

What makes us GREEN?

By D. Katie Powell

Saying we are committed to **GREEN** is a recent practice, but our commitment to ecologically safe product and practices began almost at the inception of our business, because we did not want to become sick from the work we did nor did we want our toddlers, our water well and our world harmed with toxic chemicals.

In our early days in a small farming community committed to certified organics and recycling, the influences were strong to inspect our own business practices. What we found was that practices that made sense for our world also made sense in our business and for our client's furniture. Of course, recycling is the nature of our business, as we repair and reuse old furniture, which might otherwise be headed for a landfill!



In antique upholstered objects, organic² stuffings were the norm: cotton, hair, feathers, burlap, muslin, hemp, Tunis, Spanish moss, sisal, and various organic twines. Many upholsterers simply rip out the old organic stuffings and insert Dacron®, or poly-foam fills. Early in his career, Mitchell apprenticed to several European and American classically trained master upholsterers. His mentors imparted a philosophy of preservation, which became a focus of his career, leading him eventually to become a conservator.

¹ Ca. 1860 Godwin influenced Barrel Chair, before treatment, and after treatment.

² Note: Organic used to mean what is now called natural -- that is, non-synthetic. We use that term here, and refer to certified organic when we mean pesticide-free.

Mitchell's practice employs century's old upholstery techniques that emphasize the knowledge and use of traditional



stuffings, which by their nature are intrinsically organic. He is interested in recreating the insides of his projects by cleaning and reutilizing the original stuffings whenever possible, and this is one component of our **GREEN** program. Matching old stuffings means using organic products, or what we now refer to as "natural."

Whenever possible, we also use certified organic materials. As the certified organic movement has accelerated, and also, in part, due to our constant requests, we can now obtain certified organic cotton

batting and other products.

³Additionally, MPF uses of unbleached cotton, hemp, muslin and burlap foundational cloths, another **GREEN** practice, because the lack of chemical bleaches is good for the environment and the side benefit is it allows the upholstery fabrics placed over it to last longer.

Do we ever use non-organic material in upholstered pieces? Yes, for our customers who are allergic to organic products, and in modern pieces that must use synthetic materials.



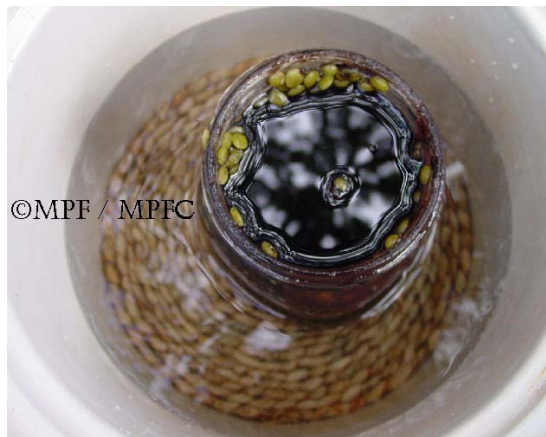
In our studio, we are equally committed to the use of low-impact materials. We make over 3/4 of our own finishes and glues on site, and what is purchased is typically bought from small specialty supply houses where we can speak to the manufacturers directly, and know that they, too, are committed to similar environmental concerns.

Recently I read in a top **GREEN** magazine that shellac and varnishes were highly toxic and should be avoided. There is a terrible misunderstanding in our industry, in that people think that the word varnish, when found on the outside of a polyurethane-based chemical product in a paint store, is the same thing that was used on a priceless antique. It is not! People also equate lacquer with shellac, but lacquer today is generally

³ Ca. 1860 Godwin influenced Barrel Chair's original pod, before cleaning, left, and the buildup of the seat using old and new hair, right.

Ruby red shellac in the process of dissolving in isopropyl alcohol, bottom left.)

referring to a synthetic lacquer in the polyurethane family. Polyurethane lacquers are clear and hard, and mimic characteristics of Chinese white lac, the original dewaxed lacquer, which was made of dewaxed shellac.



Traditional finishes are made, at least in large part, from organic materials⁴:

⁴ (Organic resins ready to be tied in cotton scrim, top left, and suspended in pure gum balsam turpentine to make a Dammar Varnish, top right. Waxes in their raw form, top; melted with pigments, center left, and in the final form ready to use on the NPS's Monterey Furniture, center right.)

- resins (copal, amber, sandarac, dammar, mastic) obtained from trees, shown above,
- lac, the resinous secretion of a species of insect, which makes shellac (ruby shellac being made, right)
- waxes such as carnauba and beeswax, shown below
- aromatic balsams
- pure non-toxic finely ground earth pigments in 95% of our applications, shown next page.

Since we do not strip finishes and make many our own finishes from traditional recipes, our impact with highly toxic chemicals is minimal. Our shellac is usually made with isopropyl alcohol. Our varnishes are made with pure gum aromatic turpentine, which are a bit different than the caustic chemicals bought at the store, and while not completely non-toxic, are relatively safe. Further, we have little to no disposal, as we make what we need so do not have to send cans of product to the landfill. Our waxes are made from pure unbleached carnauba and beeswax in similar suspensions.⁵

When do we use toxic chemicals? A small amount of naphtha is used on a rag to clean the dirtiest of finishes, and quickly dissipates. For the rare times when we must infill small areas with pigments using a tiny pointed brush (see right⁶), or the very occasional use of anilines suspended in benzenes (whenever possible we choose anilines suspended in alcohol or water.) Less than a 1/2 teaspoon of a chemical such as xylene is used to suspend the pigment in worst cases, and all of the product is used or quickly dissipates, and imparts no lingering toxicity.



We are **GREEN** because we use traditional practices and materials mixed with a heightened awareness to make additional choices to choose low impact products whenever possible and recycle. It is impossible for most businesses today to be 100% **GREEN** -- the use of technological objects, delivery trucks, and most any modern convenience support some practices that are not good for the environment. However, we make the right choices whenever we can, and stay open to changing practices as new information or product becomes available. We also speak out and support causes that can change the way we fundamentally do business in a manner that allows our grandchildren and environment to be healthy and have a future.

⁶ Color loss infill on a bureau.