

WATERCOLOUR Brushes

Watercolour is a wonderful painting medium, and relatively simple with respect to the materials needed - paint, brushes, paper and water.

It seems simple enough, but there is a lot more to it, especially when it comes to choosing the right brushes. There are so many different hairs/fibres, shapes and sizes to choose from that it can get a little overwhelming. Then there is the cost. Watercolour brushes come in an incredibly wide range of prices and it's not always obvious what the difference is between a R10 brush and one that costs R1,000. In this article we hope to explain the differences in shapes, sizes and hairs/fibres used to make watercolour brushes (and don't forget cost).

The type of brush that you use is very important, especially when it comes to watercolours. This is because watercolour painting relies so heavily on the interaction of the water with the paint, so one needs a brush that can hold and release water in subtle variations. Artists often talk about this as being the responsiveness of a brush.

It's important to remember that when choosing any brush, not only for watercolour painting, it is largely a personal preference. One artist's opinion can be completely different to another, and this often depends on the painting style and techniques used.

When choosing a watercolour brush there are a few key factors to take into account:

- **The point-** a watercolour brush needs to keep a beautiful needle point. Snap refers to filling a brush with water and flicking the water off sharply. The brush should snap to a sharp point.
- **Absorbency-** It is crucial that a good watercolour brush holds a decent amount of liquid.
- **Spring or resilience-** a good watercolour brush will spring back to its proper shape after each use and be able to maintain that shape.
- **Release-** a good watercolour brush will release the water/paint in an even and smooth manner. A brush stroke should start and end clean ie. Not with a puddle of water.

HAIR

Here are the main hairs/fibres used for watercolour brushes:

KOLINSKY SABLE

We have to start with Kolinsky sable as it is famous as being the most sought after hair for watercolour brushes. Most of the top watercolour brushes in the world are made from Kolinsky sable hair.

Anyone who knows about Kolinsky sable will know that it carries a hefty price tag, but like most things, you get what you pay for. A good quality Kolinsky sable brush that is looked after properly will last for many years.

What makes it so great as a watercolour brush you may ask? Kolinsky sable is probably most noted for its unbeatable point. No other hair has the same exquisite point as a Kolinsky watercolour brush, and if looked after well it will keep this point for years. This hair also has wonderful spring and release, and holds a lot of watercolour. No brush compares with the Kolinsky for control and resilience; it is the ultimate in artist brushes! Once you've tried it for yourself, you'll know what the fuss is about.

Why is it so expensive? A Kolinsky sable (also known as a Siberian Weasel) is a weasel-like creature that is only found in a small region in the northern most part of Siberia where the climate is incredibly cold and harsh. This harsh climate is the reason that the hairs of the Kolinsky sable are so resilient and supple. The very best brushes are made from the end of male's winter coat and only from the tail, making it a scarce and driving up the price. Legally acquired Kolinsky hairs (such as those from reputable companies) requires special licenses and heavily scrutinised paperwork for customs purposes- all of which costs money and further increases the price of the hair.

Not all sable is Kolinsky sable. Brushes marked with 'sable', 'red sable', 'artists sable' and 'fine sable' are not made from Kolinsky hairs but hairs from animals within the same family as the Kolinsky sable. Although they won't perform as well as a pure Kolinsky brush, they can still be a good alternative given the price of the real thing.

If you are going to invest in a Kolinsky brush it is very important to buy one from a reputable brush-maker with excellent reviews. There are two main reasons for this:

- 1) Not all Kolinsky hairs are created equal. A brush made from the female (or not from the tail or not in winter) can still be labelled as 'Kolinsky' but will not have the same characteristics that you are looking for.
- 2) Unfortunately due to the high price of Kolinsky hair, and the cumbersome process of acquiring it legally, some manufacturers use devious tactics such as mixing Kolinsky hairs with other hairs, not using enough hair in the brush, or sometimes using hair from a completely different animal. Kolinsky sable is a very expensive hair so any brush marked 'Kolinsky' that seems too cheap should be treated with caution. A poor quality sable brush can still be expensive but is often not worth the price tag, so seek advice from the shop assistant and online reviews. Make sure the sales assistant knows what he/she is talking about- this is a specialised subject and many do not!

*"Kolinsky Sable springs,snaps and glides along the paper in a totally different way, flowing and holding so much liquid."
Brush-maker Rosemary & Co*

SQUIRREL HAIR

Top quality squirrel hair holds even more water than Kolinsky sable hair, but doesn't have the same beautiful point and nowhere near the spring. It is perfect for mop brushes and wash brushes where its water carrying capacity is so important.

Watercolourists who paint in a loose style will find a good quality squirrel mop to be invaluable.

Just like most things, not all squirrel hair is equal and you get good and 'not so good' squirrel brushes. Siberian Blue Squirrel (also called Sacamena) and Kazan Squirrel are excellent choices for mop brushes and cat's tongue brushes. They are both highly absorbent and the Kazan Squirrel can have a nice point when fully wet.



Canadian or Golden Squirrel hair is short and thick and is often used in high quality flat wash brushes. It has great absorbency.

It's difficult to achieve a uniform wash if your brush doesn't hold enough liquid and you are constantly having to recharge it, especially if you are using a 'thirsty' (absorbent) paper. Camel Hair Camel hair is not from camels, but is actually an industry name for a whole range of natural hair blends that are usually of inferior quality and we recommend that you stay far away from these brushes.

GOAT HAIR

Goat hair is a cheap alternative to squirrel hair and not highly recommended. Unfortunately goat hair can look very similar to squirrel hair and is often used in mops and passed off as squirrel.

You need to ask the sales assistant about the hair used in every mop brush that you buy and be extra vigilant is the price seems too good to be true.

SYNTHETIC FIBRES

Synthetic fibres are used as a cheaper alternative to natural hairs and are usually made from nylon or polyester. Although a good quality synthetic brush can still have a decent point it typically won't last as long as a brush made from natural hair. Synthetic fibres don't hold as much water or release it as evenly as a natural hair because they are smooth (Natural Hair contains microscopic ridges along its length, which helps to hold a greater amount of watercolour paint).

Manufacturers such as Raphael have recently developed synthetic fibres with tiny ridges on them to greatly increase the water carrying capacity. These are more expensive than the common synthetic brushes, but offer a far greater painting experience.

There's no way around it, good quality art materials can be a stretch on the wallet. You should view your watercolour brushes as an investment in your art and no matter what level you are at, try to buy the best quality brushes that you can realistically afford.

Your watercolour brushes will probably be the biggest investment that you make with regards to tools, and if they

are properly cared for they should last years. It's better to have a few really good brushes than many inferior ones.

There are so many different brushes on the market with a wide range of prices, so ask your shop assistant to help you pick out the best ones for your budget and your painting style.

SHAPES:

There are a lot of different shaped brushes for watercolours and at The Italian Artshop we always recommend that you have fewer brushes of good quality than many different brushes of poor quality. These are the 3 main shapes that we recommend as your initial brushes:



ROUND

This is the most common shape for watercolour brushes. A round brush is in fact teardrop shaped and comes to a point at the tip. Typically a round brush will have a large 'belly' which acts as a reservoir and feeds the liquid down to the tip of the brush as you are painting. A good round brush will generally be your workhorse brush and many watercolourists will use this brush for the majority of their painting



MOP BRUSH

A good mop brush is a very useful tool to create washes but it can also be used to create loose watercolour paintings. Alvaro Castagnet for example uses a mop brush to accomplish many of his paintings.



RETOUCH BRUSH

This is a small brush used for fine details.



CAT'S TONGUE

This brush is really three brushes in one. Paint with the point for fine lines, with the side for medium strokes, and with the flat side of the brush for washes and large areas.



RIGGER BRUSH

These brushes are named so because they were used to paint the rigging on sailing ships. They are extra-long with a fine point. A rigger made from Kolinsky sable will give you long lines in a single stroke



FLAT BRUSH

Flat brushes are used for washes and also to create faceted and long linear strokes



TREE AND FOLIAGE BRUSH

Made by brush manufacturer Rosemary & Co, this brush is designed to simplify the art of painting trees and foliage in watercolour, this special brush has just the right performance to deliver perfect tree foliage (also a good texture brush for shrubbery etc).



UNIVERSAL LINER

Also called a reservoir liner, this is a very special brush made with a bulbous belly of squirrel hair to hold maximum liquid and an extra fine kolinsky central tip for fine detail. As you paint the reservoir feeds the liquid to the kolinsky tip giving a continuous fluid motion.



A watercolour brush is an investment and we highly recommend that you test a brush before you buy it. Ask the shop assistant for help and test the point, absorbency, spring and release.

The Italian Artshop is offering two readers the chance win one of the famous Raphael 8404 watercolour brushes. These brushes are renowned for their amazing point and are perfect for fine details.

Send your name, postal address and contact numbers to:
skye@italianartshop.co.za

Closing date:
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