



Article: The Basic Materials of Watercolour Part 2: Brushes

There are a number of things you need to consider when choosing brushes, the most immediate consideration (particularly to the beginner stocking up on equipment for the very first time) of which is cost.

My advice is simply this: if you can avoid it, don't buy the cheapest but don't necessarily feel you have to buy the most expensive.

Watercolour brushes come in all shapes and sizes and are manufactured from a wide range of different materials both man-made and animal-hair. In this article, I'm going to discuss these differences in some detail, along with what brushes there are available and to what different uses they might be put (and which brushes are best for which job) in the hope that it might help you when choosing your equipment.

As a general rule, I like to encourage students to work with as big a brush as possible for as long as possible. A decent, large, round brush, therefore is a must; So too is a large flat brush, if you want to create smooth, even washes.

But what do we mean by decent?



SYNTHETIC OR NATURAL?

Brushes containing natural hair are simply that: hair that has come from an animal, the most sought after of which is Sable (*Martes zibellina*), a small pine marten found in large numbers in North America, and its cousin, the Siberian Weasel (*Mustela sibirica*) from the Kolinsky region of Siberia, China, hence Kolinsky Sable. Camel, goat or horse hair is also in common usage, as is the hair of the grey squirrel (*Petit Gris*, literally meaning 'Little Grey'). This information has been known to alarm some students, who might prefer to make a conscientious choice to opt for man-made fibres on grounds of animal welfare. Research into this has convinced me that inhumane, battery-farming of animals for brushes is uncommon. The following will hopefully help to put undecided minds at rest (or maybe not):

Siberian weasels live wild in the Taiga's forested river valleys where they eat rabbits, rodents, insects and fruit and can live up to six years but do not usually survive more than two years in the wild, where they have been trapped or snared for the fur industry since the 16th Century. Sables are also trapped in the wild like the Siberian weasel or grown on fur farms (although farmed sables are rarer, since wild specimens produce better quality hair. Most sable farms are dedicated to protecting them). Brushes are made by hand. Once he's received the pelts and tails, a fur dealer will clean, cut and grade the fur ready for sending in bundles to the brush manufacturer. A large manufacturer of fine art material can produce 30,000 brushes a week.

A good brush should hold large amounts of paint and water mix, saving on reload trips to the palette, and is soft when applying brushmarks to paper (in fact, 'glide' is probably the description that best suits it). Another main requirement for a good brush is that it should return to its original point, even when fully loaded. There are instances where the desire for a different kind of brushmark dictates otherwise. As far as I'm concerned, springiness has the priority over softness, since this gives you maximum control over your brushmarks; in my studio, a brush that has lost its point is immediately demoted to menial mixing tasks.



Different types of hairs have different properties with regard to springiness. Whilst Kolinsky Sable is reputed to have the best of all worlds, many, slightly cheaper hairs such as Red Sable or Squirrel Hair (as in the *Petit Gris*) lack any sort of flexibility at all, staying in place after laying down a brushmark.

Paying a huge price for natural-hair brushes isn't always a cast-iron guarantee of quality or longevity. Whatever they are made out of, they'll still wear out eventually, and I've known expensive sable brushes lose their point within weeks. You should, of course, look after your brushes by cleaning them after every session - nothing is guaranteed to wreck a brush more than leaving it coated with dried paint (except masking fluid, but that's another issue).



I commonly advise students to go for a brush that combines both synthetic and natural hair. It's ultimately a personal choice, after all, but I think the mixed brushes available these days are far superior to their earlier counterparts. Technology and research have enabled manufacturers to develop brushes that successfully combine all the attributes we artists look for, offering an acceptable balance between cost and performance. I would go as far as to say, it's difficult to find a really bad brush, as long as you are buying from a reputable dealer. Be sure the brushes you are buying are specifically designed for watercolour use - if in doubt, ask. Generally speaking, you get what you pay for, so purchasing the cheapest, absolute bargain-basement brushes you can find will almost certainly lumber you with tools that you'd wished you paid that little bit more for in the first place.

FLAT OR ROUND?

Despite the fact that many larger round brushes are described as 'wash' brushes, I still maintain that to lay down an even wash requires a flat brush of at least 1" - 1½" in width.

A cheaper alternative to large flat brushes, which can be a little expensive (even those of a synthetic/sable mix), is to use a hake (traditionally made of goat hair). I've known people turn up to classes with decorating brushes bought from their local hardware shop - not recommended! Washes can be tricky things to get right, so you should at least buy brushes made specifically for the job of watercolour.



BRUSH SIZES

I've found many discrepancies between makes of brush over the size quoted on the handle. A size-12 in one make may seem considerably smaller or larger when compared to its equivalent produced by a different manufacturer. In time, it is highly likely that you will build up a large collection of brushes; when tooling up for the first time, however, the following small selection of brushes should be sufficient to get you started:

- [1] Large Wash Brush (1" - 1½" Flat or a Hake)
- [2] Large Round Brush (size 12 - 16)
- [3] Small- to Medium- sized Round Brush (size 5 - 8)
- [4] Fine brush (size 2-round or a Rigger)

WHAT'S A RIGGER?

A Rigger is a long-bristled, fine-pointed brush called so because they were traditionally designed to paint the rigging on paintings of boats. Their advantage over a similar brush with shorter hairs is that, despite being long-haired, they are generally quite sturdy, and hold a fair amount of paint, which is ideal for long, fine brushstrokes where not having to stop and re-load in mid-stroke is a definite advantage.



BRUSH CARE & STORAGE

A well-looked-after brush should last you a long time, providing you look after it. This means cleaning it thoroughly after every session and not allowing paint to dry on it for any length of time.

Brushes should either be stored flat or on their handles if kept upright, to help protect the hairs (brushes dropped hair-first into a jamjar will almost always adopt an awkward bend in it which can be difficult to straighten-out). A brush-case is a good idea if you need to transport your brushes. This can be anything from a malt whiskey container to a cardboard postal-tube; I wrap my brushes up in an old tea-towel. If you prefer something a little classier, there are many very good designs available to choose from (I've also seen some extremely well-crafted, home-made designs - the resourcefulness of students never ceases to impress me).

NEVER RETURN YOUR BRUSH TO A POINT BY PUTTING IT IN YOUR MOUTH! I see students do this time and time again (some will just not be told). It should be remembered that watercolour paints contain many ingredients, some of which are extremely harmful to humans (Cadmium is not noted for its health-enhancing properties). One of the best ways to protect a brush, particularly if it is going to be stored for a long time, is to dip it in gum-arabic (available from all art material outlets). It is this that gives brushes that stiffness when new, and which needs to be washed out before they can be used properly.