BURNISHING, SCUFFING, MARRING & COLOR RUBOFF

In interior environments, walls and trim are routinely exposed to contact, cleaning, and abrasion. The resulting surface marks are often described using terms such as burnishing, scuffing, marring, and color ruboff. Although these conditions may appear similar, they involve different mechanisms at the coating surface. Understanding the differences helps assess issues accurately, set realistic expectations, and select appropriate coating systems for the intended service environment.

Burnishing

Burnishing is a localized change in sheen caused by repeated contact, wiping, or abrasion that physically smooths or polishes the coating film. Common examples include glossy-looking spots on surfaces painted with flat or lower sheen paints where people brush against corners or where repeated cleaning is performed.

Burnishing is mainly a visual change. The surface gets slightly polished, so it reflects more light and looks shinier (sometimes a bit darker) than the surrounding area (Figure 1). The effect is more noticeable in lower sheen finishes, such as flat or matte, because the contrast between the original flat appearance and the polished area is greater.

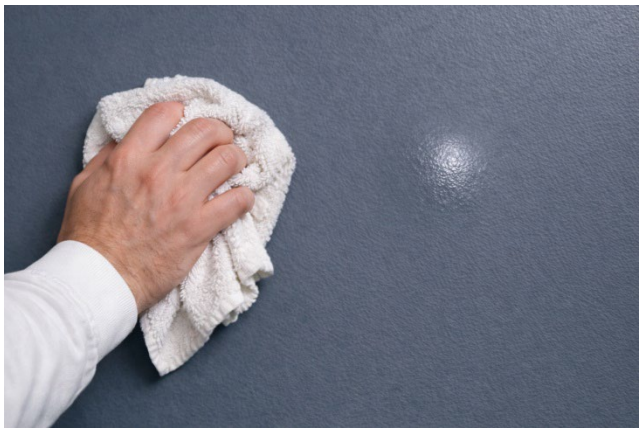

Figure 1

Figure 2

Scuffing

Scuffing occurs when friction deposits foreign material onto the painted surface and/or lightly disrupts the surface texture. Typical examples include rubber marks from shoes, gray streaks from carts, or marks from moving furniture (Figure 2). Unlike burnishing, scuffing often leaves material behind from whatever rubbed against the surface.

In many cases, scuff marks can be reduced or removed because most of what is visible is transferred material on the surface rather than permanent damage to the paint film. However, aggressive cleaning

to remove scuffs can increase burnishing, particularly in lower sheen finishes, leaving the area glossier than the surrounding surface.

Marring

Marring is physical damage to the coating surface, such as fine scratches, small gouges, or distortion of the film. It typically occurs with little to no material transfer from the contacting object. Because the upper portion of the film is scratched or deformed, the way the surface reflects light changes, and the mark often shows up as a lighter line in dark colors or as a noticeable change in texture.

Marring is commonly caused by harder or sharper contact, including metal edges or the corner of a plastic item. Unlike scuffing, marring is usually permanent because it reflects true film damage rather than removable residue, so cleaning is less likely to eliminate it. Compared with burnishing, marring is more likely to appear as a distinct line and may be felt as a change in the surface.

Color Ruboff

Color ruboff (also called “crocking”) is when pigment from a coated surface transfers onto another surface—most often seen as color left on a cloth after wiping, especially with a damp rag (Figure 3). Unlike scuffing, which is usually material deposited onto the paint, color ruboff comes from the coating itself. It’s also different from burnishing because the key sign is color transfer, not a change in sheen. Color ruboff is impacted by the resin and pigment used, surface porosity, degree of cure, and water-soluble ingredients like surfactants. It is most noticeable in deep or dark colors because they contain more colorant.

Figure 3

Performance and Appearance Drivers

Sheen selection and service conditions strongly affect how often these issues occur and how visible they become. Lower sheen finishes, particularly flats, tend to show burnishing more because even small, localized sheen increases stand out. Higher sheen finishes may make burnishing less noticeable, but their increased reflectivity can make scratches and marring more apparent.

High-traffic areas, frequent cleaning, and repeated contact increase the likelihood of all four conditions. While these are typically appearance-related conditions rather than coating failures, they can still be unacceptable in commercial or institutional spaces where visual uniformity is a key requirement.

Minimizing Burnishing, Scuffing, Marring & Color Ruboff

Several practices can help reduce the likelihood and visibility of these conditions:

1. **When applying multiple coats, allow adequate dry time between coats.** The next coat should be applied a minimum of two hours after the previous coat, or in accordance with the product label. Proper recoat timing supports film development and durability.

2. **Avoid over-application.** Two thin coats applied at the recommended spread rate, with proper recoat time, provide better film formation and durability than one excessively heavy coat.

3. **Allow at least two weeks of cure time after application before attempting to clean the surface.** Premature cleaning can disrupt film development and increase susceptibility to burnishing or color ruboff.

4. **Use higher sheen finishes in areas subject to frequent contact or cleaning, such as hallways, children's bedrooms, and family rooms.** Higher sheen paints contain more resin and less pigment, which generally improves resistance to color ruboff and burnishing**.**

5. **Consider coatings specifically engineered for improved scuff resistance in high-traffic environments.** Some advanced interior coatings incorporate resin technologies designed to improve surface durability and resistance to marking. For example, Vista Paint's *Scuff-Tec* coating is formulated to provide enhanced scuff resistance compared with many conventional water-based architectural coatings, helping surfaces better resist marks from shoes, furniture, and everyday contact, and is available in matte and satin sheens.

6. **Use proper cleaning techniques.** Overly aggressive scrubbing, abrasive pads, or harsh cleaners can increase sheen variation and surface damage. See Technical Bulletin, *Care & Maintenance of Interior Coatings*, for specific cleaning guidelines.

Key Takeaways

Each condition points to a different mitigation approach. Burnishing often indicates the selected sheen does not match the cleaning demands. Scuffing may indicate the need for improved scuff resistance or revised cleaning procedures. Marring may require a tougher film, a different sheen level, or physical protection in high-impact locations. Color ruboff commonly indicates insufficient cure before service or a product that is not optimized for deep-tone, high-contact applications.

Burnishing, scuffing, marring, and color ruboff are often grouped together because they result from contact and friction, yet each involves a different surface mechanism. Proper identification is essential for selecting the appropriate coating system, setting realistic performance expectations, and implementing cleaning practices without creating new appearance issues. Understanding these distinctions allows specifiers and contractors to better align finish selection with service conditions and long-term aesthetic goals.