

Backfill

From Steel to Wood in a Day

As the owners of a San Clemente, Calif., specialty painting company called Rags 2 Rich's, husband-and-wife team Rich Howe and Cindy Miller do a wide range of faux-finish work, including convincing renderings of masonry, plaster, and marble. They also take on one-of-a-kind projects, like the yachtman's carbon-fiber spinnaker pole they recently finished, which is now all but indistinguishable from a traditional wood pole.

But their signature I-can't-believe-it's-not-wood finishes are found on garage doors.

According to Miller, any garage door can be faux-finished, but steel doors — like the ones pictured below — are particularly good candidates because they're inexpensive and

dimensionally stable. After masking the areas surrounding the door, Miller applies what will be the first of three applications of colored stain, using a standard brush and a stain pad to create streaks and highlights. Grooves between the pressed steel "panels" are rendered darker than the panels themselves to strengthen the apparent shadow lines.

Next, Miller sprays the first coat with a clear finish, which serves two purposes: It prevents the second layer of stain from bleeding into the first, and it creates a woodlike illusion of depth. The coloring of the second and third applications of stain — also separated by intermediate clear coats — varies depending on the desired effect. On the doors shown, an initial layer of walnut stain was followed by a darker mahogany and then an application of black. The final step is a protective coat of varnish, which should be renewed every year or two, depending on the door's exposure to the sun.

Miller and Howe pride themselves on their efficiency. They arrive on the job site in a fully stocked truck, apply the complex multi-layered finish, and leave a finished set of doors and a clean site at the end of the day. But it took many years of patient experimentation to refine their methods. When a potential customer recently balked at the company's price of \$550 per door — arguing that it seemed like a lot of money for one day's work — Miller spoke for everyone in the building trades who has taken the time to master a demanding craft. "Well, that's not just for today," she said politely. "That's for the last 20 years and today." — *Jon Vara*



Faux wood finishes work best on steel doors. Wood-composite and even natural-wood doors can also be fauxed, but they're prone to weather-induced checking and cracking, which can mar the effect.



Once the second and third coats of stain have been applied (above and right), the original steel doors are virtually unrecognizable. A clear finish sprayed on between coats adds extra protection and visual depth. A layer of varnish finishes the job.

