

# Restoring and Refinishing Furniture

Alex Mathias, WVU Extension Agent – Grant County

## Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn to identify the focus of DIY projects to properly move forward with a restoration.
- Participants will understand what resources are needed to help with individual restoration projects.
- Participants will be able to complete a simple furniture restoration with this information.

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 artist 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.

– continued –

- 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.

### **Here are a few questions to help you decide which route you would like to take:**

Do you want to show off original paint and finish or maintain the integrity of a true antique? Do you mostly want to clean it well? You would choose conservation.

Do you want to upgrade a sentimental or family piece? Do you want it to look more like it did when it was new? Do you want it to be back to its original functionality? You would choose restoration.

Do you want a piece to look new or updated? Do you want it to be a difference color or difference finish or more sturdy to be in everyday use? You would choose refinishing.

## **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.

The general process:

1. Situate the piece somewhere ready for cleaning.
2. Locate several different cleaning tools, such as cloths, rags, soft brushes (large and small), as well as small tools that will help with crack and crevices, like toothpicks, or tools for cleaning small areas, and some light cleaning supplies and polishing materials.
3. Start by dusting the item to remove as much dirt and dust before using water.
4. Once dusted, begin slowly cleaning item, making sure it can handle light water and soap.
5. Use tools to clean out cracks, crevices and corners.
6. Place items for use and continue to clean lightly.

### **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.

The general process:

1. Situate the piece somewhere ready for heavy cleaning.
2. Decide if you want to replace any parts with similar originals (i.e., with a latch that you found online that matches the old, broken latch).

3. Begin the same cleaning process as conservation.
4. Once it has been fully cleaned, repair broken pieces with wood glue or other material-based glues, lightly sand any unusual roughness and make sure it feels usable.
5. Decide if the piece needs new sealant, stain, etc., to be restored to use – the level of restoration depends on your preference!

## 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! It is more like primitive paints, before modernity brought forward more durable paints we know today. As DIY projects have grown in popularity, chalk paint has seen a resurgence in use. One of the best parts of chalk paint is that it works on almost all surfaces and often helps smooth out knicks and dings. It comes in a large variety of colors. 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.

The general process of painting:

1. All the techniques start with cleaning, and refinishing is no different. Start by dusting, then clean with light soap and water using a cloth or soft brush. If there are spots



with grease or difficult dirt, you may use a degreaser or other light cleaning product. Don't use anything that's too heavy or may keep paint from adhering. Allow furniture to fully dry from cleaning.

2. Remove any hardware or take apart any doors, drawers, etc. Make sure to label items in tape on the back so they do not get mixed up when reinstalling.
3. Select a brush that is right for your project. A foam brush will give a different texture than a small brush, and both have different textures than a roller. Try them out on a small, discreet part of the furniture piece to see which one is right for you.
4. Do a single coat of paint and let dry. Chalk paint dries quickly compared to other paints, so you may be able to continue painting sooner than you think.
5. Complete coats until you happy with the final product. Older or "thirstier" wood may take several coats.
6. Select a finish. You can use chalk paint wax finish or another sealant depending on the desired look. Try a few out in a small area to make sure you are happy with it before you seal it. You can also leave it unsealed if you like the look, but it may wear quickly.



### Cabinet example:

At right, 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.

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!

### Put It to Use

1. Have members bring in small pieces or photos of furniture they would like to conserve, restore or refinish. Talk about which method they would prefer.
2. Select a project and work on it as a group. Maybe a local community area needs a piece of furniture looked after. Work on it as a club. See the progress.
3. Have a member talk about their experience with older or antique furniture and talk about the processes they used.
4. Take a trip antiquing together!



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

### Resources

Howard, Amy. (2018). *Rescue, Restore, Redecorate: Amy Howard's Guide to Refinishing Furniture and Accessories*.  
Pourny, C. (2007). *The Furniture Bible: Everything You Need to Know to Identify, Restore & Care for Furniture*.  
Timar, Maria Cristina. (2007). "Furniture Restoration – Science, Art, Challenge." *Fundatia PRO Ligno*, 45-54.

2023

*In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, WVU is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, and reprisal of retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodations will be made to provide this content in alternate formats upon request. Contact the WVU Extension Office of Communications at 304-293-4222. For all other ADA requests, contact Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at [diversity@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:diversity@mail.wvu.edu).*

