

Sealing Wood Blocks

Some woodcut printers like to seal their block before they begin to print. Here are a number of ways to do this from various people and sources.

Karen Kunc from the University of Nebraska seals the wood with shellac. Notes from her class say that it's important to seal both sides of the block to prevent warping; to rub the shellac on with a rag or paper towel; that it can raise the grain of the wood slightly so the block may need a light sanding after the shellac is dry; and that shellac cleans up with alcohol. (*The Artist's Handbook* also says that it can be thinned with alcohol. The alcohol may turn it cloudy, but they say this will go away when it dries.) Karen puts it on after drawing or transferring her image onto the block, so her reason for using the shellac is to make it possible to take a proof, clean the block of ink, and still see the original drawing underneath. Shellac is insoluble in turpentine or mineral spirits.

Bill Paden at NYU used PVA glue (like Elmer's) thinned with water. He would apply this to the plywood, allow it to dry, sand it lightly and then carve. He felt this strengthened the wood so it was less likely to chip, especially the very thin veneer on the top of the plywood block. PVA glue is not affected by water after it dries.

Barbara Mason, a Portland area printmaker and member of Baren Forum, uses varnish. She doesn't name a brand or type, so just any good quality varnish from the local woodworking store (or internet site) would probably be fine.

The Art and Craft of Woodblock Printmaking also recommends varnishing the blocks with a

"transparent matte or semi-matt water-soluble varnish to be used in indoor spaces and thin it in the ratio of 1:1 (varnish to water). If the varnish is too thick, it will form a film on the surface and prevent the texture of the wood from showing in the impression. Spread the varnish on the block with a broad brush as evenly as possible. If the varnish is too runny, apply another layer when the first has dried." They also note that varnish makes the block harder and your tools will dull faster, that you will need to sand the block after applying it, and that shellac can also be used.

Another suggestion from the same book: "Cold-press linseed oil is another option for treating the block. Oil will make the wood softer and diminish splintering; this is particularly true for plywood. Oil will also saturate the wood, preventing the block from absorbing the oil in the ink. Spread an even layer of linseed oil with a brush or a rag. You may repeat this once or twice until the block is saturated. Linseed oil takes a long time to dry; two to three weeks: ground several blocks while you are at it. Activated linseed oil will dry in a day.

Hot oil will be better taken in by the block, but be careful when heating the oil. Do not let the oil boil or heat it too much: 50 to 65 degrees is enough. The flash point of linseed oil is 100 degrees, but it may catch fire during heating. Keep a lid ready by the pan to smother the fire. Never use water! Wash the brush after use and do not toss the rags in the waste bin: they are self-inflammable. Burn the rags or store them immersed in water."



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