

Restoring and Refinishing Furniture

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In a world where many things are cheaper and more disposable, finding ways to reinvigorate an old piece of furniture or thrift-store find is a great way to keep things out of the landfill and add a special piece to your home. Whether you make it a completely new piece or just highlight what it once was, there are many ways to improve your furniture piece.



Restoration is meant to re-establish the potential unity of an art object, as much as this is possible, without committing an artistic or historical false, and without eliminating the traces left by time.

If you have a piece of furniture that you enjoy and want to restore, do-it-yourself is the way to go! If you have a very valuable piece, you may want to seek out a professional restoration. Refer to “The Furniture Bible” by Christophe Pourny. Additionally, identifying the time-period and materials used to make it will help you identify, care for, and respect what you own as well as who made it.

Conserve, Restore and Refinish

There are three categories of work often referred to that can be done to rejuvenate old furniture: refinishing, restoration and conservation.

- Conservation involves the preservation of original material in its current condition. The primary goal is to stabilize the piece and preserve the finish, surface, structure and design
- Restoration takes conservation a step farther, includes repair and remanufacturing of broken pieces, veneers and carvings, and is typically reserved for quality antiques or family heirlooms with a monetary or sentimental value that would be improved by the work.
- Refinishing involves stripping away the existing finish, preparing the bare wood, staining the piece, if desired, and adding several layers of new finish.

Sometimes these terms can be used interchangeably when referring to furniture and homes, so make sure to reach the context of the use of these words.

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Techniques

Conservation

Conservation for personal use is mostly cleaning an item to the desirability of displaying or using the piece of furniture. This technique is the easiest (and cheapest) way to put an item back into use. The most important piece of conservation is to take it slowly and only try small, non-visible spots first to make sure it will hold up to cleaning.

Restoration

Restoration is the process that is a step beyond conservation where you start by cleaning the items but then continue to repair or restore it to how it looked as an original. Restoring an existing antique finish can sometimes be even less expensive than refinishing, with the added bonus of preserving the market value of the antique.

Restoring an original finish involves cleaning and renewing it to take away water stains or surface scuffs, but it shouldn't take the finish off down to bare wood. The distinction is that you can take away some of the finish to make it look new, but do not use harsh refinishing techniques. You want to highlight the original beauty, while also bringing it back to life.

Refinishing

Refinishing also has a wide range of effort from a few coats of chalk paint to professional paint sprayers and gold gilding. For the sake of ease in this beginner lesson, we will focus mostly on the lower effort refinishing with chalk paint, which is the best introduction to refinishing furniture. After you gain confidence, you may want to move to a more professional finish, but chalk paint may surprise you!

What is chalk paint?

Chalk-paint is a calcium carbonate paint, which means the main component is chalk! One of the best parts of chalk paint is that it works on almost all surfaces and often helps smooth out knicks and dings. Another benefit of chalk paint is that it requires very little

preparation in comparison to other paints and can be sealed or finishing in my different ways. Lastly, chalk paint is water-based so you can clean your brushes with soap and water instead of mineral spirits. The main drawback of chalk paint is its price; however, one quart will typically go a long way for a piece of furniture.

Cabinet example:

Below is an example of wooden kitchen cabinets with a DIY refinishing using chalk paint in a small house in West Virginia. Cabinets were cleaned, painted in two coats of chalk paint and finished with a semi-gloss finish. This project was completed in approximately 10 hours, including removal and reinstallation of hardware and doors.



Home cabinets finished with gray chalk paint above, before painting below.

Remember that you are conserving, restoring or refinishing these items for personal use, so it is up to you. The process for restoring items for museums is much more intensive and specific. However, you can DIY for some wonderful personal-use items!

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