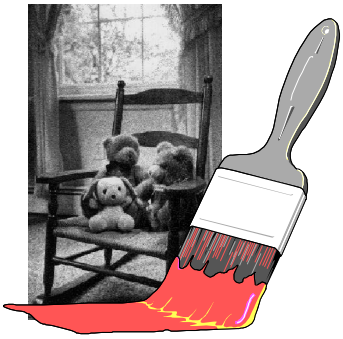

Wood Finishing & Refinishing

Fact Sheet #3

Removing the Old Finish

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Introduction

A successful refinishing job depends upon the care and the thoroughness with which the old finish is removed. Commercial paint removers are the most effective materials available to use in removing old finishes. Read the label to see what kind of finish the paint remover will soften. The heavy-duty or premium grades that soften epoxy will soften the old finish faster and save you time.

Safety Practices

When dealing with potentially harmful paint removing chemicals, there are some safety practices that should be followed:

✓1. Work in a well-ventilated room.
✓2. Store all wood refinishing chemicals away from children and animals.
✓3. Avoid all contact of products with skin and eyes by wearing rubber gloves, old clothes with long sleeves, and glasses.
✓4. Always open the lid of the paint remover slowly to allow pressure to escape. When stored for long periods of time, excessive pressure builds up in the container and opening rapidly may cause the remover to spray the user.
✓5. Never apply finishing chemicals in a room where there is an open flame or a pilot light.
✓6. If at all possible, select a nonflammable paint remover.
✓7. Clean brushes and discard rags soaked with paint remover.

Prior Preparation

Prior to stripping wood furniture, there are some things you should do to get ready:

1. Spread work area with layers of newspaper for protection.
2. Remove hardware such as handles, drawer pulls, knobs, and hinges. A brief soaking of hardware in paint remover will soften the old finish for easy paint removal.
3. If you need to reglue or repair loose joints, then disassemble the wood furniture piece. It makes it a lot easier to strip the corners, edges, and sand when the wood piece is disassembled.
4. Place the furniture at a comfortable height. An old table covered with papers may work.
5. Assemble needed supplies and materials.

Types of Removers

Commercial removers are available in two basic types: (1) gel or paste types; and (2) water-like or liquid. These two types require different methods and tools to strip the old finish. Paste or gel removers are effective in removing the old finish from large with flat surfaces. Liquid is effective in removing the old finish from carvings, grooves, and turnings such as legs and rungs.

Steps in using paste or gel removers:

1. Pour a small amount of remover into a separate can. Seal the lid of the remover container so fumes can't escape.
2. Use an old polyester brush. If you use a natural bristle or nylon brush, the remover could soften the bristles.
3. Apply a thick coat to the surface. Use short strokes in one direction. Don't brush back and forth. Once the remover is on the surface, leave it alone. Start applying the remover at the bottom and work up.
4. Immediately wipe off any remover that drips on other parts of the furniture or stubborn spots will form.
5. Allow remover to work until the old finish softens. The surface will blister and bubble when it has softened.
6. Don't let the remover dry before scraping off with a putty knife.
7. Use a dull putty knife to remove the old softened finish on flat surfaces. Use coarse steel wool to remove the finish that cannot be removed with a putty knife. (See Figure 1, Coarse Steel Wool).
8. Put the sludge into an empty can or newspaper.
9. Rub the flat surface with coarse steel wool and lacquer thinner to remove the excess chemical.
10. Apply more remover as needed. Some old finishes are so thick that several applications are necessary.

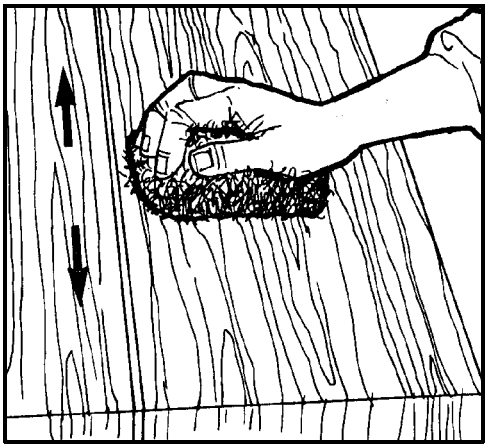

Figure 1. Coarse Steel Wool.

11. Check the label for the appropriate neutralizer. Use a cloth or scrub brush to neutralize the wood piece.
12. Let dry thoroughly and then sand.

Steps in using liquid paint removers:

1. Pour the paint remover into a medium sized plastic container.
2. Place the wood piece into the middle of the container and scrub the old finish off using a soft natural bristle scrub brush.
3. In hard to get at areas, such as carvings, use a stiff toothbrush or suede brush. (See Figure 2, Removing Finish Using Scrub Brush and Liquid Remover.)
4. Keep the old finish wet until it is completely softened or has been removed. The liquid type stripper evaporates rapidly so scrub until the old finish is completely removed.
5. When you think you've removed all the old finish, examine the wood. If the surface is sticky or shiny, some of the old finish still remains. In that case, reapply the remover.
6. After applying remover, check the wood again to see if all the finish is removed.
7. Now you are ready to neutralize the paint remover. Check the label of the liquid remover for the appropriate neutralizer. If you fail to neutralize the paint remover its residue will lift your final finish. If the label of the paint remover gives you a choice between neutralizing with water or a solvent, use the solvent. Water will raise the grain of bare wood.
8. After all of this has been done, let the finish dry thoroughly and then sand. If the surface is free of residue, the dust should be powdery, not dirty and sticky.

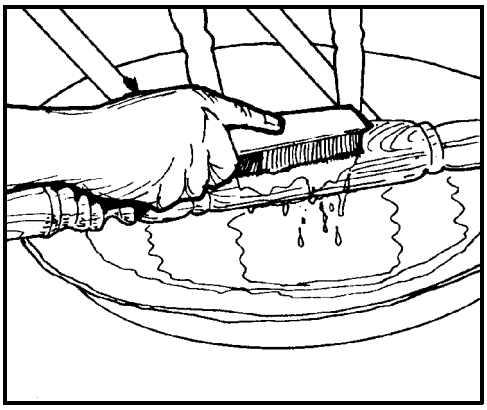

Figure 2. Removing Finish Using Scrub Brush and Liquid Remover

NOTE:

1. If the surface of the bare wood feels waxy or if a furniture polish containing silicone was used on the wood piece, wash the whole surface with gum turpentine or lacquer thinner and steel wool. Allow the turpentine to be in contact with the wood for two or three minutes. Change cloths frequently to prevent the transfer of silicone residue from the cloth back to the wood surface.

2. Clean brushes and rubber gloves with paint thinner. Dispose of all papers, rags, twine, and steel wool in the garbage.

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