Coloring Wood by Jimmy Clewes

By **Craft Supplies USA** - June 3, 2014

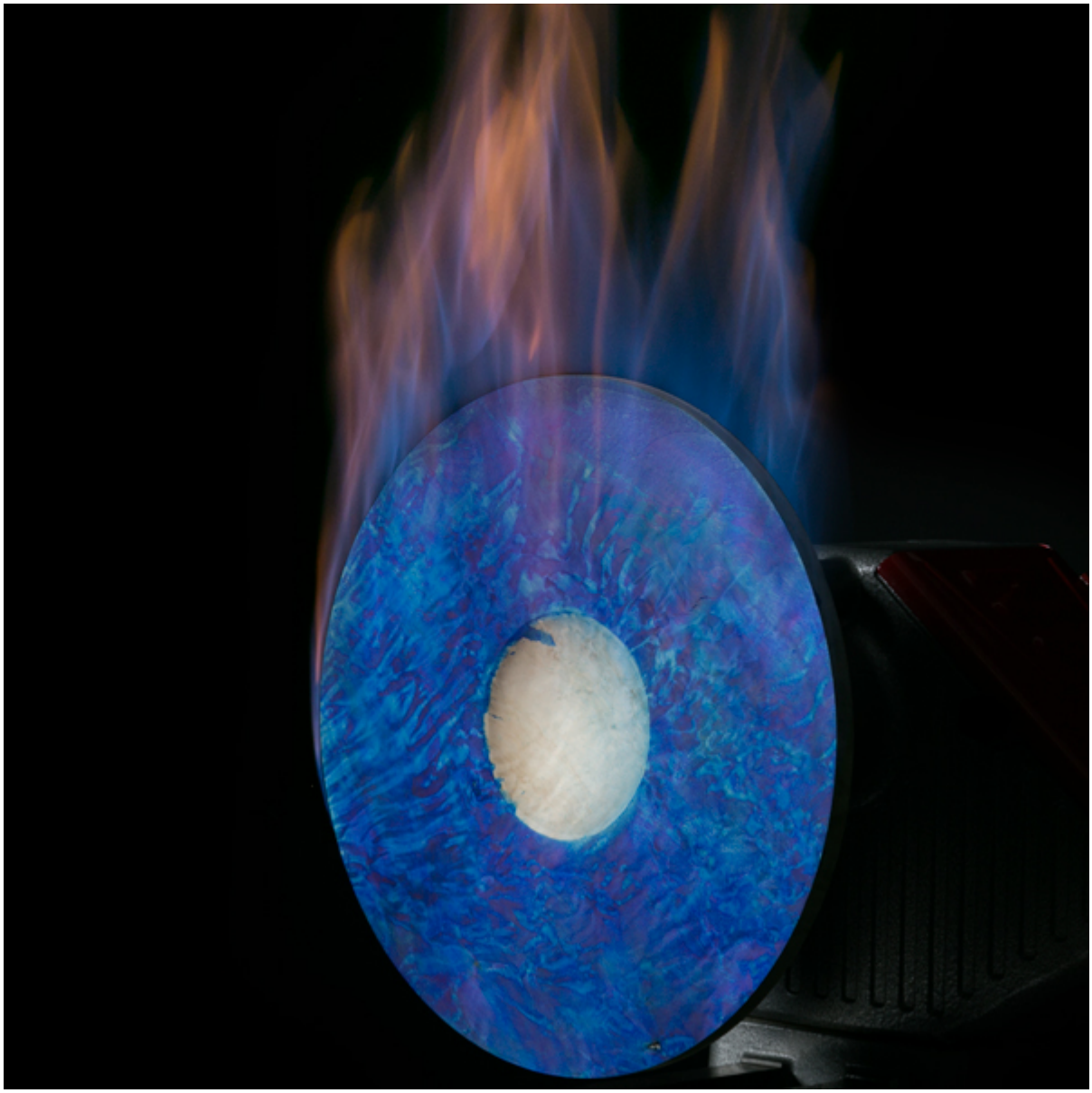
Using dye to color woodturnings is a fun and exciting way to make any piece of wood look spectacular. In this article, professional woodturner Jimmy Clewes shows you how to use a multi-layer coloring technique to create a stunning effect on your woodturnings.

Coloring Preparation

Sand up to 400 grit

After turning your piece, the coloring process can be started. It is very important to sand the piece correctly. In my mind, the initial sanding, as with any finishing process, is the most important.

I usually start sanding with 180 grit but this depends on the finish you have from the tool. A cut surface will be better than a scraped surface. You must ensure that the surface to be colored is flawless and that any tear-out or disturbed grain is eradicated. Remember, if you are using a rippled or burl wood (both of which are most desirable and gives an aesthetically pleasing result) the grain may be running in different directions so inspect the surface very closely. If there are any flaws on the surface they will show up when you apply the first color. Sand through the grits, 220, 240, 320 without missing one, continue up to 400 grit. Remember, if there is no tear-out after 180 grit then all you are doing is removing the abrasions made by the previous abrasive.



Use caution when using this technique

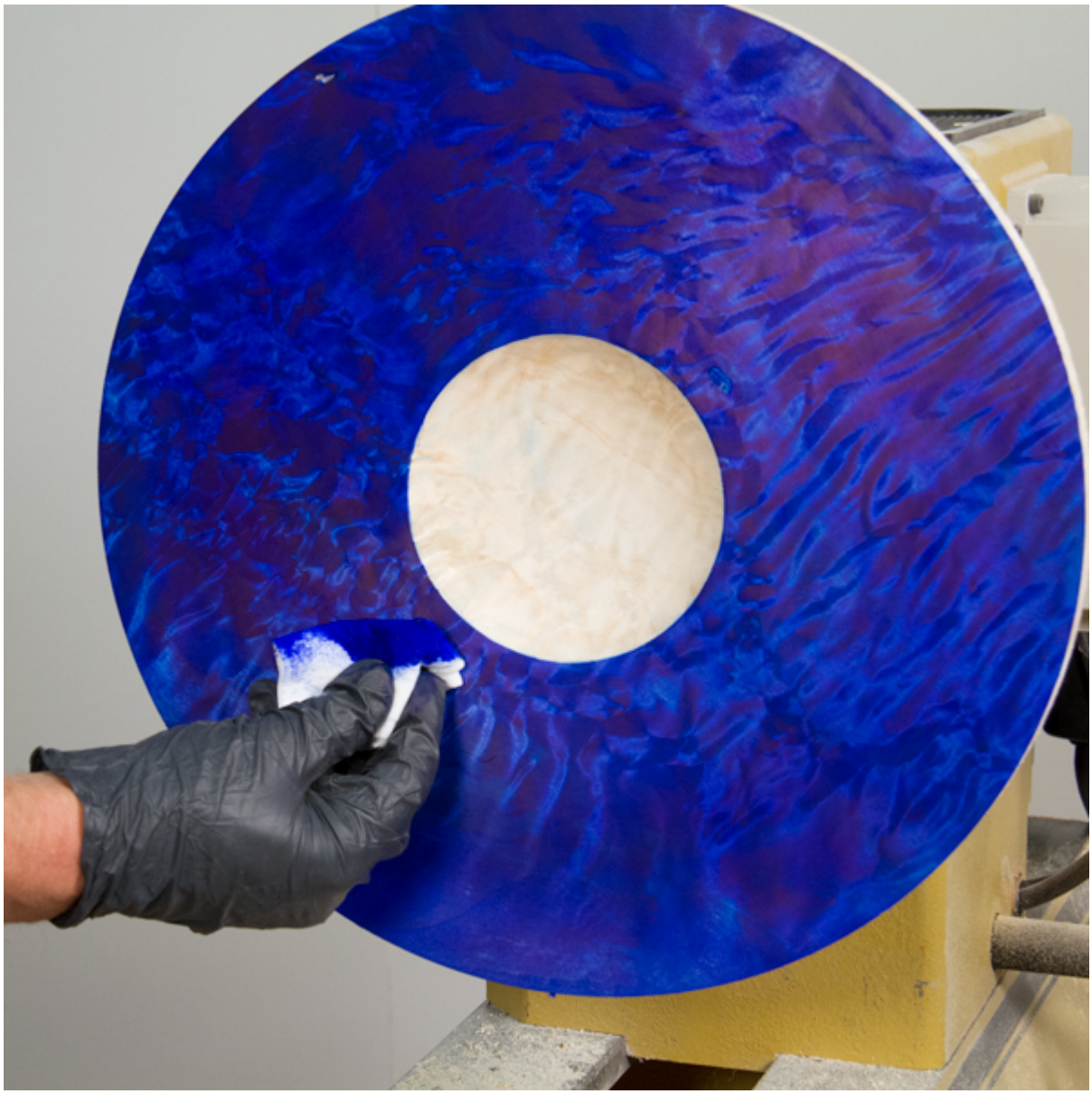
The dyes that I prefer to use are a pre-mixed; alcohol based dye. The advantage of using this type of dye is that they are lightfast, which means that they stay bright and vibrant. They are also spirit based and therefore dry quicker, or can be "flashed off" using a lighter or match. ***Note: It is solely your responsibility to take the necessary safety precautions when using this technique so as to prevent a fire or personal injury. I don't accept responsibility for burnt down workshops!***

Being spirit based allows for blending or mixing on the surface of the wood, by applying alcohol neatly with a spray or in a more controlled manner with a cloth or sponge soaked in alcohol. The colors also have a 5% shellac content, which binds the color to the alcohol. This will aid the finishing process, as with each coat of color the wood will become more progressively sealed, therefore the later colors soak in less.

Color Selection

Choice of colors and a basic knowledge of colors is useful but not essential. The three primary colors of blue, yellow and red will play a large part. Depending on which colors you mix together, you will get different results. Blue and yellow make green, red and yellow = orange, red and blue = purple. The three colors I like to use are blue, green, and yellow or blue, purple, and yellow. Sometimes I may add a red.

Application



Simply wipe on with a paper towel or rag

For example, the first color I would use would be blue, this can be applied with a brush, cloth or sponge and covers the whole surface. Since the color is alcohol based it will dry in under a minute.

Cut back the Dye with 400 grit sand paper

When dry, sand back with 320 grit to remove some of the blue. Depending on how much of the blue you remove will determine the end result, in that the less you remove the darker the whole piece will be upon completion. Next, I would apply the green. This color will take to the areas more where the blue has been removed. If you are using rippled wood, such as sycamore or maple, the blue stain will penetrate more in the short grain and therefore some of the color will remain when the long grain next to it will be exposed. The green could be applied to the surface in a dappled or varied manner and does not necessarily need to cover the whole surface.

Dappling the yellow will lighten parts of the green and make some of the blue areas a different shade of green

Cut this back with 400 grit again to a degree where you will gain lighter wood to take the next color of yellow. The yellow can be used sparingly and again could be applied in a dappled manner. The yellow will lighten parts of the green and make some of the blue areas a different shade of green. The final sanding should be with 600, 800, 1000-grit abrasive. This will prepare the surface for the gloss spray finish. If you need to reduce the amount of lightness caused by the application of yellow, just cut this back with 600 grit. Remember that the blue and the green coats seal the wood twice therefore the yellow will not have penetrated as far. Other techniques I have used to blend the 3 colors together are to use a sponge soaked in alcohol or to spray the surface with alcohol. If spraying, keep the piece rotating in order to stop “drips” or “runs” from occurring. The colors can be “fixed” by igniting the alcohol and rotating the piece by hand. The alcohol burns out quickly and should not damage the turning.

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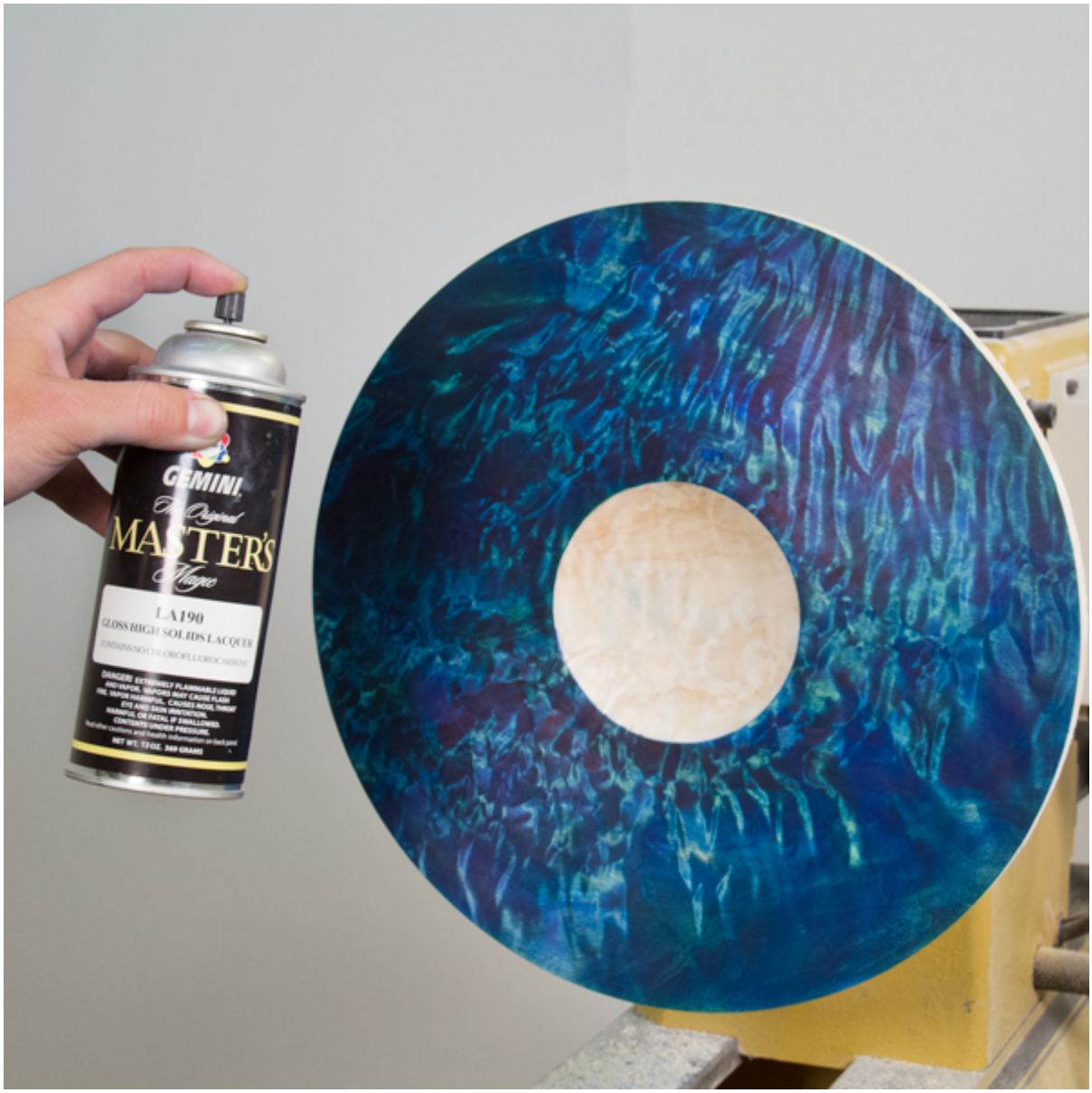
Finishing Over Colors



Evenly spray the piece to prevent runs

The final finish is a spray gloss. I like to use a pre-catalyzed lacquer and apply several coats, cutting back between each cured coat with 1500-grit abrasive. It's important to make sure each coat is fully cured before cutting back. This multiple coat process will build up to a flawless finish. With experience and trying different finishes, oils etc., I have found that there is more depth and the color detail is far superior with a spray gloss finish. As a point of interest while demonstrating at the Craft Supplies USA symposium in Provo, Utah I used a

great product called Masters Magic Spray Lacquer, kindly supplied by Craft Supplies USA which is conveniently in a can! You should finish up with a flawless finish, with the colors bright and vibrant. Colored, rippled wood can have an almost iridescent look.
Hopefully these techniques will help you achieve a decorative touch on your next project. Try experimenting with different colors and multi-layering dyes to find what works best for you. Leave any comments or suggestions you might have in the comment section below, we'd love to hear them!

Items Used

Sanding Discs
Chestnut Spirit Stain
Cotton Flannel Squares
Sandpaper (sheets)
Master's Magic Spray Lacquer

About Jimmy Clewes-

Jimmy is not your ordinary woodturner. Upon a first meeting one would think of him as a renegade, a free thinker and not within the stereotypical image of a woodturner. His charming British style, unending wit, creative mind and magnetic personality are only some of the attributes that make him popular in the woodturning demonstration circuit.

When asked what drives him, he shares, "My energy comes from those around me. When I can stir the creativity of one's mind, that for me is very satisfying. As with any art form, expression is only as limited as one's mind and I want to raise the bar and create an awareness of the art form that has been virtually unknown to most people."

Coloring Wood by Jimmy Clewes

Coloring Preparation

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- The dyes that I prefer to use are a pre-mixed; alcohol based dye. The advantage of using these colors is that they are lightfast, which means that they stay bright and vibrant, they are also spirit based and therefore dry quicker, or can be "flashed off" using a lighter or match. (Please exercise the necessary safety precautions.) Being spirit based allows for blending or mixing on the surface of the wood, by applying alcohol neatly with a spray or in a more controlled manner with a cloth or sponge soaked in alcohol. The colors also have a 3% shellac content, which binds the color to the alcohol. This will aid the finishing process, as with each coat of color the wood will become more progressively sealed, therefore the later colors soak in less.

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Application

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Note: Please consider the safety aspect of this procedure and take any necessary precautions. I accept no responsibility for burnt down workshops!

Finishing Over Colors

- The final finish is a spray gloss. I like to use a pre-catalyzed lacquer and apply several coats, cutting back between each cured coat with 1500-grit abrasive. This will build up a flawless finish. With experience and trying different finishes, oils etc I have found that there is more depth and the color detail is far superior with a spray gloss finish. As a point of interest while demonstrating at the Craft Supplies USA symposium in Provo, Utah I used a great product called Masters Magic Spray Lacquer, kindly supplied by Craft Supplies USA which is conveniently in a can! You should finish up with a flawless finish, with the colors bright and vibrant. Colored, rippled wood can have an almost iridescence look.

Coloring with Molotow Dye Markers

Filling the Markers

1. Disassemble the marker.
2. Fill the markers with your choice of dyes by using a funnel or pipette. Reassemble the marker.

Preparing the Workpiece

1. Make sure the work surface to be colored has been sanded to 320 grit, is completely dry, and does not have any surface contaminants such as oil, wax, or dust.

2. Seal the turning using a thinned sanding sealer with a ratio of 70% sanding sealer and 30% lacquer thinner.
3. Sand back the work surface with 600 grit sandpaper.

Coloring the Workpiece

1. Color the workpiece with the darkest color you plan on using. In this case we will be using black as our base color. Giving the workpiece a dark base will intensify the figure and color in the finished piece.
2. Once the dye has dried, sand back the dye using 600 grit sand paper.

3. We recommend moving the workpiece still in the chuck to a workbench so it's easier to color on.
4. Using the marker, color directly over the figure on the workpiece using a dark color (red, blue, green, purple); we will be using blue.
5. Fill in the non-figured space with a lighter color such as green.

Blending the Colors

1. The color on the workpiece needs to be blended to remove the harsh lines of color and smooth everything out.
2. Blend the colors together by wiping denatured alcohol or yellow dye in a circular motion.

3. If you have dye bleed to any unwanted areas, put the workpiece on the lathe and sand out any imperfections.

Setting the Colors

1. A nice glossy finish can be achieved using a spray lacquer. Spray multiple light coats and let dry overnight. Once dry, spray lacquer can be polished and buffed if desired.

Note: Do not use a wipe-on finish because the solvents in most finishes will cut the dye and leave an undesirable result.

Wood Dying & Coloring

Jim West 10/11/18

Alcohol-based Dying

- **Supplies**
  - Sandpaper
    - 320, 400, 600 grit
  - Sanding sealer
    - I use 1/3 boiled linseed oil + 1/3 mineral spirits + 1/3 shellac
      - Friction polish it in with lather spinning
      - Sand back with 400 grit
    - 70% sanding sealer + 30% lacquer thinner
  - Newspaper or drop cloth for lathe/table covering
  - Lot's of paper towels!
  - Lot's of blue nitride gloves!
  - Old or protective clothing!
  - Denatured alcohol in bottle
  - Denatured alcohol is spray bottle
  - Die in various colors
    - Lot's of colors available
    - I like to mix primary colors
      - I have red, yellow blue, black and white
    - Apply with a cloth, sponge, brushes or sprayed
    - Can be flashed off with a match/lighter
    - Wood becomes progressively sealed with each layer, so multiple layers penetrate less
  - Bottles to store thinned/custom brewed colors
  - Pipettes/medicine droppers to transfer dye into bottles
  - Small measuring cup (if you are an engineer, ha!!)
  - Lot's of flannel cloth squares
  - Brushes
    - Small artist brushes
    - Make up brushes
  - Foam make up pads
  - Malotow Dye Markers
    - More precision
    - Create patch work patterns
    - Selectively place colors on your work
  - Matches/cigarette lighter /heat gun to die dye
  - Spray lacquer for final top coat

Alcohol-based Dying (2)

- **Wood Selection**
- **Wood Preparation**
  - Sand as you normally would, 180, 220, 320, 400, etc.
  - Imperfections jump out after die is applied
  - Apply sanding sealer (optional)
    - Apply on lathe and obtain a friction dry with a cloth while the lathe is rotating
    - Sealing can help non- uniformity of die absorption into the wood
- **Techniques**

  - General considerations
    - Applying with the bowl chucked in the lathe works well
      - Easy to rotate the piece
      - Can rapidly sand to adjust color depths or compensate for goof ups!
  - Application
    - Cloth application works well
    - Foam brushes work well to cover larger areas
      - Its easy to apply more than desired
    - Smaller brushed can help fill in cracks, etc.
  - Alcohol is your friend!
    - Helps blend colors and removes harshness
  - Finish coasts
    - Use spray lacquer
    - Wipe on finishes contain solvent that will cut the die and produce bad results

  - **Technique 1** (Demo): Blending lighter to darker colors
    - Thin all dies for the project as desired
    - Apply lighter colored base color coat uniformly
      - Flash dry with a lighter – be careful!
        - I've used a heat gun also
      - Spinning on the lathe accelerates drying
    - Absorption depends on grain type
    - Sand base coat with 320 to adjust color if desired
    - Apply darkest color in desired area
    - Blend with alcohol
    - Apply mid color after darkest color
    - Blend with alcohol
    - Repeat coloring and blending process until satisfied
    - Yellow works well to smooth everything out
    - Final sanding with 600 – 1000 grit
    - Final finish is gloss lacquer in the normal manner

Alcohol-based Dying (3)

- **Techniques**
  - **Technique 2** (Demo variant): Blending darker to lighter colors
    - Thin all dies for the project as desired
    - Apply darker colored base color coat uniformly
      - Flash dry with fire or heat
      - Spinning on the lathe accelerates drying
    - Absorption depends on grain type
    - Color absorption will likely be non-uniform
    - Sand base coat with 320 to adjust color if desired
    - Apply next darkest color in desired area by dappling
    - Blend with alcohol
    - Apply light color in desired areas by dappling
    - Blend with alcohol
    - Repeat coloring and blending process until satisfied
    - Final sanding with 600 – 1000 grit
    - Final finish is gloss lacquer in the normal manner
  - **Technique 3** (Jimmy Clews)
    - Colors can be blended together using an alcohol soaked cloth by rubbing/dappling, or spraying/spritzing alcohol on the surface after each new color is applied
    - If spraying, keep rotating the piece on the lather to prevent runs/drips
    - Colors can be fixed by flashing with fire while hand rotated the lathe
    - Sand with 400 and apply 3rd color by dappling
    - Final sanding with 600 – 1000 grit
    - See Jimmy's handouts for more details

Alcohol-based Dying (4)

- **Technique 4** (Jimmy Clews)
  - Apply base color coat
    - Flash dry with fire – be careful!
  - Absorption depends on grain type
  - Sand base coat with 320 to adjust color
  - Selectively apply 2nd color in areas where the first color was removed – dappling
  - Sand with 400 and apply 3rd color by dappling
  - Each coat penetrates less, so progressively lighter sanding is required
  - Final sanding with 600 – 1000 grit
  - Final finish is gloss lacquer in the normal manner
  - See Jimmy's handouts for more details

- **Technique 5:** Molotow Markers
  - Allow more precise and selective color placement
  - Allow more detailed accenting of features, grain figure
  - Like a felt pen loaded with dye
  - Can draw very fine features
  - Create patch work patterns
  - Blending can be accomplished by alcohol soaked rag, or yellow die, rubbed in a circular motion
  - Sand out any die bleed
  - Finish with spray lacquer in the normal fashion
  - See Craft Supplies USA Handout for more details

Alcohol-based Dying (5)

- **"Gotchas", Lessons Learned**
  - Be prepared to anticipate a mess!
    - Die has the viscosity of water, manages to get eveywhere and stains clothing/hands
  - Always use fresh/clean nitride gloves
    - Alcohol from wet rags will bleed the die from your gloves onto you piece
  - Have everything you need within arms reach before your begin!
  - If applying off-lathe, be careful of bleed over areas where you do not want a specific color
  - If on-lathe, selective sanding or tool cutting gives you more precise control of color changes
    - E.g., precisely color a platter rim
  - Applying too much die at once slows drying time and does not improve penetration!
    - Many lighter coats, with drying in between works well
  - Results can be unpredictable!
  - Have fun, it can be like finger painting as a child!
- **Resources**
  - Craft Supplies USA Web Site
    - Jimmy Clews videos
    - Materials
  - Other Vendors
  - YouTube
    - Craft Supplies USA
    - SP Wood Art
    - WYOMING WOOD TURNER
    - Many others!

Water-based Coloring

- **Techniques**
  - Same basic approach that caricature wood carvers use
  - Thin acrylic paints with water
  - Mix custom colors
  - Use artist/foam brushes and sponges
  - Blend colors with water/dry brushing techniques
  - Dry with hair dryer to set colors if desired/needed
  - Water color based pencils are available for more precise coloring
    - Can blned these with water also

- **Finish Coat**
  - Spray Shellac sets the colors
  - Can use spray lacquer after shellac has dried
  - Boiled Linseed Oil also works well as a final finish