

Consumer Guide to Furniture Refinishing

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Save money and the earth!

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Print these out.

5 Furniture Refinishing Shortcuts that can damage your furniture

Usually the lowest price means short cuts have been taken in repairs, stripping and finishing.

1. Repairs on Chairs

In the regluing of chairs, a common shortcut we see is when glue has been injected without taking the chair apart to clean off the old glue. The new injected glue sticks to the old glue for a while, and then breaks apart. Then in a year or 2 you spend more money to fix your chair, again.

The proper repair is to clean the old glue off the stretcher, and off the inside opening in the receiving leg. Then proper carpenter glue is applied to both parts and clamped together. When the old glue is not removed, the new glue cannot soak into the wood and create a bond of the wood fibres between the two joints.

Another shortcut is to add nails through the leg into the stretcher. This also lets go in a few years. The process to remove the nails takes a lot of time and costs more than having the joint repaired correctly the first time.

2. Repairs on Cabinets

We see this repair on cabinets such as dressers or buffets. When the drawers stick and the cabinet is wobbly, a short cut is to hammer nails or large staples into the frame instead of taking the case apart and regluing. This may split the wood at the joint causing it to become loose again in a short time and create a very costly repair, sometimes even unrepairable.

3. Repairs on Veneers

Many times the damaged area is just filled with wood filler or the wrong kind of veneer is used. Then a dark or shaded finish is applied to hide these cheap repairs, which has now devalued your furniture.

4. Stripping

Fast and cheap...Dip Stripping, which loosens glue joints, and excessively raises the wood grain. Now you need to reglue the item and in some cases, the wood may be so dried out that it can't be refinished. You're now faced with an expensive process to make the piece finishable or you just throw your furniture away.

5. "Refreshed" Finishes

The old finish is "refreshed" – meaning sanded lightly – a new finish sprayed on top – usually a darker colour. This finish looks great for the first year or two – then the new finish starts to chip off as the old finish continues to dry out and break down. This becomes a very costly finish as now you have to pay again to properly strip, stain, and finish your furniture.

BONUS

Here are some other short cuts we have seen:

6. Power Sanding

The handy man, who loves power tools, will try stripping with a Power sander! This method usually removes all the patina your furniture has taken years to acquire. Sanding will also change/remove raised carving; damage or sand through veneer. It also leaves deeply imbedded scratch marks that are almost impossible to remove and will show through the final finish. The sander cannot get into the corners, grooves and turnings. This is a very inefficient way to strip and can be very damaging to your furniture.

7. Incomplete staining and finishing

We see this on cabinets and chairs where only the top surfaces are stained and finished. Leaving the bottom side unfinished may cause warping due to uneven exposure to moisture or dryness. Because the bottom is not stained, the finisher often leaves his stained finger prints...very sloppy, and very unprofessional.

You can avoid shortcuts such as these, by working with a professional refinishing company. They will take the time to inspect your furniture and discuss the problems and solutions with you before the work begins. Sometimes consultations are necessary as the work progresses.

3 Misconceptions about Refinishing Antiques

1. What qualifies as an antique?

For furniture, a true antique is over 100 years old. Most people own good quality vintage furniture from the 40's, 50's and newer. Some have older furniture dating back to the early 1900's, and some of these may be considered an "antique" based on the 100 year guideline.

2. My Furniture is over 100 years old; therefore, should not be refinished.

In most cases this is not true.

Only if it is a "One of a kind" antique made by a known manufacture, and has the original finish on it, then you might not refinish your furniture. Look at your furniture and ask yourself "***Can I verify my furniture is 100 years old and so unique that a museum would want it?***" Probably not and here is why. In North America there is not very many, really, really old furniture pieces. Remember we are a very young country compared to Europe or Asia. Most of our furnishings have been massed produced, and usually have not been a "new concept in furniture design".

Most designs since the mid 1800's are reproductions, better made than today, but still not museum quality. If you have an antique, one of a kind museum piece, that should not be refinished, a professional refinisher will recognize its value and advise you to only clean it up, touch it up or do limited professional repairs. ***Make sure you pick the right professional.***

3. "My grandparents gave me this furniture so it must be antique"

Usually it is not an antique based on that criterion.

Even if your grandfather died when he was 80 or 90 , ten years ago, he probably didn't buy his furniture until he married your grandmother at age 25 or 30. So you can see, these facts fall short of the 100 year criteria.

There are better ways to date your family heirlooms. Your professional furniture refinisher can explain how, and give you a very accurate time frame once they see your furniture.

BONUS

Here are other misconceptions that you can learn about:

4. "I will decrease the value by refinishing my family heirlooms."

If they are not destined for the museum, then you will actually increase the market value should you choose to sell your heirloom. Realistically, do you want to use your family heirlooms if they are the wrong color, need repair, and the finish is so old it is no longer useable? Maybe someone painted it. It's in your basement, garage, or attic just collecting dust and deteriorating. Do you really want it in your living room, den, bedroom, kitchen in such disrepair? What value is it to you (or your heirs someday) if it is not useable, the right color and no longer fits your decorating theme?

You were given the heirlooms so you can enjoy them and cherish the memories of your family member. Maybe that means restoring your furniture to the way you remember them. The right refinishing professional can help you achieve any of these goals.

When to Strip and Finish

Age:

Most finishes maintain their ability to withstand non chemical liquid spills, moderate heat, and resistance to light scuffing for the first 20 to 25 years. After that the finishes start to dry out and lose their ability to withstand the day to day use and start to show fading, cracking, white marks and scuffs. This is usually most evident on table tops, chairs and dresser tops.

Wooden back kitchen and dining room chairs may become “sticky” when you lean against them. This usually is most noticeable in the summer time when there is more humidity.

The best remedy at this point is to strip and finish and once again have a resilient finish applied for your furniture’s day to day use.

Accidents do happen:

On finishes that are newer, you may have had a spill that didn’t get notice soon enough, and now you have white marks. Sometimes, these can be removed without stripping. Ask your professional refinisher.

When the finish is newer and damage has occurred to the top only, it may be feasible to only strip and finish the top. Again you professional refinisher can give you guidance for your particular situation.

Burns, deep scratches and dents:

These types of accidents definitely require you furniture being stripped and finished. There are so many factors that have to be considered in just doing a touch up that you can very easily spend more money and not be happy with the results. All finishes will fade, depending on the light exposure, so some areas may have lighter colour than others. Depending on the wood and light exposure, some finishes will go darker. Pine is a good example where this can happen. All of these factors make most touch ups unsatisfactory for the results you want, which is to make these marks disappear.

This is another situation that you may be able to just have a part refinished if the rest of your furniture’s finish is in good condition.

Structural Damage:

Large cracks, broken or missing pieces, warped, raised joints and lifted or missing veneer require extensive repairs to be done including sanding the damaged area. The only way to have the finish restored in the repaired area is by stripping and finishing. Again, it may be feasible to only finish the top, side, leg, or the surface where the damage occurred. Your professional refinisher can advise you once they see what has to be done.

Changing the Colour of Your Furniture:

Unless you are having your furniture painted over an existing finish that is good condition, you will need to have your furniture stripped, so it can be stained the new colour you want. You cannot apply a stain on top of an existing finish. The stain is applied to the bare wood. The finish on top keeps the stain on your furniture from being rubbed off. **Beware**, this is where we see shortcuts taken, that you will end up have to pay to redo in a year or two. See our point #1 for shortcuts taken called Refreshing the finish.

Which Stripping Method is The Safest?

There are 4 ways to strip furniture:

1. Sandblasting:

Yes, every now and again we will have someone bring us a piece of sandblasted furniture they thought would be a good way to strip their treasure. Fortunately we have only seen 4 or 5 pieces stripped this way. On wood that has been sandblasted it literally takes the soft tissue out and leaves marks like deep scratches all over the furniture. The soft wood is one section of the annual growth ring which, depending on the kind of wood that was used, is the lighter or darker colour. Unfortunately, the furniture cannot be finished, even by spending a lot of time and money.

When sandblasting is used on metals, it usually leaves little pits all over the surface, which can be seen even through paint.

Not to be used especially on your furniture.

2. Power Sanding:

This is a very popular method used by those Power Tool Lovers. Hopefully not you.

If you have tried stripping this way you have probably discovered that it is very impractical. Any kind of finish gums up the sandpaper, sanding only removes the finish from flat areas, and can't get the finish off in corners, turnings and carvings.

We get furniture brought to us, where the veneer on quality furniture has been sanded through in spots and deep scratch marks left across the grain. Then it was covered up with fillers, a very dark finish applied or painted. All of this is a very big surprise to our clients when we strip the finish off. Without re-veneering, the furniture cannot be saved. Even painting will show all the marks left behind by the sander.

Not to be used on your family heirlooms.

3. Dip Stripping:

This means your furniture is totally submerged in a large vat of hot caustic chemicals. Not only do the harsh chemicals soften the finish but also the glue, veneer, any applied carving, and in many cases, the wood turns grey and very rough.

Fortunately, there are only a few dip tanks left in Southern Ontario.

Not to be used on furniture or architectural pieces.

4. Chemical Hand Stripping: *The only way to have your furniture stripped!*

This process is where the professional refinisher uses liquid or semi liquid chemicals that are applied with a brush or flow over process to soften only the paint, and finish so it can be gently brushed off.

This is the least stressful process to be used on your furniture. It leaves the wood smooth and the glue in the joints.

This process can be used on any kind of finish that is on solid wood and veneers. Some of the newer offshore furniture has been manufactured, using pressboards and paper veneer. The paper veneers cannot be stripped, as the pattern on the paper is an ink, and comes off when it is stripped using any stripping method.

Some furniture manufactures from the 70's and 80's have used particleboards and regular wood veneers, which can have the finishes stripped off of them.

Ask your professional furniture refinisher to help you identify the good furniture for refinishing.

The Importance of Value and Lowest Price

The company that offers the lowest price has usually cut their costs by taking shortcuts. Consider these facts:

All professional refinishers are paying the same to buy quality stripping material, stains, finishes, wood for repairs, veneer, glue, sanding supplies and to hire staff.

Professional refinishers will have appropriate safety equipment in place for their staff and to minimize any effect on the environment.

All Professionals are very transparent to the public and will have a respectable showroom to display examples of their work.

So when you are referred to someone who works out of their garage, or they don't want you to "drop by" to see samples of their work, what are they hiding?

To offer low prices, shortcuts are taken in the products used, which mean you won't have a finish or repair that last for years. And of course shortcuts are taken, in the preparation of the furniture for finishing and in the finishing steps as well.

Remember, this is your furniture that you are investing in. You work hard for your money, and don't want to throw your money away by having low quality refinishing done, and end up spending double! You deserve value for work done. Choose the Professional Refinishing Company whose price is based on doing the work correctly the first time, and are willing to discuss with you on a step by step basis the work they are doing for you.

Avoid Quick Quotes

Over the phone quotes are really not possible as there are too many variables. For example, what finish is on your furniture? A paint or a varnish? If paint, what kind of paint is on your furniture? Is it milk base, lead base, water base, oil, or is it a combination of all or some of the above? Is the finish a varnish or shellac? Is it a catalyzed lacquer, a pre-cat lacquer? Was it stained originally and if so, is the stain an aniline dye that was made with a water base or oil base? There can be a stain and a varnish combination as well as a variety of paints on your furniture. All of these factors determine the cost to strip and a professional refinishing company can't decide that cost, until they see your furniture and what combinations are on it.

Then, what are the repairs that need to be done? Some are visible, such as a broken leg. Sometimes there can be broken stretchers on a chair that are held together by all the paint. Once the finish is off, many times we discover that there is actually veneer pieces missing, or cracks show up and in both cases the damaged area has been filled with any variety of filler. So the repair pricing can't accurately be done until the item is stripped.

How do you want your furniture finished? If you want a light colour, the finisher needs to see how light the wood strips up. For example, if you want a light oak colour and your item has a red aniline dye embedded in it, then the finisher will need to apply a stain to compliment the dye. Having a red aniline dye isn't a bad feature; it just means that you have a very old piece of furniture. You may say you want a dark finish, however, when a trial colour test is done on your furniture, you may decide it doesn't produce the look you want because of the grain or character marks.

There are many variables that you need to discuss with your professional refinisher before pricing can be determined. You both must know what end results you are trying to achieve. Many times your refinisher will have solutions to your furniture problems that you were not aware of. There needs to be a clear understanding before any dollars are discussed at each step of the process.

Price Quoted

The price you pay, with quick quotes, may not be the price quoted. If the refinisher did not take all aspects into consideration when price quoting, then the phone calls start with extra charges to finish the job. So then what do you do? They have your furniture and you want it finished properly, so you end up paying more. Too stressful!

Go to a professional furniture refinishing company that you know will give you the right price for each step you want taken with your furniture.

When Refinishing is a Better Investment than Buying New

If you have an older piece of furniture, or even as new as the 60's, you will find it is better built, with much better quality materials. Older furniture is usually built with hardwoods, unlike the synthetic

materials and poor craftsmanship used by many of the furniture manufacturers from the “70’s and newer.

Not all furniture manufactures moved to the cheaper materials and craftsmanship. Some, like the Gibbards, Krug, Roxton, Vilas and other manufactures, kept building with the solid hardwoods, and high end craftsmen.

If you are not sure of the age of your furniture, and the quality of the materials used, ask your professional refinisher for advice.

Refinishing these quality pieces of furniture is a good investment. Many times what you will pay to have your furniture refinished, costs a lot less than purchasing new from brand name stores.

The furniture you are getting today is usually made offshore, with pressboards and paper veneers. Cheap inexperienced assembly labour is used, resulting in very poor workmanship. Many of the finishes that are used in offshore countries would never be allowed in North America because of the hazardous content. This is furniture that will be used for a few years, until it breaks down, goes out of style and ends up in the landfill site. That makes it very expensive for you and very harmful to the environment.

Refinishing your older and vintage furniture, will give you quality furnishing that will last for many generations and withstand many colour and fashion changes.

Questions To Ask to Find the Right Professional Refinisher

Here are **3 General Questions** you should ask for all types of furniture work you need done.

These would be asked whether you are considering restoring antiques or modern furniture. It may be you just need your kitchen chairs reglued, need a missing mirror frame built, or hand caning for a chair seat.

1. Do they have samples of work they are working on that you can come and see?

This is very important to know where they are located. If not in town, then how are you going to be able to consult with them as to colour and repairs? It also gets very costly if they do the pickup and delivery and charge you by the mile.

If they do not have a show room or are hesitant to invite you there, what are they trying to hide?

2. Do they do the work at their store?

Some refinishers may only do some parts of the repair work, and send it out to other business for the rest. This is where shortcuts can be taken if they are not willing to spend the time helping you get the

work done correctly. If a specialized replacement of veneer has to be done, such as book match veneer on a table top, and they don't have the expensive veneer press, (most refinishers don't) then they should tell you who they are using and what the cost is for that particular step. If, for example, they don't do their own lathe turning, colour matching, chair caning, ask them who they are using. Ask if they guarantee that persons work. If they work with an upholsterer, they should tell you who and how to contact them.

3. Are they working on their own or with staff?

In this type of business, lifting heavy furniture safely cannot be done properly by one person. How are they going to handle your furniture so it doesn't get damaged?

What happens if the owner gets sick or injured? When and how will you get your furniture back?

How experienced is their staff? Can they do all aspects of the work?

5 More Specific Questions:

1. How do they do their stripping? See #4 **Which Stripping Method is The Safest?**

Note: If the refinisher tells you they take chairs or cabinets apart because they usually need gluing anyway, that may mean they are power sanding.

2. How do they give quotes?

If the only way they will give you a quote is by having the quote person come to your house, beware.

You should be able to show them pictures, along with parts of your furniture when you visit their store or showroom, and then receive a quote on getting stripping done. They should tell you how they charge for repairs or specialized seat replacements such as chair caning, splint seats, fibre rush and others. Actual repair costs are usually determined after the stripping is done and you discuss how extensive the repairs are to be.

If they don't invite you to their showroom and will only give a price at your home, be prepared for a lot of pressure tactics and two or 3 people arriving with a truck.

This usually happens with people you meet in malls, who are from out of town.

3. How do you get the colour you want?

Will you be consulting with the finisher, once your furniture is stripped? This is very important so the finisher knows exactly what colour you are hoping to achieve. Sometimes the existing stain won't

always come out when you furniture is stripped. This occurs because of the age of the furniture, or the type of wood a particular stain was used on. Then you have to make an adjustment to the stain.

If you have given the finisher a colour sample from another set of furniture, it may be made from a different kind of wood, and even if the colour is matched, the wood grain can make your finish look very different.

This is a crucial step. You need to see a sample of the stain applied on the stripped wood, before the set or piece is completely stained and finished.

4. How do they apply the finish?

Most finishers, apply a sprayed on lacquer finish over top of the stain.

If you want your furniture painted, will it be professionally sprayed?

Hand rubbed finishes need to be applied in some cases, usually on older pieces of furniture.

NOTE:

There are special finishes that should be used on the exterior of doors for UV protection, OR high moisture areas in your home such as bathroom cabinets.

Special lacquers need to be used on brass.

5.What is their guarantee?

When the professional refinisher works with you on a step by step basis, everything should get done the way you want it. When these steps are not taken, then you can end up with a finish that was not what you were expecting. What is their guarantee? It should be 100% to your satisfaction.