

Finishing and Polishing Marquetry

Introduction

Once you have completed cutting your marquetry it ideally needs sticking down, sanding and polishing to give it a smooth, durable finish and bring out the best of the colours of the veneers. Polishing alone is a complex subject, with many books devoted to single methods, such as French polishing, so this can only be a brief overview. In general, if you have a method with which you care comfortable then that is the one to use!

A Simple Cheat!

One easy way to display your marquetry is simply to frame it under glass. With time the glue may go brittle, so ensure the back is well taped to hold everything together – even then the adhesive on the tape may deteriorate. Another option, which can work in some cases, is to laminate the marquetry or cover it with self-adhesive "library film". These really are not viable long-term methods, but may suit small items, such as decorations on cards etc. where a quick result is required.

Much better is to stick the work to a suitable substrate and then sand and polish it.

Choice of Substrate

The ideal substrate (backing) for your work is one which is easy to work and has good stability against warping etc. The simplest, commonly available, material is medium density fibreboard – MDF. This comes in a range of thicknesses – 2 or 3mm is good for jewellery, Christmas decorations or small pictures which are to be framed. 6 and 9 mm is good for larger pictures and box construction.

MDF is very absorbent, which means the cut and sanded edges can be stained using penetrating wood stains. These then will take a lacquer or polish (though they will be thirsty for the first few coats) and produce an attractive end result.

Gluing Down

For most small marquetry works PVA wood glue is suitable. A few veneers swell when wet, which can cause "bobbling", but most behave reasonable well. Prepare the marquetry by taping the front and removing any tape or glue residue from the back. If you work cleanly whilst making the marquetry this can be a quick job, but if not, you may have to do some careful scraping and sanding to get an acceptable surface. Place the marquetry face down on a flat board, with some padding material underneath to take up any slight variations in thickness, and a plastic sheet to avoid any glue that penetrates the picture sticking everything irretrievably together! Newspaper is OK as the packing, but the spongy plastic sheet used as underlay for laminate flooring and packing delicate objects is very good. Apply the glue to the substrate (NOT the marquetry – or it will curl up and be very difficult to handle. With PVA glue the right amount will be more than makes the MDF look just "wet" but not enough that the glue is uniformly white.

Press the substrate onto the back of the marquetry (make sure everything is the right way up and the right way round) and clamp firmly. A heavy book is NOT enough – you need a stout flat board on top, and several firm clamps. A vacuum press, commonly used in industry, will apply 10-15 lbs per square inch – so even a small 6"x4" picture will need around 300 lbs applied. Get clamping!

Leave the work clamped up for an hour or so, then remove and, if necessary, trim off excess veneer from the edges. This is easier to do before any extruded glue has set really hard. If necessary, re-clamp (still with the packing) for another couple of hours.

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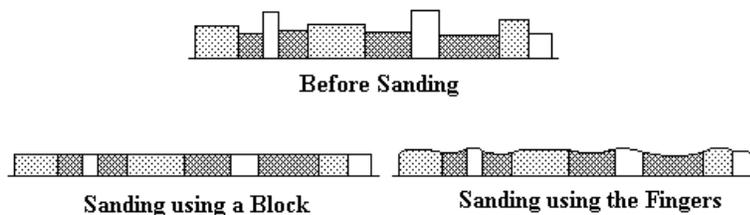
Ideally you should also veneer the back of the picture with a plain veneer to "balance" any tendency to warp due to tension in the veneers.

Edges and Borders

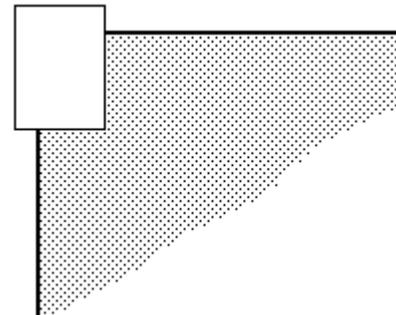
Traditionally marquetry pictures are veneered on their edges and any "frame" is constructed of veneers and lies flat with the picture. These techniques are outside the scope of this pamphlet – contact me if you are interested in tuition in this aspect of finishing.

Sanding Down

Sand the picture using a good quality, medium grit paper (something like 180 grit) wrapped around a flat block. Do not sand using a soft block or your fingers as you will simply smooth out any unevenness without actually flattening (see diagram).



When sanding the edges and corners of your picture do not extend the block more than about 1/3 of its width over the edge (see diagram) to avoid rounding the edges.



Waxing, Lacquering or Varnishing

Once the picture is sanded smooth a simple rub with a good wax polish will bring up the colours of the veneer. However this will need repeating at intervals and over time the wax will build up and dull the picture. Be sure to AVOID waxes containing silicone – the silicone will penetrate the wood and may prevent any subsequent lacquer or varnish from adhering properly.

Probably the simplest method is to brush on a coat of clear acrylic varnish and allow to dry. Keep the coat thin as it's water-based and we don't want to start loosening the adhesive by "flooding" the surface. If the work is kept flat and dust-free whilst the varnish dries this should give an acceptable finish. A second coat may be needed – follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Better, but harder work, is to use multiple coats of lacquer or varnish, carefully rubbing down between each one. This fills the voids in the grain of the veneer (and any areas of inaccurate cutting!) and eventually gives a completely smooth surface. This can either be made matt/satin by rubbing with very fine (OOOO) wire wool or brought to a high shine using burnishing cream or metal polish (such as "Brasso"). Again these methods are beyond the scope of this pamphlet.

Hanging

Finally fit a hanging string to your picture – simple screw in eyelets are easy to use, but do check that they are strong enough for the weight of the picture and not long enough to go right through to the front!

Hang your picture up and sit back to admire your handiwork!

For more information about tuition in marquetry and finishing methods please contact me via my website: www.qjsmarquetry.co.uk