A Satisfying Quick Finish, by Mike Schwing

Truly excellent wood finishes cannot be achieved in a short period of time. They take weeks and months of work in preparation, application, drying/curing, sanding, buffing, and polishing. Few turners have the patience, equipment, and desire to create "showroom" quality finishes on their work.

Fortunately, very satisfying high sheen finishes can be accomplished in a short manner of time with the right techniques and tools.

This is only one of them. It will involve wipe on lacquer based products that can be purchased from most any turning supplier. We'll be using Mylands Cellulose Sanding Sealer and optionally their wipe on Lacquer. A word of caution - they can make you dizzy if you don't take appropriate measures.

First – a note about surface preparation. Shiny surfaces are a result of even, directed light reflection. An even surface, free of defects, will produce a shinier surface than one that is uneven. A common adage among many woodworkers is that "the finish goes on before the finish goes on". This means that surface preparation has much to do with the final finish. A workpiece sanded to 220 grit will take much, much more effort to bring to the same shine that a piece sanded to 600 or 1000, or even 12,000 will. Indeed, sanding to 12,000 grit often polishes some woods to an acceptable finish that requires nothing more. Woodcraft sells a product called "Micro Mesh". It is fine, cushioned back sandpaper that offers grits up to 12,000. Their 1500 grit is approximately equal to 400 grit aluminum oxide sandpaper. (note – there are those who will say finishes will not stick to surfaces sanded to such a high grit, but none of those have been able to produce any proof – I've asked)

Our "satisfying quick finish" begins at the sanding stage.

1. Sand your surface up to at least 1000 grit with aluminum oxide paper, or 4000 with micro-mesh. Sanding higher is wasted effort for this finish as the steel wool is about equivalent to 4000 grit micro-mesh. Any higher is wasted effort.
2. With a lint free cloth (no paper towels or sponges), rub on a thin coat of Mylands Cellulose Sanding Sealer. Rub it in evenly, but don't go over a spot more than once while wet, as it'll gum up and leave tracks.
3. Wait for it to dry. 10 minutes is plenty.
4. Turn the lathe on, medium speed. Take a wad of 0000 steel wool (Liberon wool is by far the best – that cheap stuff is just that – cheap) and move it over the surface. The goal here is to knock back the sealer so it just fills in the pores. Turn the lathe off and inspect the surface. If the sealer was not dry you will see little streaks have formed. You can knock them off with the lathe stopped. Remove any scratches by rubbing the wool in circles by hand.
5. Repeat steps 2 – 4 for a total of 3 coats. For each repeat, remove less of the sealer so it starts to build a little thickness.
6. (optional) At this point you have a nice, low sheen finish. If you wish, turn the lathe on again, medium speed, and place you palms on the work, one one top, one on bottom. Apply just a bit of pressure so it starts to heat up. You will notice a gloss form. The right amount of heat seems to be the closest to what you can tolerate. This will produce a perfectly acceptable finish to many. If you are satisfied, great. If you want a deeper finish, switch to the mylands lacquer and repeat steps 2-4 for a few coats until you are satisfied. You may also use step 6 on your last coat. Using the lacquer is totally optional. The sealer will produce a very nice finish on its own.
7. If you have buffing wheels, now is the time to use them. Starting at Tripoli and a high speed, work your way over the surface evenly. The move to white diamond, then carnuba wax. This will produce a gorgeous display type finish, but not suitable for utility/food use. An entire bowl can be finished thusly in under an hour.

The above will give what the title implies – a Quick, Satisfying Finish. It won't be perfect, it is not glossy like lacquer, and not water safe/durable like an oil finish, but the folks in our demo thought it was an improvement over many of their efforts. One word of note – the sealer is not optically clear, and as so is not suitable for a "build" type finish., thus the knocking it back with steel wool after each coat. Using it as so will eventually discolor the wood and obscure the grain.

Products used:

Micro Mesh - http://www.sisweb.com/micromesh/
Woodcraft sells a kit that includes 2 of each grit from 1500-12,000 and a cushioned sanding pad.
Micromesh lasts extremely long – one set lasts me 6 months.
Mylands Cellulose Sanding Sealer - http://www.myland.co.uk/turning.html
Both the sanding sealer and melamine lacquer, can be found at Woodcraft and Packard, too.
Liberon steel wool - http://www.woodcraft.com/family.aspx?DeptID=2332&FamilyID=5216
Without doubt the finest steel wool I have found anywhere.
Don Pencil buffing systems - http://donpencil.com/buffingsystems.htm