Yard-Sale Bureau Becomes a Bathroom Vanity

Ingenuity and a bit of planning transform an old dresser into a classy bathroom fixture

BY MIKE GUERTIN

O ne-of-a-kind bureaus are easy to find at yard sales, second-hand shops, and antique stores. They make unique bathroom or powder-room vanities and can cost hundreds of dollars less than commercially available cabinetry built to look like furniture. I've turned many bureaus into vanities, including two in my own house, with just simple modifications to the tops, backing panels, and drawers. Here are some tips for a successful conversion.

Ideally, you should select a bureau before installing the rough plumbing. This way, the drain and supply connections can be positioned to fit the bureau rather than requiring modifications later.

Choose a sink to suit both the size and the shape of the bureau top. Drop-in, undermount, and top-mount sinks are all suitable for bureau conversions.

Because of the space needed for the underside of the sink bowl and the plumbing, many faux-antique, store-bought vanities have fake drawer fronts that obviously aren't useful. You don't necessarily need to sacrifice the drawers on an antique bureau to the sink and plumbing; they can be modified to fit.

I make cardboard templates of the existing drawers and use a trial-and-error process to scribe the sides and the bottom panel precisely around the obstructions. Once the cardboard template fits, I cut the drawers to match and reinforce them with intermediate partitions. This way, I can retain 50% to 90% use of the drawers.

The veneers and glues used to make many old bureaus aren't intended for wet locations. To prevent the risk of delamination, I strip off old finishes and coat the top with exterior-grade marine urethane or two-part acrylic urethane. The vertical surfaces can be finished with regular urethane or varnish. □

Contributing editor Mike Guertin is a builder and remodeling contractor from East Greenwich, R.I. His Web site is www .mikeguertin.com. Photos by Roe A. Osborn, except where noted.

SIMPLE MODIFICATIONS CREATE A SEAMLESS TRANSFORMATION

Any sink will work, but a drop-in style (photo left) hides any imperfections in the cutout. I mark the opening on the bureau top, drill a starting hole in the waste area, and use a jigsaw to make the cutout. A reverse-toothed blade (teeth pointing down) helps to reduce tearout in the top surface.

Strengthen the top. *To support the weight of a filled sink bowl, you may need to install a ¾-in. plywood subtop with glue and screws.*

Install dividers. *New side panels stabilize the modified drawer.*

Modify the drawers. *Cutouts allow drawers to operate around obstructions like the sink bowl and the drainpipes.*

Strengthen the back. *Panels or slats may need to be reinforced to prevent parts from coming loose.*

Add height. *Bureaus are often shorter than the typical 30-in. to 36-in. height of a vanity, so I attach extensions. Blocks of wood and furniture feet work great, but in this case, a turned-wood doorstop fit the piece nicely.*

Minimize the intrusion. *Plan rough plumbing stub-outs to avoid drawers as much as possible.*

Drawings: Bob La Pointe. Top photo, this page: Mike Guertin. Bottom photo: Krysta S. Doerfler.