

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL SCARBOROUGH

Using paint to create texture

Michael Scarborough shows us how he adds texture to his Japanese pieces, using a complicated series of painting and buffing techniques

There is little in this world that I find more beautiful than a piece of twisted burl or knotty wood full of nature's surprises. When turned, properly finished and then polished, the natural aesthetic qualities of such a specimen become even more breathtaking. This is one of the many appealing aspects of the work of superior Japanese craft artists, like George Nakashima, who have so influenced my work: the 'imperfect' portions of a workpiece that many European craftsmen might throw away are retained and celebrated for their natural beauty.

As turners, however, we hear with greater regularity about the scarcity of exotic figured wood and the increase in its cost. And, for good reason, we are warned away from

turning pieces that contain knots or splits. These two factors, I believe, are contributing to the increase in pieces made from less visually spectacular species, but with more and more innovations in surface decoration and opaque finishes. Instead of twisting grain or tight burl patterns, visual interest is often created on the surface by incising and surface carving, pyrography or through the use of physical patterning. And, there seems to be a noticeable increase in painted pieces being exhibited at shows and in the pages of magazines.

One of the most intriguing uses of paint that I have ever seen is the technique of Gyotaku, or fish printing. For centuries, Japanese fishermen avoided the need for telling fish tales by coating their prize catches

with paint and then making an impression of the fish on paper. As with so many things Japanese, what began as a simple means of recording fishing exploits soon turned into an art form.

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About the author:

Growing up in Japan influenced Michael's turning style, which he describes as 'Japanese-inspired art'. He works with a broad range of materials and techniques and spent 25 years as a classical singer.

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◀ INSPIRATION

As an artist who works primarily in the Japanese aesthetic, I wanted to see if some variation of this technique could be used on wood. I have a ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) in my garden, which has beautiful, fan-shaped leaves with ridges. Would it be possible to use those leaves to make impressions in the wet paint? It would have a similar effect as the imprint of a koi, but its application would be far easier and certainly

less malodorous. I picked a variety of leaves and set off for the studio. Generally, leaves taken from trees are turgid enough to be used for this process if used right away. If, however, the leaves are at all dry or curly, they can be soaked in glycerin and then pressed between sheets of wax paper, as for for veneering. At all costs, I am avoiding having the leaf tear in the upcoming removal process.



The beautiful, fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgo tree

FORM

Since the impression of the ginkgo leaves was to be the focus of this particular piece, I needed a form for the bowl that would not detract from the pattern of leaf impressions, but would, nevertheless,

maintain a visual interest of its own. To achieve this form, I chose to employ a series of curves and one sharp edge: the foot would curve gently in; the outside face would be subtly concave; I would leave

a sharp edge on the outside of the rim, but round off the inside. By combining this series of curves, I created a frame that directs the viewer's eye to the inside of the bowl where the visual action is taking place.

SETTING TO WORK

I decided to use a large piece of linden (*Tilia vulgaris*), as it is so lacking in any discernible figure or grain that it is perfect for a painted finish. I generally start with a screw chuck, create a mortise in the bottom of the piece, then switch round to an expandable chuck. I use a combination of two bowl gouges and two scrapers to do almost all of my bowls. I find that the fewer tools I use, the better my skill with each becomes.



Step 1: creating a mortise for the expandable chuck

What is Lacquerware?

The bulk of my work is based on Japanese lacquerware. Japanese lacquer, or usushi, has nothing at all in common with what we in the West know as 'lacquer'. Urushi is the highly refined sap of a tree, known as *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*, which is similar to poison sumac, *Toxicodendron vernix*. And, as the name implies, it is toxic. Learning to create lacquerware, in the Asian sense, is considered a lifelong process that must be undertaken under the tutelage of a master. I have been working for a long time with combinations of oil-based paints and different varnishes to create a finish that is not toxic, but has many of the same

properties as urushi. I am pleased to report that, upon viewing and feeling pieces with my finish, the Japanese artists I have met have all assumed I was using actual urushi in the process.

Japanese craftsmen are well-known for their ability to put a razor-sharp edge on their tools. Those tools are put to good use in the creation of the wooden cores upon which many lacquerware pieces are built. There can be no imperfections. Japanese lacquer artists are known to take a boat and go to the middle of a pond when applying the last coat of lacquer in order that no specks of dust fall into it.

BEGINNING THE FINISH

After the basic turning is complete, I sand the wood to a grit of 220 before applying grain filler. Although the linden is extremely tight-grained, I use filler to achieve as smooth a surface as possible upon which to begin building my finish. And, yes, I refer to this as building a finish, rather than applying a finish. You shall soon see why.

I allow the filler to dry for 24 hours and then use Micro-Mesh abrasives to wet sand up to 12,000 grit. A drop of washing-up liquid added to the water acts as a lubricant. Following the final sanding of the filler, I buff the piece with a horsehair cloth.

Question: why go to all this smoothing work if the piece is to be painted? Answer: because many layers of finish will be applied, and any imperfection that remains on the surface will only be magnified in the final coat.



Step 2: the multiple curves work in harmony

COLOUR

Before applying the first coat of colour, I laid out the leaves on my table to create a pattern that would appear in the finished piece. In these leaves, the deep and cool summer green was beginning to fade out, while a hint of autumnal yellow was seeping in. I wanted to include both of those specific colours in a 'greenery-yallery' palate of which the Aesthetic Movement artists, who were also greatly influenced by Japan, would approve.

I use oil-based signpainter's paint for most of my work. It is heavily pigmented and, when used in combination with spar varnish and allowed to properly harden, produces a highly polishable finish. I add the varnish and turpentine to the paint, as well as a few drops of Japan Drier to speed up the drying process. The ratio changes depending on the specific use, but, in general, I'm looking for a mix that flows easily off the brush, yet is not runny. As

with every step in the finishing process, I experiment and make lots of samples.

Before mixing any of the ingredients, I wipe out the paint cup with a turpentine-dampened, lint-free cloth and then strain everything that goes into the cup through a paint filter. I do almost all of my finishing on the lathe, so it, too, has to be thoroughly cleaned, wiped down, covered as much as possible, and the area around it misted to help settle any ambient dust. As a precaution against the rust that might result from the misting, I keep all parts of the lathe, especially the ways, well oiled and waxed.

Since my paintbrush is as important as any tool in my studio, I use the best one I can afford: a 40mm-wide sable brush. If properly maintained, it will pay for itself many times over in the years to come.

I apply the first coat of paint with the lathe

turned off. I lay it on evenly in a cross-hatch pattern for complete coverage and to achieve an equal depth of paint on the entire piece. I then turn the lathe on to the lowest speed and float the brush from the centre of the bowl outward, then on the outer portions. I'm seeking the smoothest layer of paint possible. Generally, I am able to apply two layers in a day; then I allow it to dry overnight.

The next morning I wet sand the paint up to 500 grit. This process of wet sanding and applying two coats of paint per day goes on for five days. On the last day, I wet sand up to 1,500 grit. I then run the lathe at a slightly higher speed and polish the surface, first with '0000' steel wool, and then with a blue paper shop towel. In the process of sanding and polishing, I probably remove half the paint I've applied, but I'm left with a glass-smooth surface for the next step.



Step 5: straining the paint



Step 3: the piece is then liberally coated with grain filler – or pore filler

Step 4: playing with colour in order to get it just right



Step 6: the base coat is wet sanded...



Step 7: ... and then buffed with a blue shop towel



Step 8: the process of determining the highlight colour...

Step 9: ... which should look something like this

Painting the leaves

As the next layer of paint will be the accent colour, I add more of the yellow to the paint mix. I also add a bit more varnish, as I want the mixture to be a little less opaque. By doing this, I begin to build visual depth into the finish. I apply this new colour liberally to the inside of the bowl, where the leaves will be, in the same manner as previously described – laid on cross-hatch – then smoothed out with the lathe turning slowly. Once this first coat has started to become tacky, I add another coat to produce a deep layer of paint in which to create the impression of the leaves.

As soon as this second coat is applied, I begin placing the leaves into the wet, sticky paint, gently pressing them down so that their whole span is embedded. Take care to avoid the leaf moving from side to side, as I want as perfect an impression of the leaf and its surface texture as I can get. Now the timing becomes both tricky and important. I am looking for a point at which I can remove the leaf before the paint becomes so dry that it causes the leaf to tear and remain in the impression, but I want the paint to be dry enough so that the impression of the leaf veins will remain intact. Many

factors go into this magic moment; all I can suggest is that you experiment. When that magical time has indeed arrived, I begin removing the leaves using tweezers. I find it best to gently take hold of the leaf and pull at a low angle, similar to the proper way of removing masking tape. If I pick the leaves when they are full of moisture and their veins are well defined, and I have allowed the paint to set up to the proper level of tack, and if my stars are in alignment, I should be left with a well-defined impression of a ginkgo leaf. So what do I do now with these marvellous, well-defined fossil-like impressions of ginkgo



Step 10: determining the pattern and looking for visual balance



Step 11: because of the bowl's edges, the pattern of leaves inevitably changes in transferring them to the bowl. The time spent laying them out beforehand is well worth taking, however



Step 12: making sure all the leaves are firmly pressed into place. Be thorough but gentle



Step 13: very gently removing the leaves



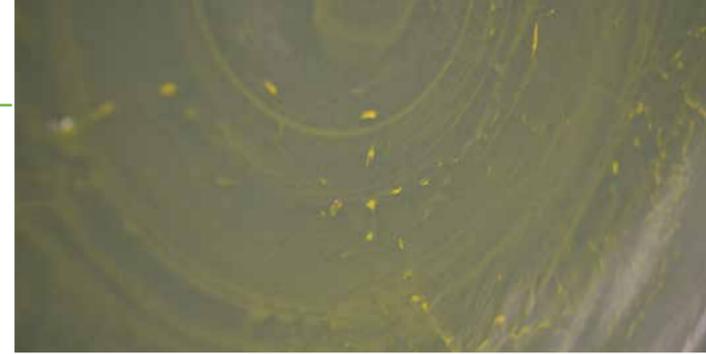
Step 14: leaving a good impression in the semi-dry paint

THE END IS IN SIGHT

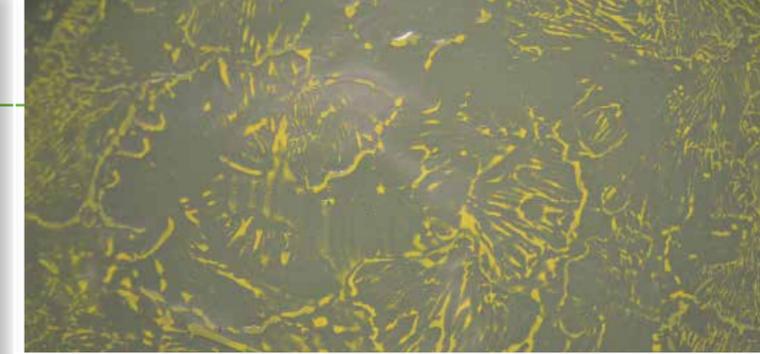
Wait for this coat of paint to thoroughly harden, not just dry. The paint will be dry to the touch rather quickly, but it needs to be fully hardened in order to be sandable and polishable. To me, hardened means that it has dried all the way through and that the adherence to the previous coat or substrate is rock solid. A chemical change is

taking place and must be allowed to complete itself. In fine furniture finishing, the rule is to allow 200 hours before a coat of finish is rubbed out. I do indeed wait that long with certain of my finishes, but this step in this particular finishing process needs but three to four days to harden. Once it has hardened, I begin to gingerly wet sand the surface with

600 grit paper. I keep a spray bottle of water at hand and constantly spray, then wipe the residue to monitor my progress. As soon as the brighter colours of the leaf impressions begin to appear, I switch to 800 grit and then go up to 1,500. I then thoroughly wash the bowl with water and wipe it down with mineral spirits to make sure all paint residue has been removed.



Step 15: the moment the highlight colour starts to show through, switch to the higher-grit paper and proceed judiciously



Step 16: once full leaf patterns begin to be revealed, stop. Sanding any further will remove so much paint that the patterns will disappear

THE END IS IN SIGHT (CONT.)

To make sure there is no moisture left from the wet sanding, I allow the piece to dry overnight and then apply the final finish coat the next day. This coat consists of gloss spar varnish tinted with the yellow colour, which results in a fully transparent layer of varnish. Again, all precautions are taken to strain the paint and clear the work space of ambient dust. As previously mentioned, I am beginning to use foam brushes for this step in the process. When the varnish is properly thinned and the lathe is turning at the proper slow speed, I am able to lay on a bubble-free and unmarked layer of varnish. Again, it takes practice but, as you will hopefully see, the end result is well worth the effort.

“I apply this new colour liberally to the inside of the bowl...”



Step 17: the tools for wet sanding



Step 18: applying a coat of varnish using a foam brush



Step 19: the range of colour created from two cans of paint is limitless

FINISHING TOUCHES

At this point, the reason I've chosen gloss varnish, and not semi-gloss, will become clear. I want a finish that glows delicately, not one that shines in a bright and brassy way. You will be able to see your face in it, but you will quickly realise that you are not looking at the finish, you are looking through the finish. It may seem counterintuitive, but, by using pumice, we are taking off a lot of the gloss. We put some gloss back with the rottenstone and we put back even more with waxing and buffing. So why not use semi-gloss varnish in the first place? Because it is a completely different look and feel. It may not be apparent at first but, over time, you will see and appreciate the difference and feel the extra effort is worth it.

Yes, indeed, there is a lot of effort involved in this process. It may remind my readers of the film *Karate Kid* and the phrase, 'wax on, wax off'. There is very good reason for that. For serious practitioners, Japanese martial art forms, like many

decorative art forms, are considered Zen arts. Through practice, the student seeks the way to self-improvement and enlightenment. My old karate instructor used to say that in polishing our technique through daily practice, we are polishing our souls. Interestingly, a Japanese master carpenter I know said that when he sharpened and polished his tools, he was also polishing his soul. I firmly believe that doing this sort of labour-intensive work in our wood art is no different. So, polish away! ●

The completed piece

