



French polishing

Louise Biggs take us step-by-step through an essential restorer's technique that is still applicable to furniture finishing today

The origin of French polishing dates back to 17th- and 18th-century France and became a widespread way of finishing from around 1720/1750, more commonly known as the Georgian period. It is not generally used on open grain timbers such as oak (*Quercus robur*), but is very well suited to close grain timbers such as walnut (*Juglans regia*) and mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*). Providing the surface is sound, French polish will create a sealed barrier against moisture and dirt that is pretty resilient if treated with respect. That said, moisture trapped within the wood will cause problems, cold and damp conditions will create a bloom on the polished surface and dust, of course, the greatest enemy, will quickly ruin a surface that's being polished.

One of the greatest benefits is that you do not require any very expensive equipment for French polishing, unlike spray finishes. With the exception of some good quality polishing mops and artist/pencil brushes, once you have the products, most of the equipment consists of wadding and cloths.

What you will need:

- Oil stain
- Shellac sanding sealer
- Plaster of Paris
- Boiled linseed oil
- Pale polish
- Red and black polish
- Earth pigment
- Methylated spirits
- Tinted wax
- Polishing mops
- Fine artist brushes
- Grey skin wadding
- Fine cloth
- Muslin
- Glass containers
- '0000' wire wool
- Soft towelling rag



Materials and equipment for French polishing

As with any form of finishing ‘practice makes perfect’ and there is more than one way of polishing. The best way to improve French polishing skills is to take a prepared piece of timber or even a veneered board offcut and go through the stages. Test pieces give you the opportunity to try the variety of polishes available and to see the different tones they create on alternative timbers.

I learnt many years ago, while still at college, that this quickly highlighted the flaws in my technique but it has also, over the years, given me the chance to try out different techniques and tips from polishers I have met along the way. It is still something I try to do, time permitting, especially when I have read something new as I can go for long periods without polishing, depending on what type of work comes through my workshop. The terminology and stages that follow are the best way I can describe the methods I was taught to French polish but hopefully they will help you on your way.

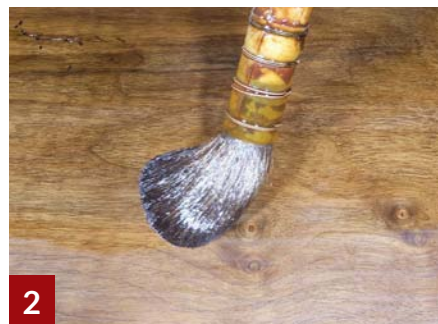
1 Prepare your timber for polishing down to 240 grit. Using a piece of grey skin wadding, stain the timber with oil stain – you can also mix the stain colours. The wadding, available from polishing suppliers, tends to hold the stain without soaking it up and drying, which allows the stain to be applied easily with an even coverage. Suitable protective gloves should be worn and allow 24 hours to dry.

2 Decant some shellac sealer into a jar and once the stain is dry, apply two coats of sealer using a polishing mop. You don’t need to denib before applying either coat of sealer but you need to allow the first coat to dry thoroughly before applying the second.

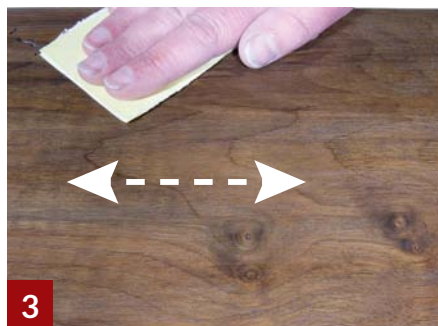
3 Next, you need to denib the surface using 320 grit abrasive, going across the surface with the grain direction at all times. You also need to be careful and aware of any corners and edges, so as not to cut through the sealer and stain. ➤



1



2



3

Making a French polishing rubber



1. Fold a square of white wadding over to form a triangle sandwich



2. By pulling the sides in to form wings you can see the shape needed



3. Unfold, wrap the cotton over it, refold as in step 2, twist the spare material to tighten the rubber and grip firmly

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOUISE BIGGS

Denibbing

Between coats, the surface can be denibbed if required using 320 or finer grit paper, which will also flatten the surfaces. Extreme care must be taken not to cut back too heavily or to overwork any single area. Where edges and mouldings are present, be very careful not to cut back aggressively on these edges as you can very quickly cut through the layers of polish.



4 To fill the grain, proprietary grain fillers are available but the traditional method is to use plaster of Paris and this is the way I grain fill restoration pieces. Put some plaster of Paris in a suitable container and, using some wet muslin cloth dipped into the plaster, apply into the grain in a tight circular motion until you achieve an even coverage.

5 Leave the plaster of Paris to dry for 24 hours before carefully cutting back with 320 grit abrasive in the direction of the grain; this will allow for the excess plaster to be removed

without cutting into the sealed surface and creating a patchy surface.

6 Remove any remaining dust from the plaster with a tack-cloth; this will leave a clean surface with the flecks of plaster within the grain. Tack-cloths are effective as being impregnated with a resin means they collect all the dust without depositing it back onto the surface you're working on.

7 To colour the plaster, wipe over the surface in a circular motion, with a pad of muslin soaked in boiled linseed oil. This is used in preference to raw linseed oil as it has a drier additive, which helps to speed up the drying process.

8 After leaving it for a few moments, remove the excess oil using a piece of cotton cloth wiped with the grain direction. You can then leave the work to dry.

9 Brush the first coat of polish on using a polishing mop.



In this instance, I used pale polish but different coloured polishes can be used to obtain different results, depending on whether the timber is light or dark.

10 The surface I was working on had a small amount of worm damage that had been filled when the surfaces were prepared for polishing. To deal with this, use localised colouring out, which is also referred to as 'picking out', using a fine-tipped artist brush with a blend of red and black polish and a small amount of earth pigment; this will give the mix the yellow tone required.

Suppliers

Liberon
Web: www.liberon.co.uk

Rest Express
Web: www.restexpress.co.uk

W.S. Jenkins Wood Finishes
Web: www.wsjenkins.co.uk



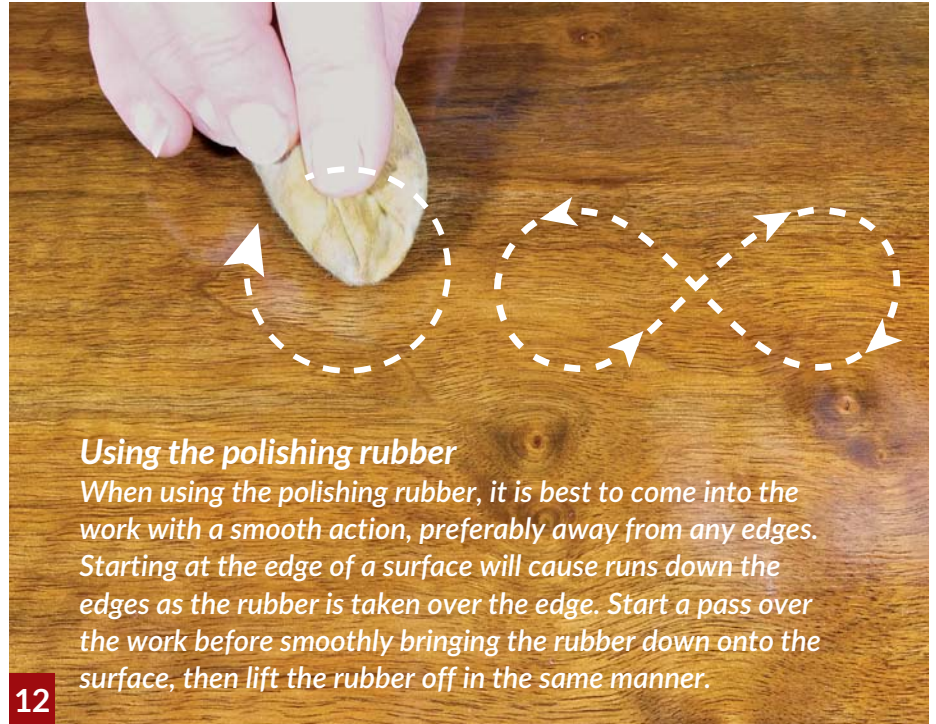
11 Areas where the stain has not taken quite so deeply will also need to be toned into the surrounding areas in the same way. The colour can be mixed on a piece of glass as shown or in a small glass container, depending on how much is required.

12 Once the colouring out has thoroughly dried, body up the surfaces using a polishing rubber – a fine cloth over grey skin wadding – and pale polish. Work the surfaces in a circular motion, although a figure of eight motion can also be used. As the layers of polish are built up, gradually move the rubber round to run in the same direction of the grain until you achieve your desired depth of shine. If desired, white mineral oil can be used at this stage to aid the smooth flow of the rubber and increase the depth of shine a little quicker.

13 Once you have achieved the desired depth of shine, it's time to carry out the 'stiffing' stage. This involves mixing 50% pale polish with 50% methylated spirits, making several passes over the surface with straight strokes in the grain direction. The aim of this stage and the next is to slowly lift any white mineral oil from the surface if you used any.

14 You need to carry out the 'spiriting off' stage in the same way with a cleaned-out old polishing rubber, but this time it will be charged with 100% methylated spirits. You must ensure to take care not to cause any lines on the surfaces where the pass across the surface overlaps with the previous one or to have the rubber too wet, as this will lead to burning the polish off the surface. This stage should also lift any remaining oil from the surface.

If mineral oil has not been used on the surface, then the stiffing and spiriting off stages are not so critical. I tend to follow through the stages



Using the polishing rubber

When using the polishing rubber, it is best to come into the work with a smooth action, preferably away from any edges. Starting at the edge of a surface will cause runs down the edges as the rubber is taken over the edge. Start a pass over the work before smoothly bringing the rubber down onto the surface, then lift the rubber off in the same manner.



completely regardless of whether I've used oil or not.

15 Once the surface has hardened off, it must be wired and waxed. I used a tinted wax on a pad of '0000' wire wool, which was taken over the surfaces in straight strokes with the grain with an amount of pressure to slightly cut back the shine.

16 When the wax has dried for 20 minutes or so, you can buff the surfaces up using some soft cotton towelling, still working with the grain.

Louise Biggs

Having completed her City and Guilds, Louise trained for a further four years at the London College of Furniture. She joined a London firm working for the top antique dealers and interior designers in London, before starting her own business designing and making bespoke furniture and restoring furniture.

Web: www.anthemion-furniture.co.uk

