

HAND RUBBING WITH PUMICE AND ROTTENSTONE

by Bruce Fairchild.

Pumice powder is an abrasive material used in the application of varnish, shellac, or lacquer to produce a fine hand-rubbed finish. It has obtained by grinding volcanic ash into powders of different degrees of coarseness. Pumice is used for coarse rubbing between coats when building the body of the finish. Use rottenstone for fine polishing, usually only on the final coat.

Pumice is worked with a pad. Different type of pad can be used (cotton, wool, or felt). Felt rubbing pads are available from ¼" to 1" thick in various weaves. The finer the weave the smoother the finish. Coarse rubbing of the undercoat can be done with medium pumice and medium pads. Sprinkle just enough pumice on the work to do the piece. As you run it in, the powder will ground smaller, so if you must add more pumice, remember it will be coarser and scratch up what you have accomplished.

Rottenstone is a very fine powder ground from slate or limestone. It can be worked with a pad for the final finish.

LUBRICANT

A lubricant must be used with pumice and rottenstone because dry powder will cake up and could cause heat or friction damage. Note that water will turn shellac white, so must be avoided in favour of oil when shellac is your finishing material. Through the years several kinds of oil have been in and out of favour. We suggest paraffin oil as a good quality, light oil. If using oil, make a thin mix of pumice and oil to be applied with the pad, or you can soak the pad with oil dip it into the pumice to transfer enough powder to do the piece. If using water, sprinkle some pumice on the surface of the piece then add enough water to make a paste.

TECHNIQUE

With the pad, rub and try to use the same pressure and number of strokes over the whole surface. Avoid using circular motion as this will leave visible scratches. Keep the abrasive wet, keep the pad free from build up, and check the surface often to make sure that you do not rub through. Do not rub too long in one place or the finish will burn from friction or from lack of oil. Be very careful at the corners and edges as it is easier to go through at these spots. Work until a very flat and dull surface is achieved, then clean off the pumice. Oil leaves a film which must be removed with a very soft cloth and dewaxer. For the last application of pumice, using a fine pumice powder

with oil, rub only enough to dull and smooth the finish, then clean it. Wait 48 hours before fine rubbing with rottenstone.

GLUE SIZE TREATMENT

Oil finishes can use veneer to separate from the substrate if contact cement was used as the adhesive. Avoid this problem by treating the veneer with glue size. Prepare glue size by using the mixture of 25% PVA white glue to 75% water. Apply a coat to each side of the veneer and then sandwich it between sheets of paper and plywood, placing wax paper between veneer and paper. Put weight of veneer to keep it flat. Let it dry thoroughly over a few days, but change paper every day. Glue size does not affect finishing, and it strengthens veneer.

FLATTENING VENEER

Applying a glycerine solution to brittle or wrinkled veneer makes it much easier to bond to a substrate. Mix two ounces of glycerine into one litre of water. Apply the solution to both sides of the veneer with a sponge or spray bottle, and then sandwich the veneer between brown paper and plywood. Clamp or apply weight to this set-up as soon as possible. The paper may have to be changed occasionally if it becomes saturated with water. The veneer should be ready for use or bonding after a few days under pressure. Since writing the above paragraph, Paul Armstrong gave a discussion at one of our meetings on the method he uses to straighten veneers. His method is to dampen the veneer with a fine spray mist of water only, then place them in a plastic bag for a couple of days. He then remove the veneers from the plastic bag and repeats the spraying of water only mist and returns them to the plastic bag for a couple more days. Paul advises us he has not had any problem with the black spot using this method.

TRIVIA

Before sandpaper was developed in 1860, wood was often smoothed by fine sand under a piece of damp, soft leather.