

*Shellac is perhaps the best finish that most woodworkers never consider...it is durable, easy to apply and easy to repair. So, why is it so frequently overlooked, or worse yet, rejected?*

## Introduction to Shellac



**I first experienced shellac in my 7th grade woodshop class** in West Lafayette, Indiana—my shop teacher was Mr. Lloyd Nehr. The project was a simple pine skirt holder intended to hang on the bar in the closet and hold several pair of my mother's skirts by the waist band. When it came time to apply the finish Mr. Nehr gave me a jar filled with a deep golden liquid that he identified as shellac. His instruction was to "...brush it on quickly, and don't go back over it..." When the shellac was dry Mr. Nehr gave me a crude wooden box filled with a gray-white powder that he identified as "pumice". My task was to lightly sand the freshly newly finished surface and then begin to rub the surface with pumice using a felt chalkboard eraser. In no time, I was hooked. That little piece of pine soon began to absolutely glow—I had never touched anything made from wood that was so smooth. Best of all, the skirt holder was useful and remained in service for many years.

To this day, shellac continues to be an important component in most of my finishes. There are few finishes that I apply that don't take advantage of one or more of its attributes. Some of you have never used shellac; some (like me) used in in shop class but have not touched it since. Others of you are just encountering it for the first time. Unfortunately, many *experts* among us dismiss shellac as "old fashioned", perhaps even "obsolete". These *sages* of finishing have bought into the myth that shellac lacks sufficient durability to be used as a modern finish given all of the high-tech coatings available today. This view is most unfortunate, and more than a bit unenlightened. Shellac remains an incredibly useful tool in the finisher's arsenal. Further, it is likely to remain a valuable part of finishing schedules, perhaps even gaining in prominence as clean air regulations intrude further into our choices.

I have not stopped using shellac since my first experience with it in 7th grade woodshop. Over the years I have found it to be incredibly versatile and up to many tasks that were beyond my understanding in those early days. My technique has changed. I no longer

polish shellac with abrasives, preferring instead to pad my shellac finishes to a high luster. I have even become reasonably accomplished with that most magical of all processes called *French Polishing*. I remain grateful to Mr. Nehr for introducing me to this time-honored finish, and I shudder at the thought of what I might be using today had he not introduced me to shellac way back in the 7th grade. Even more than that, as I look back to his teaching, I have come to believe that he wasn't just introducing me to shellac. The shellac was just part of the package. The real value was the lesson he taught; the concept, if you will, that Mr. Nehr planted in my mind. The tradition of skilled hands applying a fine finish (this is what all genuinely great teachers do—they plant ideas). Clearly, expending so much time and effort to finish such a simple project was probably not warranted; unless, of course, the finish was never the objective in the first place.

In the following pages I will attempt to share some of what I have learned about shellac over the years; where it comes from, and some of the many ways in which it can be used. My most important contribution, however, will simply be to encourage you to try it—to experience for yourself just how useful a shellac finish can be, and how wonderfully simple it is to use. I am convinced that once you have seen what you can do with shellac, and you demonstrated to yourself how easy shellac is to use, you will reach for it on a regular basis.

**[Mixing Shellac](#) | [Making A Shellac Pad](#) | [Applying Shellac](#) | [Repairing Shellac](#) | [Shellac as a Grain Filler](#)**