

Chinese Ink and Ink Stones

Ink comes in two main forms - liquid and solid.

Liquid ink is great for beginners and when time is limited

Chinese liquid ink - by-product of oil refining and relatively inexpensive. Does not give the same degree of tone control as high quality stick ink.

Vermilion ink – only in large bottles - traditionally used for ink-only paintings of bamboo.

Japanese Liquid Ink - more expensive than Chinese. Developed to provide similar results to ground ink. Better quality than Chinese – with very fine particles giving a much wider range of tones.

Ink Sticks - There are many varieties of ink stick – each manufacturer has a secret recipe – but basic method is the same. A source of carbon is burnt in insufficient air, creating a very smoky flame and a fine powder deposit. This is mixed with glue, oils, herbs and perfumes making a thick black putty-like material and pressed into wooden moulds. The resulting blocks are air dried. Ink needs to be aged (like fine wine) before use. The older the ink stick - the better its grinding quality.

Ink made from tea soot - brownish black - calligraphy. Ink made from oil - deep brownish black - calligraphy, freestyle, gongbi and silk painting. Industrial charcoal soot - very fine particles and low glue content. Best ink is made from seasoned pinewood - producing a range of bluish blacks, and from tong tree oil soot - produces a range of warm blacks - both for gongbi work and silk painting.

The burning process controls the degree of fineness of carbon particles affecting colour and range of tones when diluting ink. Ink made with larger carbon particles will give a grainy texture at high dilution.

Different ink sticks are used for calligraphy and painting. Avoid highly decorated ones – unless buying them as a collector. Some very expensive inks are offered as flat, plain, round cakes.

You can also get sticks of cinnabar and black ink combined. These sticks are stripy - as you grind, the colours combine to a beautiful purplish ink much prized by Chinese landscape artists.

Ink grinding - too watery and it will not provide the darkest tones. Grind at a rate to create very fine particles - not too fast. After grinding, dry the stick on paper towel to prevent cracking. Keep away from the stone to prevent it sticking. Leave to air dry before storing. If the stick should stick to the surface of the stone, do not remove the stick by force as this may damage the surface of the stone. Pour away any remaining ink, run hot water on the stone, rock the stick gently until it comes off.

Freshly ground ink is best for most purposes. 'Overnight' ink (also called 'burnt ink') is sometimes desirable for special effects as it has a grainy texture. Overnight wash (diluted ink left covered with cling film) also creates different effects.

Ink Stone

The ink stone is a vital part of the Chinese brush painter's studio. The quality of the stone affects the ground ink. You cannot grind good ink on a poor stone even if using the best quality stick! Surface should feel very smooth and cool to touch. A fine stone will give ink that can be easily controlled - if the ink is too fine or too coarse it runs out of control and can damage your brush.

Water on the surface of the stone should remain for a long time and not soak in. The stone needs a close fitting lid that will reduce evaporation. Avoid highly decorated and colourful stones - these are made for the gift trade, not for artist use. Some expensive ink stones are subtly carved, in polished wooden boxes or have close fitting wooden lids. The most popular stone amongst Chinese artists is the simple circular stone with a concave grinding surface and a close fitting lid. When you want it, a brush-full of rich black ink should be transferred from the stone to a dish or saucer for dilution and the lid replaced immediately.

When you finish a painting session, any ink left on the stone must be removed and the stone washed in clean running water. If you leave ink on the stone it will reduce the stone's grinding properties.

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