

Brushes for Watercolour painting

A few thoughts on the types and choices

The best brushes for watercolour painting are generally agreed to be Kolinsky Sable....and are unsurprisingly the most expensive (be prepared to take out a bank loan for the larger sizes). The reason they are so expensive is that they hold a great deal of colour whilst giving you perfect control of the transition of that colour onto the paper. If you treat yourself to one look after it (or better still contact Securicor).

Alternative brushes are made from Red Sable, Squirrel hair, and other hair mixes, they are cheaper and whilst you lose a little of the control they are every bit as good for general watercolour painting. There are also some good synthetic alternatives "Dalon" and "Proloene" which will also give you good service for a while but tend to thicken up quickly and become unworkable far quicker than quality brushes.

Try using a synthetic brush and a sable of the same size, you will quickly see the difference, the sable holds more liquid.

Why is this important I hear you ask.... Well I'm glad you asked that... if a brush holds more water/colour it means the delivery of the colour will be more consistent, the colour will look the same on the paper. If you are doing a large wash this will help in achieving the consistency you desire without having to go back to your reservoir of colour as regularly as you would with a cheaper brush.

If you look after your brushes, sable and squirrel mixes will give you better long term service than synthetics. (They should always be washed/rinsed in clean water and stood vertically after use, occasionally a clean with a little touch of washing-up liquid will help but not too often.)

The basic types of brush: A Round , a Flat, A Mop, and a Rigger are seen here in that order.



The round is for everyday use a general purpose brush which will produce a thin line or a wider line dependant on how much pressure you exert on it. Round brushes are graded in general use in sizes from 00 (very small) to size 12. Use the largest brush you are comfortable with, a general mistake of the amateur artist is to use too small brushes, the work becomes streaked, inconsistent and fiddly. Unless you intend producing miniatures or high quality botanical work your smallest brush should be a 3, use an 8 or 10 for most of the picture and a 6 or 7 for some detail work.

The flat is used mainly for applying washes , large areas of consistent colour or specialist detail for instance bricks in a wall.

The mop is a cheaper alternative to large rounds and will deliver large amounts of colour onto the paper favoured by those who use wet on wet techniques (the merging of coloured washes on the paper rather than mixing off the paper and then applying the mixed colour)

The rigger is a long thin brush and is used for delivering thin lines onto the paper for instance twigs of a tree, telegraph wires and ships' rigging (which incidentally is where it got its name from, maritime artists first used it for precisely that purpose)

These are not the only brushes available and you can try out others as you progress with your journey into the world of watercolour. Basically other brushes are just aids for specific applications for instance a Fan brush will produce foliage in a specific way or bushes in a distant landscape. Other brushes are a luxury and not necessary for day-to-day watercolour painting but can be fun on the odd occasion.



Some artists can never have too many brushes or other equipment... above: my window sill!

Graham Thew
grahamthewart.uk