For NOW, lets take an overview of the mess and see if that helps you figure out what to wipe all over that nice bowl you just sanded.

WAXES: Not a good choice a primary finish. I had to save earwax for over a year to get enough to do my bowl. Not a good choice. Stores offer a lot of waxes, some better than others. However, none of them give good protection to water. Spill that dry Martini on it and it is ruined. Waxes give no durability to wear or heat. So why even mention them? A really good wax can give a really nice appearance to a turning that has already been finished by some other method. Renaissance wax gives a great appearance and does not

show the fingerprints that other waxes do. If you work for the Mafia, you may want to use that product on murder weapons so that your fingerprints don't show.

OILS: Still number one on a lot of turners lists is linseed oil, or Danish furniture polish (a mixture of half turpentine and half boiled linseed oil) Why? Ease of use. Just slop a little of it on and forget about it. Unfortunately it is not much better than the waxes. That wet stuff will still leave uglies on your work. Because of good penetration, oils do give some resistance to solvents. Health considerations are pretty good. The oils aren't too toxic, but if you use a commercial product that has solvents in it, you need to know how toxic the solvents are.

SHELLAC: A lot of wood turners swear by shellac, and the rest of them swear AT shellac. The stuff is sort of a mess. It has a limited shelf life, so the ease of application gets swamped out by having to make it fresh or buying new stuff frequently. It also yellows with age. The most popular solvents for shellac are alcohol, rubbing alcohol and a very dry Martini made with white lightening. The alcohols are not as toxic as many of the other solvents used and are not as flammable. You can extinguish a shellac fire with water as the solvent dissolves. Shellac doesn't have very good water resistance, so that cup of Starbucks will leave rings on your finish. If you spill that a Martini on the shellac finish, kiss it good-bye (the shellac finish as well as the Martini). The alcohol in the drink will attack the shellac. You will have a Shellac Attack. But Shellac gives better wear resistance than the oils or waxes.

NITROCELLULOSE LACQUER: In our club a lot of folks use Deft lacquer and get pretty nice results. IF you are interested in something that will LOOK great, this is a great choice. Put several coats on. Let it dry for a month. Then wet sand with 600 grit wet/dry paper, use pumice and finish with rottenstone and you have a really great gloss finish. You can't beat it. You should not beat it. It will not stand up so good to abrasion, heat, and stuff like that. Oh, gee. Safety considerations are bad news. The solvents used are pretty toxic and smelly. Because they dry very fast, you MUST have very good ventilation. I use them outside where there is LOTS of breeze and I wear a 3M vapor mask. Also, they are VERY flammable and should NOT be used unless your homeowners fire insurance is fully paid up. As you paint around a bowl, you will wind up with a place where the stuff you put on first is sticky and almost dry and the wet lacquer on your brush makes a mess. Brushing it is not so pretty good. So, use your airbrush and you will have better luck. It sprays really nicely.

VARNISH: Well, gee. This is really hard to make much comment about varnish. It is like unicorns, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny. It doesn't really exist. There are so many kinds of varnish that you have a hard time pinning down what we mean. There are polyurethane varnishes, phenolic varnishes, alkyd varnishes, uralkyd varnishes. Add to the confusion the water based as well as solvent-based products. So for an overview, the MOST durable coatings are varnishes. Those beautiful hardwood floors at Park Meadows Mall are solvent-based polyurethane varnish. Folks stomp in out of the salty freshly sanded snowy parking lot and grind the sand, mud and water into the floor. The staff gives it a quick clean up with soapy water and it looks new again. If you apply the finish

with a brush, nothing will look better than varnish. Shellac and lacquer will give a higher gloss when rubbed out with rottenstone, but some varnishes are pretty good. Polyurethane varnish does not rub out well because it is SO tough and abrasion resistant. Pumice and rottenstone just do not wear the surface to a high gloss for the same reason that salt, mud, and sand did not do much to the surface. On the flip side of that, some of the polyurethane varnishes brush on so beautifully that you don't need to do much of a rub out.

Well that gives a broad introduction to the subject of finishes. Yogi told us, "It ain't over until it's over." And this introduction is about over. So, like Yogi said, "Nice Guys Finish Last". With a little effort, turners can change that to "Nice guy's finishes last and last and last and give great appearance to their turned objects".