

OIL PAINTING

Brushes For Working In Oils

Although, in theory, one could use any brush to paint in oils, there are several styles and types of brushes that have been created more or less specifically for use with oils. These include various shapes, lengths, and different fiber content. Each family is comprised of different selections of shape and style.

The first classification, bristle brushes, is value priced in all size ranges and offers great working strength. Each is created using hog bristle hairs, and qualities can vary from rigid, course hair to soft, hand-selected white bristle hair. Either is useful to the oil painter, the more coarse brushes for laying in general color and the softer for smoother paint applications.

Bristle brushes are used to impart texture while applying paints and are the brushes of choice for encaustic and impasto techniques because they stand up well to the rigors of such demanding work. The most common ferrule (metal cone into which the brush bristles are placed) is nickel, which resists deterioration by paint/solvent contact. Many artists swear by them because of their incredible versatility, their near-indestructible construction, and their usefulness on both rigid and flexible grounds.

Another budget-priced brush group ideal for oil painting includes those constructed of ox hair. These brushes have strong, yet soft, hair and offer smooth, silky application. They charge well with paint and offer even application and smooth color with little or no brush marks. They represent a near opposite to the boar bristle brushes described in the previous paragraph. Priced from very economical to moderate, these brushes also have nickel ferrules and stand up well to chemical and solvent contact.

Considered by most oil painters to be the premier brushes for oil work, red sable brushes have been used for centuries by artists. The higher-priced red sable brushes are constructed from hand-selected sable hair and bound in nickel ferrules. Composite brushes, those made of a combination of sable and synthetics, offer added durability and resilience, especially when working on more rigid surfaces. Sables come in varied handle lengths and a large variety of sizes.

Synthetic brushes give a combined quality of strength and supreme flexibility. Their hair is very near that of sable, yet they can stand up to more demanding use without decline. While they are best suited to acrylic painting, they can be used for oil works as well.

"Exotic" hair can also be used in oil painting brushes. Some of the more unique include badger hair, water buffalo, and raccoon. Each is available in a variety of shapes and handle lengths.

Specific shapes of paint brushes have been developed over the years in an attempt to assist the artist in his/her work. It would be difficult to say which shape is the most popular, but near the top would have to be "flats." These brushes have neat square edges, pointed tips, and moderately long hairs. They charge well with paint and deliver strokes that vary from fine to broad, depending on pressure and angle of application.

"Brights" are similar to flats but have shorter hair length. They are a bit stiffer and, while they hold less paint, offer a strong angular application. Ferrules are generally nickel and handle length is long. Well suited to impasto work and divisionism, they offer edge control for easy application of color areas. Here, again, changing the angle of application can create fine to broad strokes.

"Filberts" are somewhat like flats, but have rounded corners, so they offer a softened or rounded shape of paint application. They hold their shape well and are a favorite of floral painters because they so easily render petal shapes onto the canvas.

Another general favorite is the "round." It maintains a perfect point, has moderate length, and handle lengths from moderate to long. Small rounds are used primarily for detail work and signatures. Medium to large rounds are used more for utility paint application. Ferrules are usually nickel.

"Fan" and "blender" style brushes are shapes that lend themselves to specific duties. Fans are used for creating repetitious shapes like fur or grasses. Blenders have long, soft hairs and are ideal for blending one area of color seamlessly into another. These come in many hair qualities, but are one place where one might expect to find exotic hairs used. Ferrules are usually nickel.

Care of fine brushes is essential to their long life. One accepted method for cleaning oil brushes is to first remove the excess paint with an old rag. Soak the bristles in solvent/cleaner (preferably without resting the brush tip against the bottom of the container). Then clean a second time in a fresh solution to remove all traces of paint. Wash with a cleansing soap in the palm of your hand (low pressure against bristles).

Press dry with a clean cloth and then condition the hairs with light oil. Special brush cleaners, such as "The Masters," are available, and each offers the assurance of not only clean, but also conditioned bristles.

Store brushes tip up in a canister, flat in a drawer or box, or create a brush caddy. Threading the handles through the weave of an open-weave placemat can easily make one. Simply roll it up to store or transport.

Armed with these tips, the next time you stand before a brush rack, maybe it won't seem so confusing. Choose the right brush for the right job and you will be miles ahead. Your retailer will be happy to assist you in making your choice, if necessary.

