

“EBONIZING” AND COLORING

with Clean Lines

Garry Knox Bennett

Over the course of my career as a furniture designer/maker, I have had plenty of occasions to ebonize and add color to my work. In cases where I want clean line definition between colors, I use the simple process described in this article. Each time I use this method in my work, I have a nagging suspicion that it might prove helpful to my many woodturner friends since the technique would work just as well on turned work as it does on flat pieces. When done correctly, the technique leaves a crisp, clean line between colors.

Prepare the wood

I opted to use a flat poplar board to demonstrate the process, but the

Prepare the wood



1 Use a sharp blade to incise borderlines according to your chosen design.

Add color



2 The incised lines will confine colors to a defined area. Add color slowly and carefully to allow the dye to absorb up to but not farther than the cut lines.

concept is the same for wood of any shape. Tight-grained hardwoods, such as maple and walnut, work well for this process. Lighter-colored woods are best for adding color, and you can control the color's density with the number of applications. As with any technique, practice and experimentation are advised to ensure success.

Incise a line, design, shape, or outline using either a small box-cutter or hobby knife (*Photo 1*). A clean, sharply indented, even cut is important, as the gap between the two edges bordering the cut is what will stop the dye/color from migrating. After the design is inscribed, lightly sand the surface of the cut with fine abrasive to remove any raised areas on the edges of the cut. Then vigorously blow off the piece, making sure the inscribed line is clean—any dust remaining in the cut will “carry” the dye/color instantly beyond where it should be.

Apply color

For adding color, I use water-thinned, artist-grade gouache or watercolor paint because it can be lacquered over without compromising the color. For adding black, I use Fiebing's leather dye (USMC Black) as an alternative to traditional ebonizing methods. This dye really penetrates and I have found it to be far superior to various inks or other ebonizing techniques. The Fiebing's dye is an alcohol-based formula and performs better than acetone-based versions. Apply it with a swab, brush, or rag, but wear gloves, as it will take days to wash from your hands. I do not dilute this dye but use it full strength.

With a soft-bristle brush, begin applying the dye, starting a bit back from the

cut edge and working carefully toward it. Fill in the larger areas with long, even strokes. As you bring the dye up to the cut, it will stop abruptly at the line and will not fill or cross it. The technique is to gently and slowly “float” the color just to the edge. Notice when you start just how rapidly the dye bleeds/flows into the wood. This absorption rate will vary from one wood species to another.

When applying color inside an outlined area, use the same process, starting in the center and “floating” the color to the edges. The color will stop at the cut line (*Photo 2*).

Add a clear topcoat

Before finishing with a topcoat, let the colors dry completely. Then very carefully buff the surface with fine (0000) steel wool. If you are not careful, the buffing can cause the dye to transfer to other areas. If you notice this happening, stop buffing with the steel wool, wipe down the surface, and apply a light application of the clear topcoat finish you will be using. After this coat dries, then go again with the steel wool to get a nice, burnished finish. Complete with final coats of your preferred topcoat (mine is a clear lacquer).

Practice and experiment to reveal the possibilities of using this technique. ■

Photos by A.J. McLennan.

While Garry Knox Bennett is known primarily for furniture, he studied painting and sculpture at California College of Arts and Crafts. With regard to his furniture and jewelry, he is self-taught and enjoys pushing the limits to find alternative methods. Color and contrast have always been part of his lexicon, especially in furniture. For more, visit gkb-furniture.com.