

Colours for Chinese Brush Painting

Care should be taken using / storing Chinese colours. Some are extremely poisonous, especially rattan, cinnabar, vermilion and white. Treat with respect - DO NOT LICK BRUSHES - wash hands after painting and do not eat with your fingers whilst painting.

Traditional Chinese colours are derived from vegetable (transparent) and mineral (opaque) sources. Chinese colours (like Chinese ink) contain a high proportion of size and glue so when applied to unsized paper will be quickly absorbed and will size the paper they have covered - assume you can never remove any colour applied to unsized or semi-sized papers - every brush stroke counts!

Available colours

The Chinese colour palette may appear extremely limited to a Western artist, yet they blend with each other and with ink to create a vast range of colours, shades and tones.

Blue - mineral blue (1,2,3, made from ground azurite, opaque), indigo (transparent), phthalocyanine (similar to ultramarine, transparent), Sky (opaque)

Green - mineral green (1,2,3, made from ground malachite, opaque)

Yellow – gamboges (transparent), rattan (transparent), orpiment (opaque), ochre (opaque)

Brown / Orange - burnt sienna (from iron rock, varies from source to source), vermilion (opaque)

Red – cinnabar (opaque), peony (hard to find, transparent), bright (scarlet, transparent), carmine (transparent), rouge (semi-transparent)

White - Chinese white (opaque)

Black – black (semi-transparent)

These colours are available in a number of forms -

Chips - transparent and semi-transparent colours - small 'chips' in little boxes - put into a container with a lid, or a stacking dish big enough for your brush.

Spray lightly to activate glue, pick up colour using a damp brush. Note: do not screw the lid on whilst wet - they go mouldy and smelly!

Colours available in chip form include: rouge tint, carmine, bright red (scarlet), dark red, peony, burnt sienna, vermilion, orpiment, sky blue and indigo.

Compared to tubes, chip colours are very expensive but purer.

Rattan - dried chunks of rattan sap - treat as chips or keep in a sealed box.
Highly poisonous.

Powders - from ground minerals or stones. Most common - malachite (mineral or stone green), azurite (mineral or stone blue), cinnabar (red), ochre (straw yellow) and white. To create pigment, mineral powder is passed through a sedimentation process and allowed to settle out. Resulting sludge is divided into four or five levels of particle size. The largest - deepest shade (1), finest - palest shade (4 or 5). Vermilion and cinnabar are from the same mineral source.

To use - mix powder to a paste with special glue (usually peach stone or deer horn glue) and water. Store paste in a pot and treat as chip colours. Powder colours are very expensive compared to tubes - use on the front of silk paintings (use tube colours for painting on the back).

Colour Sticks - some colours are available in stick form – like ink. Grind in the same way, use a different stone for each colour.

Tubes of Colour - best brand is Suzhou (difficult to find). Most common brand is Marie's Chinese painting colours - inexpensive. Two tube sizes– small (approx. 5 ml) and large (3 to 4 times size of small tubes) - singly or boxes of 12 and 18 tubes. Tubes sometimes dry out but are still usable - split the tube, decant paint and spray with water (as for chips). You can also squeeze a fresh tube into a pot.

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