

Brushes for Chinese Painting

Original calligraphy brushes had very small heads made from rabbit hair glued directly into long, thin bamboo handles. These brushes were used as hair ornaments by court officials and for making notes on bamboo strips. When calligraphy developed into an art form, brushes also developed but remained fairly small. The standard “small, medium and large” sizes all originate from these early developments. Today, with new techniques and materials available, much larger brushes are available – some so large that they can only be used on the floor whilst standing upright!

Chinese brushes vary according to their function. There are different brushes for landscape, flowers, and birds; for free-style painting and meticulous work. Brushes may be soft, stiff or intermediate, and come in a range of sizes. No Chinese brushes are synthetic - all use animal hair and can contain several types. There are three classic styles of brush: cow horn ferrules and bamboo handles, bamboo handles, or ceramic handles. In all cases, the hairs are glued directly into their handles making them more fragile than Western brushes. The hollow bamboo handles are lightweight and very suitable for the fluidity required by Chinese brush painting / calligraphy. Brushes with ceramic handles tend to be heavier and harder to control.

A new, unused brush can be stored without the cap but needs protection from insects. After use, it must be washed clean, dried with paper towel, and hung on its end-loop until dry. It should be left hanging or stored in a bamboo brush mat. Good brushes keep their shape and point - after a brush stroke the head should retain its shape. Note: you should never lay more than 70% of a brush on the paper - or you could cause damage and lose control.

There are five main groups of brushes in various sizes. Select your brushes carefully. The starch holding the new brush hairs together makes it difficult to see the true quality. Good brushes are essential and the price is usually an indicator. Before buying – decide style, subjects and size of your paintings – and buy appropriate brushes.

Wolf - for ink work - reasonably priced, firm but flexible. Not made from wolf but from weasel – Chinese for weasel is yellow wolf. These are best for ink work - maximum flexibility / control. Very difficult to get long hair of this type - for larger brushes with longer hairs use Northern Wolf. Names of wolf brushes tend to suggest their subjects i.e. Fine detail, Detail, Plum blossom, or Orchid bamboo.

Goat (sheep) - softest brushes - least expensive and normally used for colour work. They are the most difficult brushes to control – but do produce excellent effects once you have mastered them. Small – petals, bamboo, branches and lines. Medium – grapes, leaves and larger versions of the above. Large – calligraphy, bamboo trunks and larger versions of the above. Extra Large – large shapes, lotus leaves, bamboo trunks and larger versions of the above. White Cloud - mixed - a core made from stiff hairs (e.g., horse or deer) defining length, giving resilience; wrapped with softer hairs (e.g. goat) to hold large amounts of water or paint, giving expressiveness. Excellent for both colour and ink work; more controllable than sheep hair. They can be used for leaves, birds, flowers, animals – everything

Speciality Brushes

Brushes with particular qualities - derived from the hairs to create special effects. Some are used instead of wolf (for larger paintings) - much longer hairs or for different effects.

Badger hair – strong semi-stiff flexible brush, excellent for texture - large leaves and landscapes

Red Feather – made from chicken feathers. Very fine tip and a wide body holds a considerable amount of ink. Used in gongbi and very detailed fine line work.

Mountain Horse – stiff brush from the tail hairs of mountain horses. Decisive sharp lines, branches, veins, bamboo leaves, texture on rocks and mountains.

Mountain Pony – softer than mountain horse - made from the tail hairs of mountain pony. Good for sweeping strokes and soft textures.

You can also find squirrel, mountain cat, deer, pig bristle and cockerel tail feather brushes.

Wash Brushes - flat white soft hair - used for background washes and special effects. Very inexpensive and fun to use.

Pai bi (row) – made by gluing several simple goat hair brushes together. For washes and larger areas of colour, such as sky or sea. Larger ones (16 –24 rows) can be used for picture mounting.

Hake – wide range of sizes from ½" to 6" - used for washes, textures, tree trunks, landscapes, etc. Avoid those with metal ferrules. Not for mounting.