

**What brush works best?
How do I keep it looking new?**



Does the brush you choose really make a difference in the outcome of your finished product? You better believe it does. A number of factors will alter the final result but starting with the proper brush for the technique and products you are working with is just as important as the correct finish. Let's take a look at some of the brushes you will encounter and discuss some important facts you need to know.

Natural Hair Brushes

Natural hair brushes can range from very soft to extremely stiff bristles. Soft bristled brushes are the best choice when working with most fired finishes because they tend to flow colour on nicely without spreading it too thin. These brushes also naturally hold larger amounts of colour well, making them ideal for brush stroke work.

Stiffer bristled brushes are generally reserved for non-fire finishes and dry brushing. These brushes are generally not recommended for fired finishes because they will spread the colour so thin that you will usually encounter streaks and starved areas in the final finish. An exception would be a stiff fan brush often used for crystal type glazes.

Synthetic Brushes

Synthetic brushes are made from manufactured materials rather than natural hair. Some of these brushes come close to soft natural hair and will work with most fired finishes in addition to non-fired colours. Manufactured hair does not hold colour as well as most natural soft haired brushes.

A person can invest a small fortune in brushes, a few dollars at a time. Preventative care is the best way to keep them in good condition so they last. Let's look at important areas to keep your brushes in tip-top shape.

Using the improper brush with certain kinds of finishes can destroy bristles. An example would be a synthetic bristle with oil-based colours. Most of the time, synthetic bristles will have a tendency to fray and curl on the ends from the harsh minerals in the colours. Natural bristle brushes are best suited for these finishes.

Dry brushing with a soft natural hairbrush could have a devastating effect on the bristles. Soft hair cannot tolerate the abuse of being slammed against the bisque surface, so the result will be loose broken hair.

Always check with a salesperson or teacher to see if the brushes you have will really work with a finish or technique you are using. Trying to cut corners by not purchasing the proper tools can give a poor outcome on the finish, plus ruin a brush.

Paint Build-up

So, you have a brush and you are ready to use it. If you are using almost any kind of water-based product, the first thing you should do is wet the bristles. Do not just give it a quick dip, but also work the moisture into the hair. Most build-up of colour happens in the center of the bristles, so just wetting the outside will not have much of an effect. If you do not wet the bristles first, the paint will start to dry in the center of the brush almost immediately. You may only be painting for a short time before you wash the brush out. In that short period, dry paint has already started to collect. Even after washing, a little bit stays in the brush. The next time you use the brush, a little more builds up, and so on. Moisture in those bristles before colour will help prevent paint from drying as quickly in the center.

Most underglazes and glazes will wash out even when dry, but stains can be a permanent part of the brush.

Cleaning Brushes

One of the most important things to remember is to clean your brushes immediately after use and never allow them to soak in water. If the paint on the handle of a brush is cracked and flaking off, it was left in water way too long. Period! Please do not blame it on the brush.

Brushes are made with hair, so naturally you will want to clean them with something safe for hair. Would you use dish soap to clean your hair on your head? Many dish soaps have degreasers in them which will dry out the hair. If your hair is dry, what happens to it? Is it fizzy and uncontrollable? You can expect a brush to react the same way.

Speaking of your hair, how would you like it someone tipped you upside down and slammed your head against the bottom of a bowl of water? Even worse, what if they dragged your head back and forth across the bottom of one of those bumpy brush bins? Then you stuff you in a paper towel or a rag and twist and pull your hair. How would you like it? Do not expect a brush to like it any better. Try being gentle with your brushes and treat them the way you want to be treated. Gently swish them in water and remove colour and then gently massage the hair in a towel to be sure all the colour is out. Repeat this process until no more colour is visible on the towel.

Storing Brushes

How brushes are stored plays a very important factor. After cleaning the brushes, it is best to lay them flat until they are completely dry. If you stand them up immediately in an upright container, the moisture in the bristles will work its way down through the ferrule and cause

damage to the handle and any glue holding the brush together. Certain kinds of bristles can also be damaged if stood while wet.

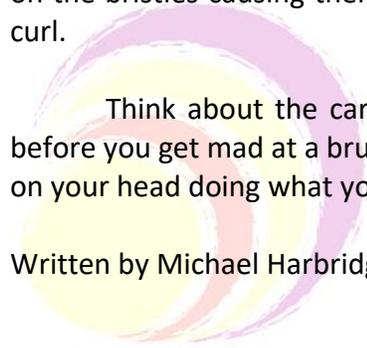
Once dry, brushes can be placed on an upright container, or a special brush holder. Old clean Pringle cans are great for storing brushes that will travel. Avoid placing brushes in a flat tray if you plan to travel with them. They can shift and press against the side causing the hair to bend. If left for prolonged periods, bristles can stay this way permanently.

It would be nice if brushes lasted forever. The fact is, some brushes simply wear out. Ceramic bisque can be a very porous surface and rough on brushes. Dry brushes will be some of the first to wear down. If you start seeing scrape marks on your piece because the metal ferrule of the brush is rubbing, it is time to retire the brush.

Synthetic brushes can start to curl on the ends even with the best care. If you are accustomed to working on bisque, every time you brush back and forth, the bisque can "grab" on the bristles causing them to stretch. Stretching many of these materials will cause them to curl.

Think about the care you have given and the abuse the brush has been subjected to before you get mad at a brush or manufacturer. To put it into perspective, just visualize the hair on your head doing what your brushes do.

Written by Michael Harbridge for Fired Arts magazine



Creating Business Opportunities

GERAMITIC

Arts