

Cleaning Clock Cases

By D. Rod Lloyd

Many of the clock cases you come across are very dirty, often very dark from the years of household furniture polish and normal dust floating in the air and probably smoke. However, it is most likely the original finish was applied so well it still exists underneath.

The motto “Do No Harm” means we want to restore the clock back to its original state as close as possible while doing as little damage or alteration as possible. Our goal is to remove the dirt and furniture polish back to the original French polish finish underneath.

There are many cleaning products on the market that will remove the dirt, however most of these products will work too well and damage the original polish below over time. We lean from museum restoration practices that any cleaner with a PH above 7.0 will not only clean as you work on the clock, but will continue to eat at the surface long after you have finished, damaging the original polish or shellac.

The recommendation is to use “Mr. Clean”. This product happens to have the perfect PH value at just under 7.0 and removes the dirt with very little effort. Just put some Mr. Clean on #0000 Steel Wool and using light pressure in circular motion, clean off the dirt. You will likely see the hidden wood grain re-appear. At this point, using a soft cotton rag and giving a little pressure to rub the surface and generate a little heat to reactivate the shellac.

If the original surface has minor damage like scratches, water marks or alligating, you can use an “Amalgamator” from Mohawk. Used carefully it will reactivate the shellac a little and blend it to create a new restored finish.

Any loose veneer can be re-glued using “Hide Glue”. This is the type of glue used by the original case maker and we still use the modern version from Titebond because it can be un-glued using vinegar and re-glued after repairs and restoration had been completed.

Once all the dirt is removed, you need to “Feed” the wood again and for this it is recommended you use Howard “Feed-n-Wax” orange oil which is readily available. This will stop the pores from completely drying out and give life back to the wood.

The final step is to protect the clock case with Bri-Wax to give a mat shine that resembles the original hand rubbed French Polish.

Information based on a presentation by Bob Arnold, Portland Chapter 31 NAWCC 2013