

Coloring Wood

by Jimmy Clewes

After turning your piece, the coloring process can be started. It is most important to sand the piece correctly. The first sanding, as with any finishing process, is in my mind the most important. I usually start with 180 grit but this depends on the finish you have from the tools, a cut surface will be better than a scraped surface. You must ensure that the surface to be coloured is flawless and any tearout or disturbed grain is eradicated. Remember that if you are using a rippled or burr wood (both of which are most desirable and gives an aesthetically pleasing result) the grain may be running in different directions so inspect the surface very closely. If there are any flaws on the surface they will show up when you put on the first color. Continue to sand through the grits, 220, 240, 320 without missing one out down to 400 grit. Remember that if there is no tearout after 180 grit then all you are doing is removing the abrasions made by the previous abrasive.

The colors that I prefer to use are a pre-mixed; alcohol based and are available from Chestnut Finishes. The advantage of using these colors is that they are lightfast, which means that they stay bright and vibrant, they are also spirit based and therefore dry quicker, or can be "flashed off" using a lighter or match. To speed operations up or to "fix" the colors. (Please exercise the necessary safety precautions, water etc.) Being spirit based allows for blending or mixing on the surface of the wood, by applying alcohol neatly with a spray or in a more controlled manner with a cloth or sponge soaked in alcohol. The colors also have a 5% shellac content, which binds the color to the alcohol. This will aid the finishing process, as with each coat of color the wood will become more progressively sealed, therefore the later colors soak in less.

Choice of colors, a basic knowledge of colors is useful but not essential, the three primary colors of blue, yellow and red will play a large part. Depending on which colors you mix together will give you different results. Blue and yellow make green, red and yellow = orange, red and blue = purple. The colors available from Chestnut finishes are black, blue, red, green, yellow, purple and orange.

The three colors I like to use are blue, green, and yellow or blue, purple, and yellow. Sometimes I may add a red.

For example, the first color I would use would be blue, this can be applied with a brush, cloth or sponge and covers the whole surface. Since the color is alcohol based it will dry in under a minute. When dry, sand back with 320 grit to remove some of the blue. Depending on how much of the blue you remove will determine the end result, in that the less you remove the darker the whole piece will be on completion. Next, I would apply the green. This color will take

to the areas more where the blue has been removed. If you are using rippled wood, such as sycamore or maple the blue stain will penetrate more in the short grain and therefore some of the color will remain when the long grain next to it will be exposed. The green could be applied to the surface in a dappled or varied manner and does not necessarily need to cover the whole surface. Cut this back with 400 grit again to a degree where you will gain lighter wood to take the next color of yellow. The yellow can be used sparingly and again could be applied in a dappled manner. The yellow will lighten parts of the green and make some of the blue areas a different shade of green. The final sanding should be with 600, 800, 1000-grit abrasive. This will prepare the surface for the gloss spray finish. If you need to reduce the amount of lightness caused by the application of yellow, just cut this back with 600 grit. Remember that the blue and the green coats seal the wood twice therefore the yellow will not have penetrated as far.

Other techniques I have used to blend the 3 colors together are to use a sponge soaked in alcohol or to spray the surface with alcohol. If spraying keep the piece rotating in order to stop "drips" or "runs" from occurring. The colors can be "fixed" by igniting the alcohol and rotating the piece by hand. The alcohol burns out quickly and also burns on the surface of the wood and should not burn the turning. ***Please consider the safety aspect of this procedure and take any necessary precautions. I accept no responsibility for burnt down workshops!***

The final finish is a spray gloss. I like to use a pre-catalyzed lacquer and apply several coats, cutting back between each cured coat with 1500-grit abrasive. This will build up a flawless finish. With experience and trying different finishes, oils etc I have found that there is more depth and the color detail is far superior with a spray gloss finish. As a point of interest while demonstrating at the Craft Supplies USA symposium in Provo, Utah I used a great product called Masters Magic Spray Lacquer, kindly supplied by Craft Supplies USA which is conveniently in a can! You should finish up with a flawless finish, with the colors bright and vibrant. Coloured, rippled wood can have an almost iridescence look. (Masters Magic Spray Lacquer -Product # 299-0001)

Coloring can be done on or off the lathe, but I usually try to do all the coloring on the lathe as it is supported in the chuck and is more easily maneuverable.

Woodturning is a very creative craft and coloring is a very creative process. So experiment and enjoy the creativity and experience of coloring turned wood.



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