

Selecting a Brush

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Brush displays at the art stores are crowded with hundreds of brushes, long and short, wide or narrow, different hairs and different shapes. How do you choose which brushes you really need? It all depends on you; How do you paint? What is the media? What do you want to do?

Oil painters need different qualities in a brush than watercolorists but in many cases the brushes for one medium can be used by the other. It is important to keep separate brushes for each, however, as the least amount of oil on a brush (even water soluble oils) can ruin a watercolor painting.

The use of a brush is determined by the material of the hairs as well as their shape. Some brushes are stiff and some are soft and there are many choices in between. The artist's painting method and style will determine his choice of brushes.

The ferrule is the metal between the hairs and the handle. The brush takes much of its character from the shape of the ferrule whether flat, oval or round.

Oil painters pick up the thick paint or thin it with turpentine or various mediums. Oil painters traditionally use flat brushes, either bristle hairs for thicker paint or sable for thinner mixtures. The oil painter stands in front of an easel, stepping back from time to time to analyze the progress of the painting. The oil painter prefers longer handles on brushes to paint comfortably in this position.

An oil painter who paints thinly, glazing layers to a board or canvas will generally choose soft sable or similar brushes to glide smoothly and not leave brush marks on the painting. Round brushes of various sizes are used for

detail work. Some artists use some brushes for warm colors and separate brushes for cool colors so that they spend less time cleaning brushes between color choices.



Flat brushes for oils or watercolor are longer, called 'flats', or shorter, called 'brights'. The longer flats are useful for moving quantities of paint across a larger area. The shorter flats are favorites of Impressionist painters who prefer many short strokes. This 'stippling' allows many small areas of color because the short brush does not carry much paint and the artist goes back to the palette many times, picking up different colors of paint each trip.

Either flats or brights can be used to move paint with the wide area or turned so that the artist can paint a line with the narrower edge. The longer flats will carry more paint and go farther than the shorter brights.

The oil painter will choose a variety of long-handled flat bristle brushes, wider flats for large paintings and smaller ones for average or smaller paintings.

The oil painter wants a few round sable (or synthetic) brushes for details and perhaps a few flat sables if glazing is a priority.

Watercolor artists do not use stiff bristle brushes because they can scratch the surface of watercolor paper. Watercolor artists usually paint with the paper on a table or slanted support and work closer to the surface. For this reason watercolor brushes are traditionally short handled. There is no reason not to use a longer handled

brush for watercolor if desired and it is easy enough to cut down the handle if it makes it more comfortable to use.

Watercolor artists often need to paint large areas of background or sky and need a wide brush for that purpose. "Sky" brushes range from one to four or more inches in width and are flat, made from sable or soft synthetic hairs. Large round brushes, sometimes made of squirrel hair are called 'mops' and can be used for large irregular areas or clouds.

Many watercolorists use a water spray bottle to apply plain water to a paper and then spread it with a wide soft brush.

Smaller flat sable brushes used by watercolor artists are standard but artists who paint landscapes often prefer 'filbert' shapes. These, rounded flat brushes are better for painting curved

shapes than the angular flat brushes. Filberts range from very small to as much as an inch wide or more. Egbert brushes are similar but longer than filberts.








Round brushes for watercolor tend to be smaller than oil brushes because the watercolor artist often needs to do closer detail work on smaller paintings.

Watercolor artists often use a variety of brushes for special uses but these shapes are also sometimes used by oil painters for their work. Script or liner brushes have long thin hairs to carry paint in a thin line over a long distance.

Detail or miniature brushes are usually round and short, made of soft hairs to carry a lot of color and give the artist a lot of control in a small area. Some miniature brushes even have angled handles to allow the artist to put details in tight spaces.

Don't be confused by the various names different manufacturers give to their brushes. Most of the names; 'cats tongue', 'angle shader' or 'comb' describe the shape and are usually variations on the basics. New brushes almost always give the artist an incentive to paint. Choose brushes for your style and media and these artists' tools will provide years of dependable results.

General Brush Table

	Name	Media	Shape	Hair	Use
	Round	oil	Round ferrule	bristle	filling, lines and detail
	Pointed Round	all	round and pointed	sable/synthetic	fine details, lines
	Flat	oil	long hairs in a flat ferrule	bristle	long strokes, general work
	Flat	all	longer flat, various widths	sable/synthetics	soft effects, large areas of color
	Bright	oil	short & flat	bristle	short stipple effects
	Filbert	all	flat ferrule, rounded (tongue) shaped	sable/synthetics	nature or landscapes, anywhere a flat edge is to be avoided
	Fans, Combs & Shaders	all	flat, fan-shaped or like filberts, some with gaps or irregular tips	sable/synthetics	grasses, hairs or other textural effects