



Traditional crackle finish

BY NANCY HILLER

If you're looking for a painted finish that's different from the norm, consider crackled milk paint. Though it's most often used in Shaker or Colonial style furniture, antique reproductions, and restoration work, you can add crackle finish to almost any piece to create an eye-popping effect. And it has an added bonus: It's non-toxic.

Producing a crackle finish is surprisingly simple. It's brushed on in three steps: a base coat of milk paint, a layer of crackle medium—essentially, thinned hide glue—and last, the topcoat of milk paint. Then get ready to watch the show. As the top layer of milk paint dries, the hide glue layer underneath, with its glasslike surface providing little purchase for the paint, causes it to break apart and form the crackle pattern. Depending on the type and strength of crackle medium you use, you can achieve anything from a fine, filigreed crackle pattern to a much coarser and bolder one. By choosing contrasting colors for the two layers of milk paint, you can emphasize the crackle effect.

Once the topcoat is dry, you can either use your piece as is or seal it with a clear coat to protect the finish from staining by water, oil, and dirt. To arrive at a satisfying crackled finish, it's critical that you experiment and make color samples using the entire process before applying it to a piece of furniture.

Prep the wood and brush on the base coat

Milk paint adheres best to raw wood. Sand the wood to the fineness you desire, and remove dust thoroughly after sanding. Mix the milk paint in a non-metallic container following the proportions recommended by the manufacturer. Apply the base color with a natural-bristle brush or a foam brush. You may need two to three base coats to ensure adequate coverage, depending on the color you are using and the porosity of the wood.

Next comes the hide glue

When the base coat is completely dry, brush on a layer of crackle medium. Franklin Titebond cold hide glue works well, as do The Old-Fashioned Milk Paint Company's Antique Crackle and the Real Milk Paint Company's Natural Crackle.

Thin the crackle medium with water to produce a finer pattern, or leave it at full viscosity for a bigger, bolder pattern with wider cracks, revealing more of the base color. Thinning by 1:3—one part warm water to three parts liquid hide glue—and applying a thin, brushed-out layer should result in a fine crackle pattern.

You can adjust the pattern not only by changing the viscosity of the crackle medium, but also by controlling the thickness of the film, and the pattern in which you apply it. Brushing the crackle medium in straight lines, especially at full strength, will typically create a more linear crackle pattern. Stippling with a brush will produce a pattern with fewer rectilinear cracks.

The amount of crackle medium required will vary depending on how thickly you apply it. Expect to use

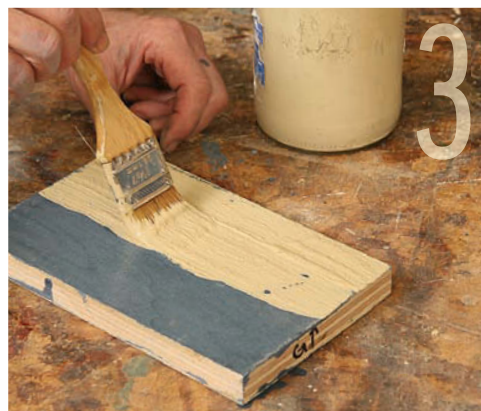
THREE STEPS TO UNLEASH CRACKLE



1 Undercoat
Brush a coat of milk paint onto bare wood.



2 Glue coat
When the undercoat has dried, brush on a layer of hide glue, the crackle medium.



3 Topcoat
When the glue coat is dry, apply a topcoat of milk paint. Because it doesn't adhere completely to the slick surface of the glue, the paint dries in a crackle pattern.



Bold or fine. Use contrasting colors of milk paint for the undercoat and topcoat to emphasize the crackle. Hiller applies the glue coat full strength for a coarse crackle pattern, and thins the glue for a fine crackle.



FIRST CREATE THE UNDERCOAT



Mix up the colors. Mix fresh milk paint from powder at the start of each job. Hiller used Federal Blue for the base coat of her cabinet and Buttermilk for the topcoat. Several coats may be required to achieve the depth of color you desire.

approximately the same volume of crackle medium as you used milk paint for your first base coat. You may use a foam brush or a bristle brush. It's important not to brush out the glue too much, as it can reduce the effectiveness of the crackle.

Allow the crackle medium to dry completely. This will take at least two hours. You can leave it overnight, or even a week or more, without reducing its effectiveness.

Brush on the top coat

You only get one shot to apply the top color of milk paint, so practice on test pieces. The powder-to-water mixture for this coat of milk paint should be at least 50% powder. Less than that results in foaminess, inadequate coverage, and less crackle.

NOW GO WITH THE GLUE



Go thin for a finer crackle. The crackle medium—either standard liquid hide glue or a proprietary product like Antique Crackle from the Old Fashioned Milk Paint Co., can be used full strength for a coarse crackle or thinned with water for a finer crackle.



Online Extra

For a video showing how to apply a traditional crackle finish, go to FineWoodworking.com/261.

The glue goes on thick. Use a wide brush for quick coverage and straight strokes for a rectilinear crackle pattern. Stippling will produce a more random crackle pattern.

Brush on the milk paint quickly and rather thickly, in straight strokes; if you applied the crackle medium in one direction, brush on the topcoat perpendicular to those strokes to facilitate coverage. You will see the crackle pattern beginning to develop within a few minutes. Once it forms, do not brush over it, as doing so will pull the topcoat off the surface, leaving you with a patch of bare crackle medium ending in a big blob of topcoat.

Clear coat keeps it safe

Allow the topcoat to dry for at least 24 hours. If you plan to apply a protective coating, use a solvent-based finish such as oil-based polyurethane or Danish oil. Don't use water-based protective coatings over a crackle finish—the water will

ADD THE TOPCOAT FOR THE CRACKLE



One shot at good crackle. Apply the topcoat in long strokes with a good-quality brush, well loaded to avoid having to go back.

reactivate the crackle medium and leave cracks in the clear coat. Unlike with a regular milk-paint finish, you shouldn't scuff-sand a crackle finish before you apply the protective clear coat; sanding will completely change the look of the crackle, producing a mottled effect. To ensure you end up with the look you want, be sure to include the clear protective coat in your test samples.

Finally, bear in mind that a crackled finish will be hard to dust with a rag, since the texture will catch in fabric. Instead, to keep a crackle-finished piece clean, use a feather duster or a vacuum cleaner with a brush attachment. □

Nancy Hiller builds custom furniture in Bloomington, Ind.



Best brush for the job. Using brushes sized to the part you are painting makes it easier to cover the area quickly and apply just the paint you need.



For bigger crackle, don't thin the glue

Hiller applied cold liquid hide glue full strength to achieve the coarse crackle pattern she wanted for the back boards inside her cabinet. The undercoat color she chose is Mustard, and the topcoat color is Sea Green, both from the Old Fashioned Milk Paint Co.

