

COLORING WOOD

Presentation by Alfred Schembri

Enhancing the turnings and showing the wood grain to its best effect is generally achieved by adding dyes or stains. This presentation will detail the process of multi-layering dyes and the steps to a great end result.

Supplies

- Color Wheel (as an aid)
- Sand Paper of various grits
- Dyes (various choices)
- Lacquer Spray or other finishing media
- Denatured Alcohol

Stains vs. Dyes

The difference between stains and dyes is that stains do not penetrate as deep as dyes and therefore are not recommended when sanding layers of dyes to apply multiple colors. Also, dyes are more transparent than stains and therefore will allow the grain to show through.

Any wood can be dyed however, cherry, maple and figured wood are good candidates. Ash may also be a good candidate for dyeing if a liming wax or gilt cream is used to enhance the grain.

Wood Preparation

Sanding is of the utmost importance as any minute scratches or tear out are amplified when applying dyes. Always start with the roughest grit required to make a uniform scratch pattern, followed by sanding with higher grits up to 50% of the previous grit to a minimum of 400 grit. Example, first pass 120 grit, second pass 180 grit, third pass 220, fourth pass 320, and finishing with 400 grit. Wood sanded to high grits will absorb dye at a lesser rate than wood sanded with lower grits.

Applying the Dye

Dyes can be applied by wiping, brushing or spraying. I use Mason jars to mix and store dyes. Woodturnings can have either a single color or different colors layered over each other. You can start with dark colors first and finish with the lightest or vice versa.

The dye should always be applied on raw wood with no finish or sealer. Also, the dyes can be applied with the lathe spinning or stationery. When applying different layers of color the dye can be feathered or lightened by rubbing with a paper towel moistened with water or alcohol depending on the diluting media used.

Wood can also be dyed by applying dye from the inside out. Since dye is absorbed at a different rate between side and end grain, a spectacular look can be achieved by controlling the amount of dye being absorbed. For this to work the wood should have a uniform thickness of not more than 3/8".

By using dyes, one can change the look of a piece from bland to spectacular because dye is absorbed more on end grain than on side grain therefore, one can enhance the grain.

To ensure black dye is as black as it can be, it helps to use dark blue dye first before applying the black dye. This will minimize the bronze look when using black dye by itself.

I like to use weak mixtures of dye as it is a lot easier to apply more coats if a darker color is preferred. It is a lot harder to lighten a darker color once applied. Normally, distilled water or denature alcohol is used to dilute the dye. For the base color, I start with a weak mixture of dye and apply it all over the turning. If I am looking for a darker effect I continue to apply additional dye. Additional colors are added to the turning to add depth and to enhance the grain. Therefore, when the base color is dry the areas receiving the second color are sanded off to achieve the desired effect, and the next color is applied only to the sanded area. Dappling the second and further colors will help in making sure that the base color is not altered and the second and future colors are only applied where needed.

Note, to expedite the drying process a heat gun or hair dryer may be used, however, keep the wood moving to avoid cracking or warping.

When that layer of dye is completely dry and before applying the next color, burnish the wood with a paper towel to remove all traces of loose dye.

This process will get your piece ready for the finishing which will make your turning 'pop'.

Finishing

Once all the colors are applied and are completely dry, the finish of choice should be sprayed on. This will avoid the risk of the colors blending into each other if the finish is wiped or brushed on.

Grain Enhancement

Dyes can be further enhanced by adding liming wax or gilt cream. This is done after the final finish is applied. Apply with finger and remove excess by wiping with a paper towel dipped in Danish oil.

Closing

Have fun doing this and experiment on your own with colors and techniques. This presentation should provide a good basis for dyeing and enhancing your turnings.