

KNOW YOUR FINISHES--Part I: FINISHING OILS

TUNG OIL--Tung Oil, also known as China wood oil, is one of the oldest and best wood preservatives. It is extracted from the nuts of the tung tree native to the Orient. This tree is currently being commercially cultivated in the Gulf States. The name comes from the Chinese word "tung," or stomach, because it has a purgative action when taken internally.

This oil is deeply penetrating and serves to bind the fibers of the wood and thus seal and preserve them. Heat will not draw out tung oil as it will other oils. It is water and solvent resistant.

To apply, rub on with a soft cloth (such as an old T-shirt or a cotton sheet). Rub until all the oil is in the wood and not on the surface. Immediately wipe off all the excess from the surface since a thick coat of surface film will wrinkle on drying. If the oil becomes tacky, wipe it off with a rag moistened in fresh oil. It is also possible to thin the oil with turpentine. The oil should soak into the wood anywhere from 30 seconds to 10 minutes depending on the weather conditions and the properties of the wood. Wait at least 12 hours between coats. It is recommended that three coats be applied with a rubbing with 4/0 steel wool after each coat to assure a smooth surface. Subsequent cleaning and polishing should be done with lemon oil.

If you use a brush to apply the oil, it may be cleaned with mineral spirits or lacquer thinner.

Tung oil tends to dry non-glossy. A varnish made with tung oil has more lustre. The product Tung Seal also contains stains if you want your carving to be stained.

One bad thing about tung oil is that it will solidify or jell when exposed to air. There are two ways to prevent this from happening: (1) use marbles to raise the level in the container and expel the excess air (you must keep the container full at all times), or (2) use a variable volume container (the refillable plastic food tubes made for hikers are very good for this purpose--they work on the same principle as toothpaste tubes).

LEMON OIL--This oil is very good to use as the final oil finish, especially over tung oil. It should not be used over a wax finish. It is recommended that you should use a pure lemon oil and not one that contains linseed oil, beeswax or silicons.

LINSEED OIL--This is an extract of the flax seed. It dries slowly but seals well. Always use boiled linseed oil and not raw linseed oil as the latter contains non-drying portions of the oil. The linseed oil reacts with oxygen to become a solid film. When it dries it leaves a soft surface and has poor moisture resistance--it will pass about twice as much moisture as tung oil. This finish should never be overcoated with lacquer or shellace.

FINISH OILS--These are chemically modified oils which penetrate faster and deeper and dry more quickly and harder than unmodified oils. They are particularly good for woods with a beautiful natural grain. They usually dry without gloss, giving a natural oil finish. When applying you should allow at least eight hours between coats. Some of the products readily available are:

Leichtung Penetrating Finish Oil

Watco Danish Oil--This contains resins which polymerize and dry in the wood.

Teak Oil--Used on highly resinous woods such as rosewood, teak and zebra wood.