



Colour A Contentious Topic



At the critique back in January, several topics arose for discussion, some of which were followed up in the February newsletter. One subject that was far too broad to do so, was the use of colour in woodturning. With meetings cancelled for the foreseeable future, now seems an ideal time to explore this medium.

There is a lot of controversy over whether wood should be coloured. Wood has its own natural colour and beauty and does not need our intervention. Added colour can disguise the nature of the material detracting from its inherent qualities. Of course, a great deal depends on the design and application of the colour. As woodturning has gained in popularity as a hobby and art form, enhancements of all sorts are being developed and colour is high up on that list. Used with discretion and subtlety, colour can add another dimension to our work. For many professionals producing gallery work, it is an important aspect of their work.

When I first started turning I was adamant that I liked to see the natural beauty of wood and had no intention of adding colour of any sort. That did not last long! In order to learn the techniques of boxmaking I followed a project by Mark Sanger in Woodturning magazine. It was a painted Japanese style box, red with gold cherry blossom, which just took my fancy. From then on artistic genes took over and whilst I agree it would be sacrilege to cover a beautiful grain or pattern of timber, I have to admit I find the decorating process on a more bland or everyday wood, brings as much enjoyment as the turning.



My own take on Mark Sanger's project coloured with blue acrylic car spray paint and gold hand painted butterflies.

If you decide to experiment with colour where do you start?

There are three main groups of colouring products, inks and paints, waxes and creams and dyes and stains. Inks and paints tend to be for surface decoration and being generally opaque will obliterate any grain pattern. Waxes and creams tend to be used in open grain timbers where they remain between fibres after the surplus material is removed from the surface of the wood and so accentuate the grain. Dyes and stains are absorbed into the wood and being transparent, allow the grain pattern to remain visible whilst taking on the colour.

Let us first explore waxes and creams. There is a large range of proprietary finishes available from companies such as Liberon and Chestnut.. You will be familiar with liming wax, verdigris wax and ebonising wax. Then there is a whole range of metallic creams in various colours. It does not stop there as there are many other options. Clear waxes can be tinted with spirit based powder or liquid dyes. Coloured waxes such as shoe polish can be used, so one can experiment without breaking the bank, particularly as a little goes a long way.

Waxes can be used to achieve a variety of effects but the most common is for accentuating the natural grain pattern of the wood. Choose a timber with open grain such as oak, ash, chestnut or elm. Turn your piece and remove every blemish and scratch as these will be highlighted along with the grain. Sand well.

The grain can be opened more by using a bronze liming brush. A base colour may be applied to contrast with the wax, a popular choice is black giving an ebonised effect with a gilt cream as the grain filler. The cream or wax is worked in over the surface in circular movements, allowed to dry for ten minutes or so then surplus



removed by rubbing gently with a paper towel soaked in a mineral oil such as Danish oil. The lathe can be run slowly to remove excess and then the work is buffed with a dry cloth.

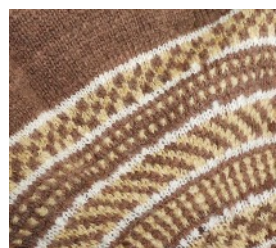
This process can also be used over textured work. If you refer back to the newsletter of December 2018 Andy Coates demonstrated the use of a verdigris finish on a textured bowl. He made his own finish which produced a real verdigris covering. You can access this article through the club website if you no longer have your copy.

Moving on to dyes and stains, these come in three types, spirit based, water based and oil based.

Spirit dyes can be applied directly and do not raise the grain. Water based products raise the grain so this will have to be done before using them. Apply cold water, allow it to dry then cut back with a fine abrasive. The dye can then be applied as required. It can be helpful to wet the wood prior to using the dye in order to achieve an even application. Oil stains are used in a similar way to spirit stains. Wood stains may be in several forms including a ready to use liquid, concentrated liquid or powders to mix yourself. Waterbased stains are probably more versatile as you can use any finish over them whereas some finishes will dissolve spirit or oil products.



Textured bowl with a verdigris finish.



Some colours from natural materials

There are other dyes which can be used including fabric dyes and homemade dyes using natural products such as plants and onion skins along with mordants, but this is another topic in its own right. Although I have never used them on wood, I have in the past, dyed a lot of wool using plant material so please get in touch if you want to have a go at making your own dyes. With certain woods, the shavings you make can themselves be used for dyestuffs.

Natural dye colours are nearly always sympathetic and subtle which would compliment wood.

A naturally occurring stain in wood is produced by a reaction with tannin. This is present in certain hardwoods, particularly oak and also chestnut and others to a varying degree. The tannin reacts with iron and water to produce a deep blue black stain. Referring back to Andy Coates demonstration, he showed the trick of adding an iron material such as wire wool or old nails to vinegar to produce a similar stain. Stains and dyes can be applied by brush, pad or sprayed. Les Thorne applied stain using an airbrush when demonstrating to the club, see newsletter June 2017.

Whichever stain you use it is very important to test it on similar wood first. The same stain will have variation of colour depending on the qualities of the timber. It is also important to have a perfect finish as stains are transparent and will highlight scatches and faults as these tend to be more porous than the surrounding area.

Whatever your inclination or skill levels do experiment and give some of these techniques a go. You may be pleasantly surprised.



Les Thorne's textured and stained box

Part two '**Paint and Ink**' will follow in the May issue, covering these products and application including the use of airbrushes.

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Meetings

Sadly meetings are cancelled for the time being due to Covid-19. Hopefully you are all well and busy in your workshops turning lots of projects to bring in when meetings resume.