

Industry and Ideas

A Digression about Varnish

In the eighteenth century, *varnish* was a term indicating almost any viscous liquid that can be applied to a surface and that, when dry, forms a cohesive, protective, and glossy coat. We use nearly the same definition today, if less liberally: Varnish is most often a sealant for wood or a protective layer applied to a painting. Both definitions were likely in the eighteenth century, but, in practice and in description, there were more possibilities. A ceramic glaze was a type of varnish. Josiah Wedgwood used "Dr. Turner's brown varnish" to put an antiqued bronze surface on pottery.¹ Metals were varnished to protect them from rust, preserve their luster without constant polishing, deepen their color or patinate the surface. Painting manuals recommended varnishing certain pigments to slow deterioration. Varnish protected boats from worms and rot. Papers and papier-mâché objects were varnished to improve durability and aesthetics. A layer of varnish on a colored print might increase the print's resemblance to an oil painting, especially if it were first adhered to canvas. The alleged principal focus of both Jean-Félix Watin's book and Mauclerc's is painters' varnishes, including varnishes for interior walls and carriages as well as for fine-art uses. In most cases the varnishing step, like textile finishing processes or surface preparation for painting, was integral to and inseparable from the creation of the object on which it was used.

Der Blumenfirniß

Um den Blumen, und Insecten, ihre Farben lange zu erhalten, dazu ist jeder Lackfirniß aus Weingeist, wofern der Firniß nur weis ist, hinlänglich. Verlangt man die schädliche Insecten abzuhalten, und zugleich das geschwinde Einschrumpfen der aufbehaltenen Insecten zu verhindern; so verdünne man den Firniß durch Weingeist, worinnen Kamfer aufgelöst worden. Man erwärme noch den Firniß zum feinen Auftrage, der mittelst kleiner Bürsten geschicht, so man in den Firniß eintaucht. Man sprengt, mit einem Hölzgen, so man überziehen will, um durch diesen zarten Nebel, den man oft macht, alle Stellen zu bethauen, und die Blume, oder das Insect, an allen seinen Theilen damit zu treffen.

Johann Samuel Halle, *Die Zauberkräfte der Natur* (Berlin, 1784), 2:61–2.

In its liquid form, varnish might be colored or clear, and it could be tinted so that it was, in effect, a translucent and glossy paint. The traditional black red and gold varnished objects typical of Asian imports were imitated in Europe, and the palette extended by the addition of blues, greens, and yellows.² New-style lacquering, such as the painted scenes of vernis-Martin japanning, and metalwork such as *tôle* demanded these colored varnishes.³

On all objects, varnish enhanced the visual effect by creating a brilliant light-reflecting surface, and it protected those surfaces from deterioration as it improved the visual appeal of the object. But like all other materials used in coloring processes, varnishes were problematic. They might darken with age,

sometimes so much that they completely obscured the image they were supposed to preserve. Poorly prepared or improperly used varnishes would crack or peel. Varnish compounds could be malodorous until completely dry; under the right (or wrong) conditions, that could require a considerable period of time. When applied to the walls of a room, the combination of varnish and paint could make that space uninhabitable for weeks.

Despite a long tradition of needs and uses for this material, varnish was occasionally described as a new technology in the eighteenth century, brought into Europe from China and Japan and improved by chemistry.⁴ Varnish-decorated objects, together with instructions (in greater or lesser detail) concerning their replication, were among the exotica that Asian travelers brought to Europe and that became a valuable import and inspiration. Eighteenth-century efforts to understand, imitate and improve upon these items, contributed to investigation of these decorative uses as well as the more prosaic purposes, by savants and other consumers.

L'Art de faire le vernis, consiste, comme nous l'avons dit, à dissoudre plusieurs résines dans un fluide, ou à incorporer un liquide dans des résines ou bitumes fondus, de manière qu'ils ne puissent pas reprendre leur premier état de consistance.

Jean-Félix Watin, *L'Art du peintre, doreur, vernisseur 4th ed.* (Paris, 1787), .

Varnishmaking skills were not difficult to master. The materials could be as common or as exotic as occasion and pocketbook demanded. A simple varnish for paintings could be made from beaten egg white, but durable coatings were more typical.⁵ By the eighteenth century, painter's varnishes were usually classified according to their component materials, as either alcohol-based spirit varnishes, or oil varnishes, made from a resin such as amber, copal, or mastic. Varnishes, and painter's varnishes in particular, were carefully composed of substances that would ease application, increase or decrease gloss and hardness, aid drying, or enhance color.

Demand for different types of varnish meant that, in common with the rest of the color industry, it was subject to considerable inventive interest. Basic ingredients were easy to find as a part of traditional pharmacopoeia, in the storehouse of the drysalter or that of many artisans. Apothecaries often made and sold varnishes. Invention and sale of secret-formula varnishes seems to have been an acceptable income source for impoverished gentlefolk and the enterprising middle class.² How to locate the best materials and the best recipe, how to determine the best proportions and the best amount to apply, how to apply the recipe, how to speed the drying time, and similar questions provided many opportunities for variation, experiment, and new ideas.

Notes:

Note 1: Josiah Wedgwood to Thomas Bentley, February 1769, Wedgwood MS E18232-25; John Sadler's Notebook, "Notes on a Varnish for Japaning Earthenware, Made by G. Bradkey," January 1767, Liverpool Local History Service, 238/SAD/1.

Note 2: Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (London, 1996), 88.

Note 3: Anna Czarnocka, "vernis-Martin: The Lacquerwork of the Martin Family in Eighteenth-Century France," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 2, no. 1 (1994): 56–74.

Note 4: See, for example, Pierre-François Tingry, *Traité theorique et pratique sur l'art de faire et d'appliquer les vernis* (Geneva, an XI [1803]), ii.

Note 5: Michael Swicklik, "French Painting and the Use of Varnish, 1750–1900," in *Conservation Research* (Washington, D.C., 1993), 157–74.

Note 6: Roy Fuller, *History of Fuller's Coach and Harness Manufacturers* (Bath, 1955); Nicholas Mander, "Varnished Leaves: A Biography of the Mander Family of Wolverhampton, 1742–1998," <http://www.localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk/genealogy/Mander/TheBook/CharlesMander.htm> (accessed 30 November 2005); Discussion of Mr. Phillips's Varnish, 19 October and 26 October 1771, 4 January 1772, Committee Minutes of the Chemistry Committee, [R]SA Minutes of Various Premium Committees 1771–72 [R]SA PR.GE/112/12/13.
