

THE CHARRED BEDROOM SUITE

BY GEORGE FRANK

When Maurice Lafaille invited me to lunch, I knew that he wanted something. When he took me to one of the finest restaurants in Paris I knew that he had something big on his mind. And it was.

In 1928 Lafaille was a young, handsome, talented and poor interior decorator, dedicated to beauty and innovation. When the main dish was served, he produced a small package, about 6 inches square. At his request I opened it and unveiled a finely detailed statuette of Buddha. He asked me what I thought of it, and I answered that it seemed to be exquisitely carved, a work of art without any doubt, but that I was far from being a competent judge of its value. "George, take a closer look at the hair," he said, and I did. The hair was made of fine lines, each about the thickness of a human hair, but the color of the lines alternated, light and

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dark, light and dark. Lafaille then produced a powerful magnifying glass. I saw that the dark lines were produced by fire, or burning, and the light ones were the natural color of the wood. How the wood was scorched in such narrow bands is still a mystery to me.

"And what do you think of it now?" inquired Lafaille. "Simple," I replied. "If I did not have this thing in my hand, I would say that such a job is impossible." Lafaille then dropped the bombshell: "George, I am designing a bedroom suite for the Baron Rotschild, and this is the finish you are going to do for me."

I called him an idiot, a dreamer, an imbecile, and told him that even if I could do the finish, it would take me at least 2,000 years. "George, you do it," said Lafaille. He paid for lunch and we zoomed back to my shop.

Lafaille was right; he knew me well. The problem did not let me sleep. The next day I borrowed my girlfriend's electric iron, my elderly neighbor's



The result of Frank's experimentation: before scorching, edge; after scorching, top.

charcoal iron, several soldering irons—and got nowhere. I cursed Lafaille, but I kept looking for the solution. I spilled alcohol on the wood and set it afire, then tried slower-burning turpentine with the same results: zero.

Photo: Staff

There must be a special God helping woodfinishers. A lead pipe, carrying water to my kitchen, sprung a leak. I called a plumber, who fixed the leak with a blowtorch.

The next day I had my own blowtorch and as I scorched the surface of my sample fir board, I knew I was on the right track. With a stiff brush I could easily take off the completely charred soft part of the wood grain (the earlywood layer of each year's growth), uncovering light, uncharted wood beneath. The hard veins (the latewood) remained dark, scorched, intact. With each experiment I came closer to the solution, and the next day Lafaille took my samples to the Baron. He was thrilled. He sent his Rolls-Royce to fetch us, and that day I learned the true meaning of haute cuisine.

About two months later the Baron's bedroom suite was ready to be scorched-finished. Both the Baron and Lafaille came to the shop to watch me char the surface of the wood. If there is a God helping woodfinishers, there must be gremlins making innovators' lives miserable. The intense heat of the blowtorch made the wood shrink, crack, split and bend before our very eyes. In less than half an hour the bedroom suite was ruined, or at least the parts I burned with my blowtorch were. Tears ran from my eyes, not only from the smoke, but from the realization that I had failed.

Without any doubt the scorched finish was something new, original and beautiful and neither of us was ready to throw in the towel. Lafaille and I decided that the bedroom suite had to be rebuilt, but that the wood must be burned before furniture was made of it. Moreover, we adopted a frame-and-panel construction to allow further shrinkage. The Baron agreed, and assured us that he would assume the cost, regardless of how many times I had to rebuild his furniture. Two or three months later, we delivered the first bedroom suite made of scorched pine to the Baron Rotschild's country home at Chantilly. It may well still be there.

About a month later, when Maurice Lafaille invited me for lunch, I knew that he wanted something. He did. And by the time the main dish was served he produced from his pocket a handful of virgin hemp, but that is another story. . . □

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