

# **Discussion on Wood Finishes**

**By Michael Panish  
Cabinetry & Millwork Expert Witness**

I have been contacted as an expert witness by homeowners, contractors, and attorneys on many occasions to give my opinion on issues arising from alleged defective cabinet, wood, and furniture finishes. My expertise in cabinet and wood finishes comes through many years of hands-on experience. I was fortunate to have learned wood finishing techniques from a few craftsmen that learned their trade through strict European apprenticeships. I have also been involved in many test programs for new finishes prior to products being put in the commercial market place. Most recently, a paint manufacturer used my home as the first real world product placement for a specific type of exterior house paint in the harsh environment of New England.

With the constant changes in formulations of finishes and paint products, modern methods for application and preparation have become very challenging. Finishes that were available 15-20 years ago have been outlawed due to EPA regulations. Lacquers, varnishes, and formulated finishes for fine furniture no longer have the same base compounds or high solid volatile components that made them so easy to use and durable in the past. Modern paints lack the binders and bases that once made them easy to flow on and achieve a depth of color and texture.

The basic premise of any finish is to protect what it is applied to. Whether it is a museum quality antique cabinet or basic wood clapboards on an exterior of an old barn, finish materials are designed to stabilize, seal, and protect the wood from moisture absorption, weather, and sunlight. In the case of the museum quality cabinet, the proper finish was done with a specific intention. Stains and clear finishes bring out the beauty of the woods used. They show off the craftsmanship of the cabinet maker, augmenting the chosen wood grains and rich tones, and bring out the highlights of the hand selected materials. In conjunction with the beautiful results, the most important feature of a good finish is the protection of the piece.

Regardless of what finish is chosen, the key to a successful project is always exceptional and thorough preparation of the surface prior to the application of the finish materials. The majority of calls that I receive are complaints about the actual finish. Sometimes the problem has to do with inconsistency of color and shading, other times the finish appears and feels rough and gritty. In several cases, I have been asked to comment about the overall appearance of the cabinet stain and finish. Cabinet manufacturers are not always able to convey the difference in wood characteristics that affect the overall finish and color of certain species. The homeowner does not always understand the variation of the wood product chosen. Some homeowners claim that they want a truly exotic and unique wood, but have not always been pleased with the product once installed in their homes. On the other side of the coin, cabinet manufacturers have been guilty of not properly staining and finishing their

**products. Cabinet finish defects have occurred when improper procedures were used at the time of manufacturing.**

**In one case, a large tract home developer was experiencing significant problems due to crazing and cracking of finish materials. In this case, I determined that the cause was a defective product from the finish manufacturer. The cabinet manufacturer had done nothing wrong applying the product. The fault was with the product's chemical makeup due to a defective product batch used to finish a large number of cabinets. The cabinet manufacturer was unaware that the product had been recalled, and was not given any direct warning from his commercial supplier.**

**Michael Panish is an expert witness, forensic analyst, and consultant in the field of Construction. Mr. Panish is an expert witness for cabinets, millwork, and wood finishes. He is a master cabinetmaker, has practiced cabinet finishing techniques for over 30 years, and is considered an expert in the field of cabinet and furniture making and finishing. He is licensed in the State of California as a General Building Contractor, Cabinet & Millwork Contractor, Door, Lock & Security Equipment Contractor, Painting Contractor, and Electrical Contractor. Mr. Panish has over 30 years of hands-on experience in the construction industry. Mr. Panish has provided testimony in construction defect, poor workmanship, product liability, and personal injury cases relating to most construction trades, doors, locks, automatic doors, cabinetry, and custom casework. Mr. Panish has offices in California and the New England area and is available for nationwide consultation, forensic analysis, inspection, report, and testimony. Mr. Panish can be reached at (818) 429-1963 (Ask for Sharon). Visit [www.constructionwitness.com](http://www.constructionwitness.com) for more information.**