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Decorative Wood Finishing  
Easing into EIFS  
Upselling



Royal Design Studio Products like Modello Marquetry ([www.modello designs.com](http://www.modello designs.com)) have simplified decorative wood finishing. Here, multiple tones of stain are applied sequentially over a Golden Oak base (top) using peel-off layers of stenciling.

Versatile and inexpensive, decorative wood finishing is in high demand.

# Wooden Wonders

For too many painters, faux finishing still stops at the walls.

"When you talk about decorative finishing, a lot of people still think of it as sponging color onto a wall," said Ronald Layman, who runs The Faux School, in Frederick, Md. "They say, 'I did that back in the '80s.'"

His advice, and that of other pros: Think outside the wall, and focus on other surfaces, like wood. Especially wood. Trim, floors, cabinetry, crown molding, chair rails, ceilings, even boats. And if you ever run out of real wood surfaces, think of the substrates where you can create a brand-new wood look.

"Decorative wood finish can really transform a space," said Kaci Lyford, of Dallas-based Patina Finishes. "I know

a lot of people are saying that faux finishing is going away, but I believe there's still a lot of potential for it."

For professional contractors scratching for new markets in a down economy, decorative wood finishing can be a boon.

### 'Demand is going to increase'

"It's a cost-effective way for people to customize their homes, as things have tightened up," said Melanie Royals of Royal Design Studio, in Chula Vista, Calif. "People are going to be staying where they are because of the slow real estate market, but they're still going to put money into their homes, and this is another way to personalize it for them."

Echoes Layman: "The demand [for decorative wood finishing] is just going to increase. In the past, someone who wanted to change the way their kitchen looked might have run up to the cabinet shop. Today, people are a bit more conscious with their money."

Homeowners are especially going to be looking for finishes that exude elegance, added Barbara Skivington, president of Faux Works Studio, in High Point, N.C. "We're seeing a lot of interest in the deep wood-tone finishes that will add value to the home."

### Starting with stains

Decorative wood finishing offers an endless range of options, from very easy to very complex. The number of techniques you can master—and offer your clients—is limited only by your time and willingness to train and practice, practice, practice.

The simplest finish is polyurethane stain, which changes the tone of a wood surface.

"Some of your customers are going to say all they want is a quick method of finishing their cabinets or woodwork," said Peter Hope, a technical advisor for Cabot Stains, which produces products for exterior and interior applications. "An inexpensive polystain gives you that, as opposed to some other method that is more labor intensive."

Still, even this simple technique requires care.

"The key is that it takes practice to apply this properly," Hope said. "It's easy to run into trouble if you don't have patience. If, for example, you shake it by mistake, and put a lot of air into it, you're going to end up with [imperfections]."

### Got patience?

*Patience* is the key word in this niche.

Joel Sarver, for one, has seen the results of too many quick-and-dirty attempts at wood finishing—usually, when he's called in to fix someone else's botched job. Sarver's Florida-based business, Decorative Wood Finishing, has refinished everything from residential kitchens to \$40 million yachts.

"When you're layering finish over existing finish, going from light to dark, it's very challenging," he says. "You can have all kinds of trouble. You can't just brush the stain on and expect it turn out well."

On one of Sarver's fix-up jobs, the previous contractor had decided to just spray on a dye coat without proper prep, and then apply a final clear coat.

"He tried to cheat, one coat, and we ended up having to strip everything and start over," he recalls.

Instead of going straight to the dye coat in such cases, Sarver sands the surface, wipes it with a wax and grease remover, and then uses a vinyl sealer.

"You need a barrier coat between one finish and the next if you want to avoid failure," he says.

### Prep steps

Like any coating project, the success of a decorative wood finish rises and falls with the prep.

For example, Hope recommends using a wood conditioner when working with a soft species like pine, spruce, oak or poplar.



*Decorative Wood Finishing*  
Staining is not complex, but it takes time and care. Joel Sarver has redone many botched wood jobs. His refinishing projects include yachts in South Florida.

"Soft woods have a high sugar content that prevents coatings from penetrating the cells, producing an uneven finish," he notes.

Contractors can choose an oil-based or water-based conditioner; the choice depends on the look the customer wants, Hope says: "Water-based conditioners are crystal clear; oil-based conditioners give you a yellow patina that will make the end result look a bit more antiqued."

### Finishing tips

For some projects, the next step will be the application of a wiping stain—a stain you apply, leave on for a specific number of minutes, and then wipe off.

Clearly, stains left on longer will darken more. But the timing is much more sensitive than many painters realize, experts say.

"You can take a wood color—say, fruitwood—and, depending on how you use the stain, you can make 50 different colors with one coat of wiping stain," says Hope. "An oil-based stain, you can leave on for as much as 10 minutes.

"I usually start with three minutes, wipe it off, and have my customer look at it. If he says, 'I want it darker,' I'll go on to four."

See **DECORATIVE WOOD** on next page

### DECORATIVE WOOD from last page

Because a few seconds can make a big difference, Hope advises doing a sample spot and having the customer sign off on the tone before continuing.

Finish with a couple clear coats. Hope advises polyurethane if the surface is head height or lower—a chair rail, for example—because those areas need extra protection from touching.

Light sanding between coats will help smooth down the grain. After sanding the first coat, wipe the surface with a tack rag.

### Graining and stenciling

Beyond staining is a world of more complex decorative techniques: masking, stenciling, graining and more.

In well-trained hands, wood graining can give inexpensive wood the exquisite look of rich walnut, oak and more, completely transforming the appearance of baseboards, crown molding or kitchen cabinets. It can even give plaster, steel and other substrates a completely new wood face.

Consumers love wood graining for its ability to deliver incredibly high-end looks at relatively low cost. Because



Faux Works Studio Inc.

Homeowners want deep tones and other elegant finishes that "add value to the home," says Barbara Skivington, of Faux Works Studio in North Carolina.

graining is so popular, and its practitioners still relatively few, painters who can master the technique remain in high demand. (For an in-depth discussion of wood graining, see "Going with the Grain" in the May 2008 issue of *PWC*.)

Also increasingly popular is decorative masking, another faux technique that delivers champagne results at jug-wine costs. Royals' Modello Marquetry Masking System is among the newer products that have made it easier for contractors to create the appearance of intricate inlaid wood tiles.

With Modello Marquetry, a contractor uses a series of patterns that employ sequential masking. While some systems use a series of masks that require extensive taping between steps, Royals' system allows the contractor to peel successive layers of the pattern and apply stain over the entire exposed surface.

### Cash in the cabinet

Decorative finishing of wooden cabinetry is another lucrative tool in the kit of today's skilled painter. Layman recently branched out into cabinetry and is thrilled with the result. And Lyford says the housing slump has actually been a boon to her renovation work, which includes cabinetry.

"Last year, 90 percent of our work was new construction," Lyford said. "But because so many people are having difficulty selling their homes, they're making them

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**DECORATIVE WOOD** from page 26 over. That means the work is far more custom than it is for new construction, where there's far less variety."

Adds Layman: "The possibilities are endless. I'll often work with someone who has built a nice pine cabinet, but they don't want it to have a 'knotty pine' look.

"Not long ago, someone brought me a couple of cabinets that were made of poplar. He'd paid around \$1,000 for them. I finished them for \$5,000, and he turned around to sell them for \$8,000 to \$10,000."

### Rustic upgrade

Layman's process is fairly straightforward. He starts by sanding, then applies a high-quality primer.

"You can't skimp on the primer," he says. "This is the most important step. It's like building a house: If you don't construct the foundation properly, the house is going to shift. You're looking for one that will give you good adhesion for the top coats. I prefer Zinsser 1-2-3 or the XIM product line."

Next comes the artistry. "Let's say you want them to look like a nice 13<sup>th</sup> century piece," Layman says. "We apply a base coat of an eggshell



Signet Painting



Patina Finishes

Custom cabinet finishes are popular and profitable. **Left:** Signet Painting stained, sealed, enameled and sanded these cabinets for an authentic distressed look. **Right:** Patina Finishes "aged" white paint-grade wood beautifully with hand-drawn patterns and multiple applications of paint, glaze and thinner.

paint and let it dry. Then we make a nice cappuccino-colored glaze"—a quart of coffee-colored paint mixed with a gallon of glaze.

Coat the cabinet, and let it begin to dry. But before it fully dries, Layman takes a rag to wipe away the excess, producing a finish that appears rustic and aged.

### High-end makeover

Kaci Lyford used a more elaborate process for a Dallas-area kitchen she recently renovated. The cabinets were white, paint-grade wood. Lyford and her crew did a light sanding, applied contractor-grade oil-based primer, and sprayed them

with a Pittsburgh Paints oil-based paint called Caramel Kiss.

Next, they painted the drawers, the bands around the cabinets, and the door borders black. Once that dried, they used paint thinner to artificially age the coating.

After that, Lyford's artist sketched patterns that were traced onto the doors and facings, then hand-painted in golds, browns and reds. These, too, were wiped with thinner after drying. The final touch was a brown oil glaze to, in Lyford's words, "make them look old and dirty."

### The learning curve

Although such projects can pay off handsomely, they also require an investment in training and extensive practice.

"If you're going to get into this, you're going to have to take your time," says Layman.

Painters should start with a class, after carefully checking the instructor's background and portfolio.

"Demand pictures of large projects they've done," advises Layman. "A lot of people can teach the simple work, but can they execute on a large scale?"

Skivington's advice: "Ask them about the anatomy of the finishes they teach. If all they say is, 'We put a paint tone down, do the wipe, and then add a clear coat'—that's a school for the hobbyist. As a profes-

## Mahogany or Not?

One tricky aspect of wood finishing is knowing what species you're dealing with.

"People sometimes use the specific name of a wood to include a fairly large number of species," says Peter Hope, a technical advisor for Cabot Stains. "For example, often when people say that what they have [in their home] is mahogany, it's actually some other wood, like camber or ipe or tiger wood."

The difference is more than botanical trivia. It can affect the way your coating works. That's why Hope recommends a "feel" test.

"If it feels like wax paper, it's something other than mahogany," he explains. "It's water repellent, and an oil-based coating is not going to work."

Another tip: If you plan to use a penetrating stain, try it on a test area first and monitor the dry time. If it's still wet after the recommended dry time, use a different stain, says Hope. "Some species just won't take an oil-based stain at all."

sional, you want someone who layers, who uses conditioner, barrier coats—multiple coats.”

Classes are just the starting point. Although you may execute a basic technique fairly soon, sophisticated projects and results will take months or years of honing techniques and experimenting with products.



*Modern Masters*

An accent table gets a custom distressed finish with Modern Masters' Decorative Painter's China Crackle System and Dark Enhancer.

“It's going to take time to learn this to the level that you can do it professionally,” says Layman. “But the more you work at it, the better and faster you'll become.

“Remember when you were beginning to paint? You weren't as good at it as you may be now; you weren't fast. In the beginning, you may not earn as much as you'd like—but give it time, and you'll master it.” **pwc**

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#### Wood Finishing: Learn More

- To learn more about faux wood graining, see “Going with the Grain” in the May 2008 issue of *PWC*.

- To learn more about staining and finishing floors, see “Wood Floors: Opportunities Underfoot” in the July-August 2008 issue of *PWC*.

- The National Wood Flooring Association also offers many resources on finishing of floors and other wood at [www.nwfa.org](http://www.nwfa.org).

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