

Brushes for Chinese Painting

The original calligraphy brushes had very small heads that were made from rabbit hair (from the back of the rabbit's neck) glued directly into long thin bamboo handles. These brushes were carried in the hair of court officials as hair ornaments who travelled around the country on the emperor's business making notes on bamboo or wooden strips as they went. When calligraphy developed into an art form, brushes also developed but, for some time, they still remained fairly small and the standard "small, medium and large" sizes illustrated below all originate from these early brush developments. Today, with the new techniques and materials available to brush makers, much larger brushes have been developed – some of which are 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, for flowers and birds, for free-style paintings, and for meticulous works. Brushes have one of three main qualities: soft, stiff or intermediate, and they come in a range of sizes. No Chinese brushes are synthetic, all utilize types of animal hair and a single brush can contain several different types of hair. There are three classic styles of Chinese brush: those with cow horn ferrules and bamboo handles, those with bamboo handles only, and those with ceramic handles. In all cases, the hairs are glued directly into their bamboo or ceramic handles, which make them more fragile than Western brushes. The hollow bamboo handles are lightweight and very suitable to the fluidity required by Chinese brush painting and calligraphy. The brushes with ceramic handles tend to be heavier and less easy to control.

A new, unused brush can be stored with the cap removed but needs to be protected from insects. After use, the brush must be washed clean and dried with paper towel, then hung on its end-loop until dry. It should then either be left hanging or stored wrapped in a bamboo brush mat. One it has been used the residue of ink or colour will protect it from insect damage.

The heads of good brushes keep their shape and form a good point. After you have made a brush stroke on the paper, the brush head should retain its shape. Note: when you use a brush, you should never lay more than 60% of it on the surface of the paper. If to attempt to use more of it, you could damage it or th paper and you will certainly lose control of it.

You should select your brushes carefully before buying. The starch holding the brush hairs together on new brushes makes it difficult to determine the true quality of a brush in the shop. Quality brushes are essential, and the price usually tells you if you have a good brush. The higher the price, the better the quality. Before buying – you need to decide which brushes you need for the style you wish to develop – and then buy!

Wolf Hair

Wolf hair brushes are used for ink work and are reasonably priced. They are not actually made from wolf hair they are made from weasel hair – the weasel's Chinese name is the yellow wolf. The hairs are firm but flexible. These are the best brushes for ink work because they provide maximum flexibility and control. However, it is very difficult to get long hair of this type so, for larger brushes with longer hairs, you need to move to other sources of hair. The best brushes of this type are Northern Wolf – or should that be Northern Weasel? Wolf hair brushes tend to derive their names from the subjects that they are used most frequently to create.



Fine detail brush



Detail brush



Plum blossom brush



Small Orchid bamboo brush



Large orchid bamboo brush. If you are buying only one, buy this size.

Badger Hair Brushes

Also come in a full range of sizes – the largest is larger than a wolf hair brush because the hairs are longer. They are more resilient than wolf hair and can be used for all types of ink work and ink washes. Colour damages the hair and should be avoided but they can be used for colour in emergencies. Size for size, they are more expensive than wolf hair brushes.



Large – strong semi-stiff flexible brush excellent for line work, ink work and ink washes and for creating texture on large leaves and landscapes

Wash / Hake Brushes

These flat white soft haired brushes are used to apply background washes on paintings and create special effects. They are very inexpensive and can be fun to use. They come in a wide range of sizes from about ½” to approximately 6”.



1.5” is a good size for general use.

White Cloud

White cloud brushes are mixed-hair brushes. They are easier to control than goat hair brushes. They have a core made from stiff hairs (e.g., horse or deer) that define the brush's length and give the brush its resilience. The core is then wrapped with softer hairs (e.g. sheep or goat) that hold large amounts of water or paint and define the brush's expressiveness. These brushes are excellent for both colour and ink work and are more controllable than sheep hair brushes. They can be used for leaves, birds, flowers, landscape and animals – lines and washes – almost everything. Where you are painting in a still where one brush stroke creates the form, you need a brush size to suit the subject for large subjects. You can use the tip of a large brush for smaller subjects.



Small -- can be used for colour work, creating small petals, small leaves and lines. Good for water work – i.e. using clean water to stop runs and for fine work.



Medium - – usage to create larger versions of small leaves and petals.



Large –for calligraphy, large petals, leaves, bamboo trunks and washes.



Extra-large – for large shapes, large petals, leaves, lotus leaves, wide bamboo trunks and washes.

Goat Hair

Goat hair brushes are the softest brushes and are normally used for colour work. They can be used for the same subjects as a similar sized white cloud brush. Because they are very soft, they are the most difficult brushes to control – however, they do produce excellent effects once you have mastered them and they are the least expensive to buy.



Small



Medium



Large



Extra Large

Speciality Brushes

These brushes all have particular qualities that are derived from the hairs from which they are made and are used to create special effects in paintings. Some of them are used in place of wolf hair brushes (for larger paintings) because they have much longer hairs and others are used because they allow you to create different or special effects.



Red Feather brush – has a very fine tip and a wide body that holds a considerable amount of ink. These brush are used in Gong bi and very detailed work.



Mountain Horse brush – is a very stiff haired brush that is made from the tail hairs of mountain horses. They are used to create decisive sharp lines, branches, veins, bamboo leaves, and texture on rocks and mountains. They come in a range of sizes this one is medium sized.



Mountain Pony brush – is a softer brush than the mountain horse brush and is made from the tail hairs of the mountain pony. It is good for sweeping strokes and for creating soft texture.

In addition to the above, you can also find a range of squirrel, mountain cat, deer, pig bristle and cockerel tail feathers brushes. None are used for general work, they are all expensive, look attractive, but hard to find a use for.

Pai bi (row) brushes –are made by gluing a number of simple goat hair brushes together in a row. They are used for wash work and to paint larger areas of colour in a picture, such as sky or sea.