

All about van Gogh Table Top Finish

By Kathy van Gogh



- Varnish is a generic word used to describe the protective (usually clear, but often contains stain) topcoat and can refer to resin, spar, shellac, lacquer, oil and even wax
- Each varnish has it's pros and cons and we have selected the type that is best when considering how it works with our Fossil paint, environmental safety, toughness, hardness vs. flexibility, and clean up
- Varnish is designed to create a protective film over the surface. Do not think of it like paint, think of it like the clear nail polish that you peel off your nail to understand how it behaves. Some clear coats are very flexible while others are very brittle. Usually, the more brittle, the harder, and the more flexible the softer. We have chosen a finish that is harder so that when Johnny runs his toy truck across the beautiful table top you created, it won't leave scratches, unless of course, Johnny is a little demon and he's actually trying to mar the surface, in which case, nothing is safe, not even TTF!
- Another reason we have chosen TTF is that it is resistant to chemicals and food spills so that when Mom cleans the table top with her spray cleaner, or spills her Cabernet after a few too many, (and with a kid like Johnny, who can blame her!) it won't remove the finish.
- The advantage of a harder finish is that it is more scratch resistant. Unfortunately, the disadvantage of a harder finish is that if you drop a can of soup on it from a foot up, instead of creating a mere dent in the film of varnish, it will cause a fracture. This is always a trade off when selecting a varnish.
- The two most common choices for varnish are water based or oil based. Alkyd is synthetic oil, a type of resin, and you may see this word used interchangeably with oil.
- Among other things, the major differences between water based and oil based is that oil based will yellow over time, sometimes in as little as 6 weeks! Also, oil based is usually slower drying than water based.
- van Gogh Table Top Finish is a water based varnish and therefore does not yellow, unlike phenolic (thermo setting) or alkyd (oils etc.) varnishes so it's a good choice for what we do
- TTF dries quickly. This is one of the things that makes it challenging to work with, however, the problem with slower drying varnishes is that it allows more time for dust to settle on your piece. Dust that dries in your varnish is going to be there forever and produces an unsightly finish.

Ok, now you know some of the reasons why we chose this particular varnish to go with our Fossil paint. Now let's talk about how to apply it.

Applying varnish is a skill. It's like backgammon, easy to learn, but difficult to master. It's not rocket science, but it does require some practice and some patience.

- Never apply varnish to a wet surface. Ensure that the Fossil paint is completely dry. I usually like to wait at least 24 hours in the summer and 48 hours in the winter, depending on the humidity, more time may be required to allow the Fossil paint to completely dry.
- As you know, dust is the enemy, so wipe the piece off prior to varnishing. Do not use a tack cloth – it contains sticky stuff that may leave a residue on your piece and prohibit adhesion. Just use a clean, lint free dry or damp cloth, or better yet, use your hand because you can feel if it's not smooth and wipe away any dust or debris.
- Work in the most dust-free environment you can, so outside is not a good option. If your environment is really dusty, consider suspending a tarp over your work while it dries. NOTE: Learn from my mistake – put the tarp up before you begin working or all the yucky bits will fall off your tarp into your wet varnish as you set it up, thereby negating the entire process of tarping your work area!

- Do not shake the can. This will create bubbles. If you do shake it to mix it, then wait at least 24 hours before using.
- You must mix the TTF prior to use. There may be a layer of thick white gooey stuff on the bottom of the can if it has been sitting for a while. This is the flattening agent. We designed the varnish to a satin finish, so it has a bit of shine, but it's not glossy. Failure to mix all of the flattening agent into the varnish will result in an overly glossy finish. If you don't feel any goo on the bottom of the can, that's good. Mix with a stir stick and then let sit for a few minutes.
- Decant the TTF into a separate container to apply. This prevents bits picked up during the application process from contaminating the whole can. When your project is finished, do not return the unused TTF to the can. It's just not worth it. To dispense of any leftover properly, allow to dry before discarding.
- Do not use old varnish. All the work it takes to apply properly will be destroyed if you use varnish that has separated or has bits of dried varnish from around the rim in it, or has become too thick through evaporation. The TTF has a shelf life of at least 1 year after opening but if you leave wet product around the rim when you close it, you may get rust. This can be mitigated by pouring your TTF through some panty hose into another container. And let's face it, some evil person invented those panty hose and this is the best use I've ever found for them! I gave up wearing them twenty years ago in protest!
- Select the proper brush. Some people will suggest a roller or a foam brush. I disagree. Those both create bubbles. Bubbles are the second enemy of varnish and you want to do everything you can to prevent them from occurring. I have tested many different methods of applying TTF, including very expensive badger brushes and specialty varnish brushes which can cost upwards of \$60.00 - \$100.00. I have found that the very best way to minimize bubbles and brush strokes is with a densely packed taklon bristle brush or synthetic bristle brush. If you get into this in a serious way, please contact me, I have a favourite brush that is 8 inches wide and does an amazing job, but it's quite expensive. I'll point you in the right direction to buy one, or you can special order them from your Local Paintologist

Here is the expensive brush I'm referring to – Liquitex makes it. I LOVE IT!



- Work in the direction of the grain of the wood. If the piece is not made of wood, imagine that it is and work in the direction it would have been created had it been made of wood. I have seen many pieces where the artist has stroked the paint brush in waves around the shape of the top surface. This always looks a little wrong. Pull the brush as if you were following the wood grain, not the design of the piece.
- If you do want to roll, then use a method called "tipping". Right after you roll a line of TTF, go back over it very gently with a soft brush. You only want the very tips of the brush to ever so gently stroke the surface, barely touching it, to knock down the bubbles.
- Dip your brush $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the bristles into the TTF, do not wipe the side off, it's better to tap both sides of the brush against the container. Wiping will remove too much TTF plus it puts bubbles into the can.
- Off load much of the TTF onto the surface about 3 inches away from your starting position. Do this by wiping both sides of the brush onto the surface. Not only are you trying to offload the excess TTF, but you are also working the TTF evenly into your bristles.
- Now, position the tips of your bristles at the starting point and angle your brush at about a 45 degree angle to the surface. Start about an inch away from the edge of the piece, make a stroke and then go back to the very edge and carry on. If you start right away at the edge, you will create a lot of drips over the edge.
- SLOW AND STEADY wins this race.

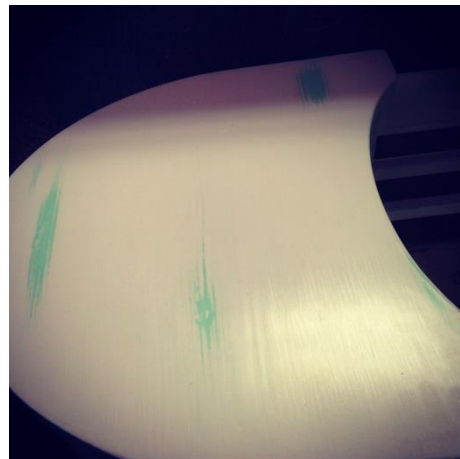
- You always want to apply the thinnest coats possible of varnish. Heavy coats will yellow where they are allowed to pool. Several thin coats are superior to fewer thick coats.
- Pull the brush at the 45 degree angle slowly and steadily, do not stop. You will be pulling a bead of TTF in front of the brush. It will drag on this first coat, don't be alarmed.
- As soon as you start to see skips in the coverage, it's time to reload your brush.
- Resist the urge to go back over the part you just did or to back brush it. The more you *fiddlefart* around with it, the worse it will look. The only thing you should go back and clean up are drips which can be very difficult to correct if you let them dry.
- If you see skips or *holidays* as they are called in the biz, ignore them. You will get them on subsequent coats. If you try to patch them now, you will just make a mess as the TTF is already starting to dry.
- Now for your second stroke. This time, when you off load a few inches away from your starting position, you're going to be working in the opposite direction from when you started. In other words, if you were pulling the brush from left to right, you will now be working from right to left. This is so you can avoid creating a straight join line were you put your brush down to begin the stroke. Instead you want to put the brush down and stroke into the wet varnish just a bit and then lift you brush as if it were a plane taking off just after you meet up the end of the stroke you previously finished.
- In order to decide where you're next starting position is, look at how far your first bead of TTF took you. If it was 12 inches, start your next pass about 11 inches away from where you stopped. You want to run out of TTF about an inch into your first pass.
- Using those numbers above, you would off load your TTF at about 9 inches away from your finished pass. In other words, you off load inside the area you're just about to varnish so you can pick it up as a bead in front of your brush.
- When you get to the part that was previously varnished, you want to lift your brush up like a plane taking off. Don't stop suddenly or you will leave a very visible line of demarcation where you stopped.
- Now, you will have a line where you initially put your brush down, but you will stroke over that on your third stroke. Hopefully, this is making sense.
- Continue working in this way across the piece. When you get to the end of your first row of varnish, go back to the beginning position and start a new row. Overlap the edge of the first row with the second row by about 1/8 of an inch.
- Continue in this manner until the entire piece is finished.
- It will not look good yet! Don't panic!
- The first coat is the most difficult to apply because the Fossil paint is absorbent and sucks the TTF into it as you're laying it on. In addition to that, you're fighting the quick dry time of the TTF. The subsequent coats will be easier to apply.
- Ideally, you should wait 24 hours for the first coat to dry.
- Sand the surface very gently with 600 grit wet/dry sandpaper. Use it dry, no water needed here. When I say very gently, I'm not kidding, scuff scuff, that's enough! No elbow grease! All you're trying to do is get rid of the peaks that were created by any air bubbles that did not pop. Those air bubbles that did pop will now be craters. Wipe with a dry lint free cloth after sanding.
- Now repeat the application process in exactly the same manner as the first coat. You may notice that the TTF will travel farther with each stroke because it's now sliding across the first coat like an ice rink instead of being dragged across a chalk pit!
- Think of this varnishing process like a Zamboni machine on an ice rink. You are filling in each little crater with TTF instead of water and then smoothing it out with your brush just like the guy between periods in a hockey game.

- Allow this coat to dry completely before applying the next coat. This timing varies depending upon the ambient temperature, but I would suggest at least an hour.
- Sand again before applying the next coat. Don't forget to wipe off the sanding dust prior to applying the TTF.
- Each time your TTF dries, use your hands to feel the finish and let them guide your decision on whether or not you need to apply another coat. Each coat gets easier to apply and provides more protection. The more skilled you become at applying varnish, the fewer coats you will need to achieve perfection.
- Always apply at least two coats to provide a protective finish from little Johnny's everywhere.
- Do not sand the last coat unless you want to create my all-time favourite finish, described below.
- It takes 30 days for TTF to fully cure. Prior to curing, the finish is vulnerable. Do not place anything on the finish until it has cured even though it may feel hard and dry.

My favourite way to finish a piece of Fossil-Painted Furniture:

My daughter Samantha and I were experimenting one day and came up with the most beautiful finish! We call this "Hand Rubbed TTF Finish" Apply the first coat of TTF as described above. Sand with dry 600 grit sandpaper – just a little to knock down the points (Scuff Scuff that's enough!), dust and apply the second coat of TTF. Allow to dry and then sand again with wet 600 grit sandpaper, but this time, put a single drop of dishwashing liquid on the surface and add some water to the surface. The soap acts as a lubricant and allows you to polish the varnish. This will create highs and lows in your finish. Some parts will be shinier than others. Wipe clean with a damp cloth. Allow to dry for about 20 minutes. Now apply our van Gogh Rice Wax Finish with a smooth lint free cloth. Rub it into the varnish and wipe off the excess. Allow to dry for 30 minutes or so and buff lightly and quickly with a clean lint free cloth. Oh ma Gawd....it feels like *buttah* and it looks beautiful! It will have a soft hand rubbed lustre, but it will be tough as nails. The wax gives it the look and feel of an old time worn piece and evens out the highs and lows in the sheen, but the TTF gives it a bullet proof toughness. Now the wax is just a sacrificial finish. If it gets beaten up from use, simply reapply a coat of wax now and then – say every 6 months to a year or longer depending on the wear and tear.

Here's a photo of this finish on a piece Samantha painted using our Designer Colour Mint Julep underneath our standard palette colour called Chalk.



Hopefully this is a helpful document. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or comments.

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HAPPY PAINTING!