



Conserve O Gram

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Waxing Furniture And Wooden Objects

The application of a paste wax to clear finishes provides a protective barrier over the old or original finish of museum furniture and wooden objects. Wax helps protect the finish from abrasion by dust and handling. It also forms a protective layer in case of an accidental splashing by water. In most cases wax will create a more level surface and higher sheen, thus changing the appearance. Therefore, the intended use of the object (e.g., interpretive, research, exhibition), must be considered before deciding to wax.

Apply paste wax only to stable, clear finishes, such as shellac, lacquer and varnish. Do *not* apply paste wax to objects that are unfinished (bare wood) because the wax will penetrate into the pores of the wood and will be nearly impossible to remove. When waxing a finish for the first time, test the wax in an inconspicuous area to determine if the solvent in the wax softens the finish. Waxes recommended for use in museum collections are formulated with weaker organic solvents (e.g., turpentine and/or mineral spirits). In most cases it is best to avoid waxes with the stronger solvents (e.g., xylene and toluene) because they can damage some finishes and are more of a health hazard.

Apply only paste waxes to museum objects. Most liquid and aerosol polishes contain silicones which could be harmful to the finishes of museum objects. (See *Conserve O Gram* 7/6.)

Frequency of waxing will depend on environmental factors such as dust, relative humidity and light. In a furnished historic structure, most objects will require rewaxing

every one to four years while objects in exhibit cases may only require rewaxing at ten-year intervals. As a rule, rewaxing is not necessary as long as the existing wax layer can be buffed to a sheen. In unusual circumstances where museum objects are used or can be touched, waxing (which forms a protective barrier) may be required on a more frequent basis.

Always clean the finish before a new wax film is applied. (See *Conserve O Gram* 7/1.)

Apply the wax sparingly. Too much wax can result in a sticky surface that attracts dust and dirt. The wax can be applied with a clean cotton cloth, first rubbing in a circular motion and then rubbing along the grain. After 30 to 60 minutes drying time, buff the wax out, using a clean cotton cloth. If the luster is uneven or additional protection is required, repeat the procedure. Remember, it is preferable to apply two thin coats rather than a single thick coat.

On carved and irregular surfaces, apply the wax with a small soft brush, such as a toothbrush. After drying, buff it out with a soft fiber brush, such as a shoe brush. Tape foam padding (e.g., weather stripping) to the wooden ends of the brush to avoid damaging the objects while buffing.

When waxing the wooden elements of upholstered furniture, avoid wiping wax on the upholstery. Sheets of polyester film (i.e., Mylar®) or similarly protective materials can be laid over the upholstered edge to help protect it during waxing. Wax applied in an environment with excessive heat or relative humidity will sometimes cloud up or whiten. If this occurs,

the wax can easily be removed with mineral spirits. Rewax the object once the environmental problems have been corrected.

Light-colored waxes will sometimes leave whitish specks in the wood pores and in the recesses of carving on darker finishes. Usually this condition will not appear until the solvent of the wax has evaporated completely, which could be several weeks. The specks can be removed with a wood pick. An alternative would be to use a pigmented wax over a darker finished wood (e.g., walnut and mahogany) and a natural or light-colored wax over lighter finished wood (e.g., maple and pine.)

There are a number of good paste waxes on the market containing no silicone, including Staples[®], Butchers[®], Johnson[®], Goddard's Cabinet Makers Wax, Trewax, Antiquax, and Behlen Blue Label. Renaissance Wax or micro-crystalline wax, commonly used for museum objects, is a highly water-resistant wax.

However, it can be difficult to buff to an even luster on large surfaces. It is more appropriate for use on the finish of smaller wood objects, particularly those that incorporate other types of materials (e.g., farm tools made of both wood and metal).

The majority of the waxes mentioned above contain the ingredients carnauba, beeswax, synthetic waxes, a carrier solution (e.g., paraffin), and solvents (e.g., mineral spirits and turpentine). For conservation purposes, each of these is reversible because they can all be removed with mineral spirits. (See *Conserve O Gram 7/1*.)

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