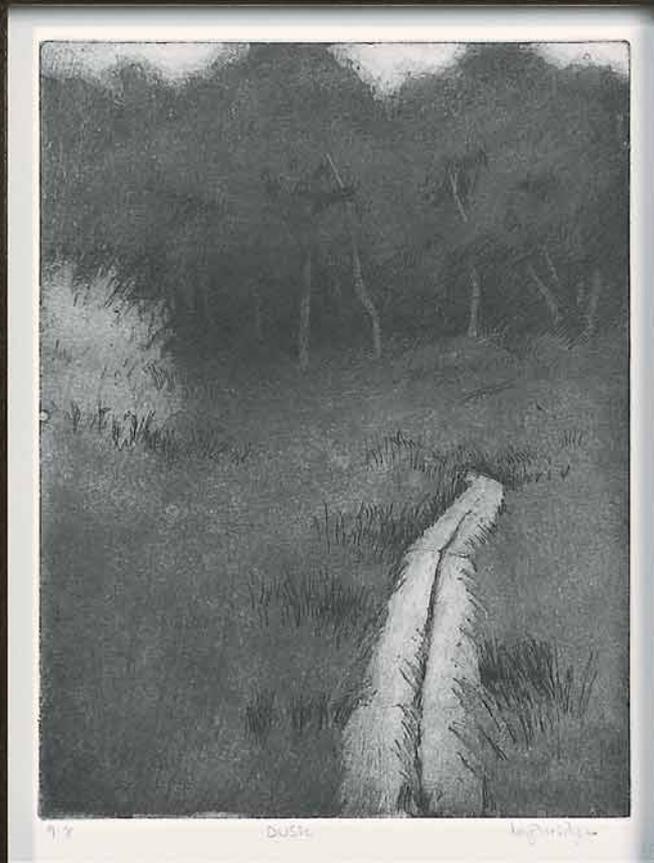


by Eric Tollefson

Lustrous



Adding a dark, rich finish to mahogany moulding results in a frame whose antique black tones highlight the soft etching inside perfectly

Etching by Stuart Loughbridge

Recently I called my friend Stuart Loughridge to see what new works he had sitting on his easel. He e-mailed me some, and one etching in particular stood out. It had a softness that I hadn't seen before in his work, something that was different. When asked, he said he applied the aquatint first and then pressed the etching. The texture could not have been achieved otherwise. A friend had told him that it was "like a whisper."

As soon as I saw this piece on screen, I set to work creating a frame for it. I wanted a dark yet warm finish on an intimately set piece, cropped close but with breadth.

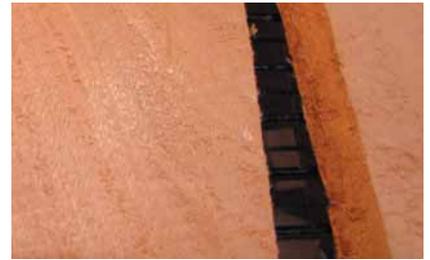
I needed a wood with highly visible pores. Instead of a wood like basswood or poplar, which have grain but visibly closed pore structures, I chose Honduran mahogany for its beautiful open pores. I felt that an antique, almost-black finish would highlight the etching in just the right way, and the mahogany would work perfectly for that. Had I decided to use a colored stain, I would have filled the pores of the mahogany first (see "Add Life to Your Finishes," April 2005 PFM). But in this case, that wouldn't be needed.

The process began with designing the frame. It was a broad stile-and-rail design using a butt joint joined with biscuits. The image would be cropped close and floated on ragboard. There is no actual mat with this image because it is not needed. While the space between the image and frame is close, the piece as a whole still breathes.

To avoid permanently clogging the delicate pores of the mahogany, clear tape was used along the edges. This allows you to see what you're doing during glue-up but keeps the mess at a minimum.

Once the frame was joined, it was important to sand it correctly beginning with a low grit (100) then working in successively finer grits, each one smoothing the last. Jumping from 100 to 320 grit would only result in the polishing of small gouges. As with most finishing, preparation of the wood surface was key.

A common problem when staining wood lies in raising the grain during finishing. The final look can be rather uncontrollable if you don't deal with this issue. Often I purposefully raise the grain right from the beginning. To do this, wet the wood after sanding it and let the grain swell. Once it has dried, you can lightly sand away the raised



Honduran mahogany is used for its distinct grain pattern. A full inspection prior to any milling is done to remove any unusable knots or splits in the wood.



Wood biscuits (compressed beechwood) are inserted into slots with glue for joining. These expand as the joint is left clamped in place.



Clear tape is used along the edge of the joint as a mask for the excess glue. This is essential as it prevents the glue from not only getting on the surface (which is easy to remove) but also from the deep pores of the wood. When these are filled with glue it is quite impossible to remove when applying a fine finish.



The frame is sanded flat using an air-powered sander. This also removes any remaining glue and milling marks.

Finish



The first coat of stain (natural Watco with a pinch of dark brown pigment added) is applied liberally. Once coated, the frame is left for 15 minutes while the stain is absorbed. Some areas may absorb more than others.



After the first stain has set for 15 minutes a second coat of stain is liberally applied. But this time as soon as the frame is coated it needs to be wet sanded with 400 grit sandpaper, sanding the stain into the finish and creating a slurry of fine dust and stain.



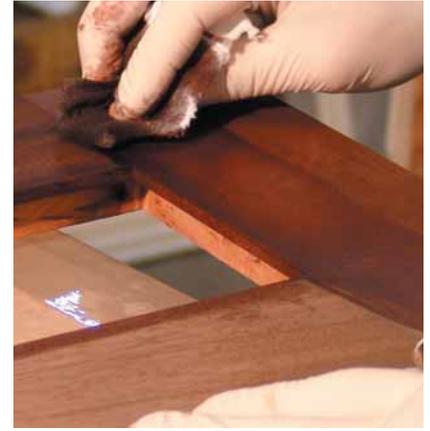
Once this has been done, wipe up the slurry with a clean rag and let it dry overnight. Be sure to revisit the frame for the first hour or so after the initial wipe down. There can be residual stain that seeps back out of the pores. If left to harden overnight, they can become quite difficult to remove.

grain and begin the finishing with less trepidation.

The way in which a surface is sanded will yield a different result. One way to avoid unpredictable finishes is to have a supply of sample sticks on hand made of the same wood as the frame and that you prepare in the same way. Consistency counts.

The first stain for this finish was Watco natural oil finish. I put a small amount of dark brown dry pigment in this mix (which had relatively little effect on the final finish). The oil was applied liberally to the frame and allowed to pool evenly over the surface. The frame then sat for 15 minutes. At the end of that time the oil finish had been absorbed unevenly by the wood. This is normal. Another coat of oil finish was liberally applied. This time, when finished, the oil was sanded into the wood with 400 grit wet or dry sandpaper. This creates a slurry of oil and fine dust. The frame is then wiped clean, removing all excess oil. At this point, the frame needs to dry completely for 24 hours. It is important to revisit the frame during the first hour or so after cleaning off the oil because there can be some residual sweating from the pores. (Watco is a mixture of Tung oil and varnishes that also work well in creating a final satin finish.)

The following day a dark, rich brown Behlen Solar Lux stain was applied to the frame. Behlen Solar Lux are very fast drying stains that come in a variety of colors. I used a rag to apply these stains but have a brush on hand to get into corners and crevices. Typically, two passes are needed with these stains to



Next a brown walnut (warm brown) Solar Lux stain is applied to the finish. This gives the finish a slightly reddish tone, which will give life to the otherwise dead black finish.



Black Pelikan drawing ink is then applied to the frame with a rag. Be sure to wear gloves for this step as the ink is very hard to wash off.



After the ink has dried a thin coat of Zinsser Seal Coat (essentially a clear shellac) is applied with a rag. Depending on the profile used, spraying this coat can yield the best results.

achieve a deeper shade. This dried within 20 minutes.

Because we have just applied an oil stain and then essentially acetone based stain, the wood was fairly well treated to withstand grain raising. But its grain and pores were not filled or coated with any high solids like shellac, lacquer, or urethane. That is what made the next step possible.

Pelikan drawing ink was then used as a stain, applied in the same fashion as the Solar Lux with a liberally but not soaked rag wiped across the surface in the direction of the grain. There should be few if any grain raising issues at this point, and the ink is a very effective, potent stain. It can also be diluted with water for a less intense effect or rubbed back to some degree. The frame should then be allowed to set for 30 minutes to 2 hours.

It was then time to apply a top coat. There are a few ways this can be done. The one used on this frame was done with shellac and wax. After the frame was fully dried, a coat of Zinssers Clear Coat



After buffing with the steel wool, a thin coat of clear paste wax is applied with a rag in the direction of the grain. As in the sanding stage, the top and bottom rails are done first, then the vertical rails. Once the wax is applied, wipe off and immediately buff to a shine.

was applied with a rag (although spraying often yields the best results at this stage). This is actually Zinssers dewaxed clear shellac. (Note: Since some inks are not as lightfast as others, check the label or use a UV top coat.)

Once the Clear Coat has dried, it may have some application marks or at the very least is too consistently shiny. To remove these attributes, I used a piece of 0000 oil-less steel wool. The frame was buffed in the same manner as it was sanded and had the stains



Once the seal coat has dried, typically an hour, it should be buffed with super fine oil-less steel wool to even out any marks from application and to reduce the sheen.

applied; that is, with the grain on the top and bottom rails first and then the side rails.

The final finish was done by wiping a small amount of clear paste wax on the frame with a clean rag. After the frame was covered, the excess wax was immediately rubbed off and the frame buffed with a clean rag.

When all the finishing work was done, the result came out just right. The frame had a tone and luster that made it an excellent complement to Stuart's etching. ■

Enhancing the Luster with Gilt Cream

Before the final clear paste wax is put on, applying a mixture of Liberon Gilt Cream to the surface can give a frame a nice, added touch. A small amount of turpentine is used to thin the cream as necessary to get it to sit in the pores. Not much is needed, and the gilt cream is impossible to completely remove once it has been rubbed into the surface. This is where the sample sticks really come in handy to test the right amount to use. Done right, though, the cream can add just the right hint of light to a shadowy wood.



The gilt cream is rubbed into the pores with a rag slightly damp with turpentine, covering the entire surface.

Eric Tollefson has extensive experience with frame design and manufacturing, focusing on gilding, finishing, and fine wood-working. For 15 years, he worked at the



Master Framers in Saint Paul, MN, supervising a staff producing handmade frames and restoring antique frames. His clients have included The Curtis Centennial Project and many regional museums, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and various local galleries. He is currently working for Rhonda Feinman Custom Frames and is a regular contributor to PFM.