How to Refinish a Vintage Bow
by Larry Vienneau

Normal wear and scratches on a vintage bow are not a problem. Most dings and scratches can be buffed out or polished . Most bows don't necessarily need refinishing. To polish your bow finish try; Renaissance Wax.

However if you have a bow that has peeling, crazing or cracked finish you should consider refinishing it. Always have a professional inspect your bow if you are unsure if it is safe to shoot. Having some basic knowledge of woodworking is very helpful before you decide to rework a vintage bow. Most fiberglass bows are fairly simple to re finish, however if you have a vintage "Woven" fiberglass consider having a professional rework your bow. This type of early fiber glass actually has a woven look to it and was used in the late 1950 early to mid-1960. I bought a nice Herter's bow and it had woven glass. I refinished it and was excited to shoot it. When I strung the bow I heard this slight crackling sound and noticed the belly of the bow was showing compression cracking. I decided to chalk it up to experience and never attempted to bring the bow to full draw.

If you want to refinish your bow you should put a few layers of masking tape over any logos, medallions or markings that can identify your bow. This will protect the bow markings. It isn't a perfect method but it does keep the original logos and serial numbers intact. The problem is the poor varnish is being saved in that area of the bow with the identifying marks. It isn't a perfect solution to saving the logos but it works. I am not fussy about taping because I usually try to lightly sand the taped area when I am ready to refinish. I try to blend out the edges with the sand paper.

Stripping is a last resort. If you can avoid a paint stripper use a "refurbisher" It will soften the old finish and will eventually repair minor flaws. If you must strip the old finish, don't use a harsh chemical paint remover. I prefer CITRISTRIP a non-hazardous water soluble stripper. It takes a bit longer but it won't damage the bow glues. Work on one section at a time. I start with the riser, then work on the upper belly, then back, lower belly then back. This method will take about a day to strip the bow. Don't rush, take your time to do it well. Use a stripper after wash and then a couple times with a damp cloth.

You should use a plastic scraper until you get used to scraping off old varnish. I use an artist's pallet knife because it is thin and flexible. One important rule- the scrap direction should be from the riser to the nocks. If you scrap from the nocks toward the riser you run the risk of lifting the fiberglass.

Sand with a rough grit if needed but I usually start with a 220, then 400, 600 then triple 000 steel wool. Avoid too much sanding on the surface of the fiberglass. Super glue is good filler for nasty scratches or stress cracks. And, it can be sanded.

I recommend a spar varnish for the bow finish. Spar varnish was originally developed for coating the spars of sailing ships. Spars formed part of the masts and rigging, they were flexed by the wind, battered by sea, punished by weather, and also suffered from UV exposure to sunlight. The

ship spars needed to be flexible and required a varnish that was durable yet flexible and elastic. Spar varnish is very flexible and will not crack – a very important quality in a bow finish.

You can use satin, semi-gloss or gloss depending on your bow, it is always good to match the original finish. I usually use a semi-gloss but I also like the gloss which has a harder finish and can be dulled if you want it less shiny.

I prefer a spray spar varnish (I like MINWAX Helmsman) but hand applying spar varnish is OK. One rule of application- thin multiple layers are better than a couple thick layers. Thick applications risk sags and runs.