

Varnishes Wanted

Do you have an old tin of spar-varnish collecting dust in your garage? A pint of early polyurethane? The dregs of a can of lacquer from the 1980s you thought just might come in handy some day? If so, this message is for you. We need your contributions to the brand new reference collection of commercial furniture varnishes at the Getty Conservation Institute.

By brushing out four microscope slides with your venerable varnish, you can contribute to a collection that will be available as a resource to conservators and scientists for generations to come. The goal is to build a comprehensive collection of commercial furniture varnish samples from the 19th to the 21st century, including products of all types from all over the world.

We are in a period of dramatic transformation in the world of varnishes designed for wood and furniture. Health and safety concerns have driven rapid changes in regulations covering the sale and use of volatile organic compounds (VOCs). In California it is already impossible to buy many traditional types of varnish due to their VOC content and it is reasonable to expect that the legislative trend will continue and expand. The array of varnishes formerly available to us is on the verge of disappearing. At the same time, a variety of low-VOC varnishes have been brought onto the market to suit the new regulatory environment; some of these are successful, some not. No one (to the best of our knowledge) is collecting samples of these varnishes for future analytical study, and with the rapid pace of technological progress in coatings technology, many of them will disappear.

Dusan Stulik and Art Kaplan of the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) have kindly offered to do the work of cataloguing and storing the collection of varnish samples at the GCI in Los Angeles. They will ensure that the collection is available as an open resource to all interested researchers in the future. The GCI will also make an effort to generate FT-IR spectra of all the varnish submissions. These will be made public and could be incorporated into the searchable spectral libraries used by conservation scientists worldwide. Sample material would also be available to individual researchers for future studies involving techniques such as GC/MS, fluorescence microscopy or spectroscopy, solubility testing, or artificial ageing.

If you have one or more commercial varnishes that you would like to submit to the collection, please follow these simple instructions:

1. Record the information you have about the varnish as thoroughly as you can. Please list the name of the varnish, manufacturer, manufacturer's address, date and place of purchase (if known), and any other information from the container that might be of interest. We recommend taking photographs of the container as well (these can be submitted in whatever format is most convenient for you).
2. Brush out one coat of the varnish onto each of four clean glass microscope slides (2.5cm x 7.5cm), leaving about 2 cm blank at one end for a label. The slides will be permanently labelled at the GCI in a standard format, but please attach a temporary label that will help us to identify them. Use a clean brush for the application, and allow the varnish to dry thoroughly before submitting.
3. Send your information sheet and the slides (well protected) to:
Art Kaplan
Science Department
The Getty Conservation Institute
1200 Getty Center Drive, suite 700
Los Angeles, CA 90049, USA
4. Be sure to include your name and address so that you can be officially recorded as a contributor and we can send you a confirmation of receipt letter.
5. If you have any problems please contact Art Kaplan at akaplan@getty.edu

Please pass this information on to anyone you think might be willing to participate, particularly overseas. You don't need to be a conservator to contribute. Next time you visit your parents, aunts, uncles, friends or neighbours, poke around the garage and see what you can find!

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