

## **BRUSH BUYING TIPS**

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Every art store sells a dizzying array of brushes priced from \$1 to more than \$100. It is best to buy a brush that is best suited to your purposes and one that is the best you can afford to meet your needs.

There are two primary categories – watercolor and bristle, and four major shapes.

### **Watercolor** –

*Kolinsky sable* - The very best brush for watercolor is made of kolinsky sable because of its natural properties. The hairs of this member of the mink family are conical in shape with a bulging belly that holds a large quantity of paint and a superfine tip that allows fine line as well as fuller brush strokes. The most important features of any good watercolor brush – snap and spring – are inherent in sable. Scaled hairs allow capillary flow that produces an incredibly even release of paint when the brush tip comes in contact with the paper. Not every brush marked “kolinsky” is as great as the next. The top of the line are taken from the top of a wild Siberian male’s tail during the depths of winter.

*Sable* - The second best natural hair choice is sable, which comes from the tail of a weasel. These are sometimes labeled “red sable”. Though not quite as good as kolinsky sable also offers spring and holds a good quantity of paint. The big advantage is the lower cost.

*Sabeline* – This imitation sable is actually made from ox. It has much less spring and seldom comes to a point.

*Squirrel* – Lacking spring but having good flow control, squirrel hair from Russia makes an acceptable brush because it comes to a very fine point and has good flow control. Squirrel hair brushes that have copper wrapped, goose quill ferrules are versatile and economical. They are great for large flowing washes and alternating fine lines and thick strokes achieved with less or more pressure on the hairs as you stroke across the paper.

*Camel Hair* – Camel brushes aren’t actually made of hair from a camel but instead include a mixture of ox, pony and low quality squirrel. They are a poor choice because they have no point or spring. Brushes included in inexpensive watercolor trays fall into this category.

*Synthetic* – Polyester, frequently labeled “Taklon” is being used to create better and better brushes for a reasonable cost. The quality to cost ratio makes synthetics the best choice for the beginner. Polyester fibers are extruded with a point and bundled in different diameters to create capillary action in between the filaments offering those critical qualities necessary for a positive watercolor painting experience.

### **Opaque mediums (oil, acrylic)**

Selecting the right brush for painting with opaque mediums is dependent upon the thickness of the paint being applied. The thicker the paint, the stiffer the brush tuft needed. If the paint is thinned with a medium, a softer tuft will work better and if the quantity of medium is increased to create a fluid consistency, flow control will become a consideration.

*Hog* – Hog bristles work as well with thick paint as kolinsky hair does with watercolor. Fortunately hog is significantly more affordable than kolinsky. Chinese Chungking hog bristles are boiled and bleached and processed in lengths up to eight inches to make the best brushes. Resiliency and flagged (split) ends are the hallmarks of these brushes. Flags help carry more paint on the brush tuft and apply it evenly across the surface. Look for frizzy rather than crisply trimmed ends.

*Badger* – Moderately thinned paints spread well with badger hair since it is softer than hog bristle. Badger hair is conical with a belly close to the tip making it excellent for blending. The very best badger brushes feature a white tip with a dark strip through the mid section. You can distinguish imitations that are made from dyed hog bristle or goat hair by looking for the tell tale flags (hog) or lack of belly and point plus curl along the length (goat).

*Sable* – Fluid acrylics or thinned oils spread well with red sable (weasel). Kolinsky is never used in brushes for opaque mediums since solvents and rough surfaces are too destructive to expensive kolinsky.

*Synthetics* – Polyester is produced in a wide range of diameters with varying springiness, accommodating paints from thick to thin. If you are using paint right out of the tube, choose a stiff synthetic. Reduce the stiffness in direct proportion to the thinning of the paint.

## **Brush Shapes & Sizes**

### **SHAPES**

*Rounds* – Rounds are the most common, all-purpose brushes. They are great for drawing, stippling, detail work and getting into tight corners. Even or varied width lines can be consistently applied with a round.

*Flats* – As the name implies flats look flat and are essentially a round with a flattened ferrule. The ferrule is the metal sleeve, ideally seamless and made of nickel-plated copper or brass, that is crimped around the bundled hairs or bristles (tuft), attaching them to the handle. Flats are designed for making broad, even strokes and for laying in large areas of color.

*Brights* – Similar in shape to flats, but with a shorter tuft, brights offer more spring, control and snap. The short tuft assists blending and making crisp edges.

*Filberts* – Even better for blending are filberts, versatile due to their shape – flat, but with a “gothic window” cut. That cut allows use like a flat or, if turned perpendicular to the surface, use like a round.

### **SIZES**

Though brushes are marked with numbers referencing size, e.g. a number indicating the diameter in millimeters of the widest part of a round’s tuft, there is no consistent standard among manufacturers so your best guide is to choose what looks right for your needs. A smaller brush that is excellent for rendering detail will impede your progress if you want to cover larger areas.