

Finish Your Turnings with Waterlox “Original”

By: Andy Chen

At my first GCWA meeting back in 1994, I showed a segmented bowl that won many praises. **Luna Ford** especially appreciated the glossy finish on that bowl. (In fact, he still talks about it today.) It might have been a beautiful finish, but the process to achieve it was painful. I had put on 10 coats of polyurethane. (This was before the days of the modern wipe-on products, mind you.) It took me more than two weeks to just put the finish on. Over the years, I have tried many other finishing products, but either the result was less than satisfactory or the process was just too cumbersome and time-consuming. Two years ago, I read in an Internet discussion group posting about Waterlox. The author claimed that **Bud Latven** and **Ray Allen**, two of the best segmented turners, used this product. I decided to give it a try and have been very happy with both the result and the ease of achieving such result. Judging from the response, our club members like the looks of it, too. Here is how I do it.

You start with a proper preparation like any other finishing job. For segmented bowls, I sand to only 220 grit with either just a pad or a power sander with the lathe turning. (**Larry Genender** has a nice article on making a James Johnson style sanding disc in *American Woodturner*, vol. 20, #2, p. 19, 2005.) For turnings from one piece of wood, I sand to 320 with a power sander, with the lathe turning. I blow off the dust and the grit with compressed air before applying the Waterlox. Waterlox is a tung oil-based varnish and as such it is penetrating. I apply the finish with a nylon stocking or just by hand (with nitrile gloves of course), making sure the entire surface is saturated. When the varnish becomes tacky (within 5-10 min depending on the weather), wipe off the excess with paper towels. You can facilitate this process by putting a little of the varnish on the towel to soften the tacky finish. After sitting overnight, steel wool (0000) the turning with the lathe turned on. Apply the second coat the same way. Because it does not require nearly as much to cover the turning this time, simply rub the finish on by hand (without nylon stocking). A couple of hours is all it takes for the second and subsequent coats to dry. I have only applied 3 coats on my turnings. More is fine, but I generally run out of patience after the third coat. Steel wool after the final coat and buff with Tripoli, white diamond and carnauba wax. I have in recent months finished turning on Friday afternoon, put the Waterlox on and brought the turning to the GCWA meeting the next morning. In such cases, I do not wait overnight before I apply the second coat. You just need to be totally positive that the varnish is dry between coats.

One additional benefit of finishing with Waterlox is that it is easy to repair should need arise. One problem with segmented turning is that over time the segments can shift against each other due to environmental changes, creating unevenness to the touch. I have wet-sanded the uneven areas with 320 grit sandpaper with Waterlox. You cannot detect any blemishes after buffing it.

Waterlox comes in many formulations: the satin (TB 6022) satin sealer/finish (TB 5284), high gloss (TB 3182), marine (exterior, TB 3940) and even urethane. What is very confusing is all their tung oil-based varnishes have “Original” on the label. I have only used the satin/sealer (TB 5284) because I like the medium luster it produces. I cannot give you advice on the others. In addition, I believe another tung oil-based product, Liberon, is very similar to Waterlox. **Brian Laing** and **Bob Brown** use it a lot with excellent results.

One problem with all oil-based varnishes is that they tend to cure in the container once you open it. The most likely cause of this is exposure to the air (oxygen). I have tried Bloxygen that displaces the air in the container to extend the life of the finish with little success. Not only is Bloxygen not very effective but it is expensive. I do not recommend it. The saving grace with Waterlox is that once a polymerized film skins over the liquid, it helps protect the varnish from further deterioration. You can retrieve the finish beneath the dried film with an eye dropper. Eventually the film will become a crust. But as long as you can recover the liquid beneath the crust, it does not appear to adversely affect the quality of the finish. I am still using the can that I opened 2 years ago. Another problem with the kind of container in which Waterlox comes is the dried finish tends to gum up the screw cap. The solution to this problem is to cover the opening with a sheet of plastic, like the produce bag you find in supermarkets, before screwing the cap back on.

In almost 30 years that I have been woodworking/woodturning, I have always hated the final and arguably the most critical step, finishing. It is hard to control the outcome and the fumes are nasty. I cannot claim I enjoy it now that I have used Waterlox, but at least I do not dread it any more, at least on lathe-turned work. I hope you will feel the same way after you try Waterlox.