

Hand Rubbed



I often see the phrase "hand rubbed finish". Can you tell me what kind of finish it is and how to do it?



At its best, "hand rubbed" means "brought to beautiful smoothness through manual labor performed with care and attention". In advertising language it rarely means anything more specific than "real nice". "Rubbing out", in the context of wood finishing, is synonymous with "polishing". Generally, it's the process of making a cured finish (practically any kind of finish, most commonly a surface film such as lacquer or varnish) very smooth by rubbing with fine to extremely fine abrasives, often buffing with lambswool, cloth or felt as a final step. Surface smoothness has everything to do with the sheen and feel of a finish, and a well rubbed finish almost always gives a better impression than a finish left as is after hand or spray application. Rubbing out by hand, just like hand sanding on bare wood, can burn up plenty of elbow grease, and doing it very well requires both care and perseverance. Which is why most polishing, especially the commercial variety, is done with machines instead.

Traditional rubbing abrasives include powdered pumice (very fine) and rottenstone (extremely fine) used with a lubricant such as mineral oil to form polishing slurries. Ready-to-use synthetic rubbing compounds and polishing supplies (including extremely fine sandpapers up to 2500 grit) are readily available these days from suppliers like Highland Hardware and where automotive finishes are sold.

Rubbing out a finish calls for a very careful touch to keep from cutting away too much material. When you're rubbing oil-based varnishes, paints and water-based finishes, you don't want to cut through the topmost layer into prior coats; the edges of the hole in the top coat, called "witness lines", can show like a faint water stain, and can be difficult or nearly impossible to polish out. The top coat of finish may be only a couple of thousandths of an inch thick, so you don't have a lot of room for error.

Just as when sanding bare wood, you want to do all the hard work ("hard" being a relative term) with your first abrasive, so that each subsequent abrasive has only to polish out the tiny scratches left by the one before. And just like sanding wood, it will take about twice as long as you wish to be sure each abrasive has done its job thoroughly, leaving none of its predecessor's scratches to mar the perfection of your final polish.

Move your abrasives in a pattern similar to that of a random orbit sander: small circles moving in larger orbits all over the surface of the piece, averaging in all the work and creating no uniform scratches or sharp distinctions between one polished area and another.

Technically, of course, smooth is smooth, and nothing about the condition itself values one way of achieving it more than another. Using an electric polisher can certainly produce as smooth a finish as you could wish (check the shine on a new car, for instance), but speed isn't necessarily the only worthwhile thing about rubbing out. The care you exercise and the intimacy with which you come to know a beautiful piece of wood as you rub it out by hand may be even more rewarding than the result of your labor. If that sounds good to you, give it a try.

