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Oriental Brushes

(Excerpts from ART HARDWARE: The Definitive Guide to Artists' Materials, by Steven Saitzyk © 1987)

In the west, a brush is considered simply a tool for self-expression; it needs little character of its own. A brush should also be multipurpose-the "vegetatic" approach to brush selection-so one or two brushes fulfill all needs. In the East, however, there is a tradition of treating artists' materials as friends, rather than as slaves to artistic expression. Artwork is a cooperative process that involves the unique characteristics of the tool as well as those of the artist. The belief is that no single brush does everything well, and to have true versatility several styles of brushes are needed. Thus it is common to find many different shapes and styles of Oriental brushes.

The actual selection of a brush is based on the calligrapher's aesthetic attitude and choice of technique. There are two major types of aesthetic attitudes. The first proposes that calligraphy involves producing readable characters and that their appearance should follow traditional laws, or rules, of writing. This point of view is similar to the Western notion of fine penmanship. In the East, this attitude is referred to as the Old Style, or Chinese style, of calligraphy, and the selection of the right brush for the correct form is critical. The second, and more modern, attitude is more concerned with the state of mind and the aesthetic appearance of the characters than with readability. The emphasis here might be more on the ink or the paper than on the brush that is used. This style is referred to as the Japanese style, even though both styles are commonly used in Japan.

Technique is the other major determining factor in choosing a brush. In Japan, there are four techniques, or styles, of writing. *Jofuku*, which means "dip once," is a style where the brush is dipped only once and narrow lines are produced. Part of the idea is to finish before the ink runs out, as well as to do the stroke without hesitation. Of all the Japanese calligraphic styles, this one is most easily applied to Western watercolor techniques.

Cultural differences affect not only style and attitude but also the composition of the brushes themselves. Chinese brushes, for example, are often composed of just one type of animal hair: weasel, rabbit, or goat. While the Chinese do not differentiate between brushes that are used for calligraphy and those used for painting, the Japanese do make a clear distinction between the brushes intended for each purpose. Japanese brushes may contain one or more types of hair selected from horse, badger, sheep, goat, deer, cat, and, in some cases, weasel. Hair such as horsetail, badger, deer (from the animal's back), and weasel are selected for their firmness and are commonly used as the central core in building a brush. The softer hairs-sheep, goat, cat, and deer (from the inner arch)-are selected for absorbency and are often wrapped around the firmer central core. The softer and more absorbent hairs have a great inclination to stay together when wet. When used as the outer wrap, they tend to bind together the less absorbent firmer hairs of the core and give the brush more control. Brushes that are made primarily of coarse dark hairs such as horsetail are left partially starched, up to one-third the length of the hairs near the ferrule, to give added control, and only the first half of the brush is actually used.

Oriental brushes are heavily starched to protect them until they are purchased. Before use, the starch should be removed by washing the brush in room-temperature water until the working length of the brush is fully loosened. The softer brushes, particularly the painting brushes, are always fully loosened.

A particular style of brush may have several names. One name given to the brush may, for example, be taken from the family who originally made that style of brush. It might be a poetic description, or simply a listing of the composition of the brush. In some cases, no name is used. Since names cannot be relied upon, it is important to understand both the intended function and the composition of an Oriental brush to make a proper selection. It might be helpful, however, to know that the Japanese have five descriptive terms that they use to distinguish the general appearance of round brushes. Flat brushes, as opposed to round brushes, are all lumped into one category and called *hake*.

The first category of round brushes is *choho*, which means "long tip" in relation to the diameter of the handle. The Japanese use this type of brush in the *jofuku* style. The Chinese have a version of this brush in which the hair can be up to one-third the total length of the brush. This type of brush is commonly used in the Zen style of painting, which resembles the *jofuku* style of calligraphy.

Chuhō, which means "regular long hair," is the second category. *Chuhō* refers to the basic painting brush.

Category three is *tanpoh*, which translates as "short hair" and is used to describe brushes used for coloring.

Menso, category four, means "small detail" and describes small brushes used for detail.

The fifth category, *jakuto*, or "peacock head," is an ancient style of calligraphy brush, which is neither popular nor even found in the West. This brush has a long, thin handle with a ferrule that resembles a bulb and holds cat hair.

For the sake of simplicity, all the commonly used Oriental brushes have been broken down into two major types based on their intended use, whether for calligraphy or painting. The Japanese term for calligraphy is *sumi*, meaning ink. The term for painting is *sumi-e*. Therefore, *sumi* brushes are for calligraphy and *sumi-e* brushes are for painting. Because of the dominance of Japanese brushes in the market, it has become common practice to refer to all Oriental brushes, regardless of national origin, by the Japanese terms *sumi* and *sumi-e*.

CALLIGRAPHY (SUMI) BRUSHES

Calligraphy brushes are designed to be held perpendicular to the paper; the width of the brushstroke is varied by pushing the tip down into the paper or lifting it up while moving the brush parallel to the surface. This allows for the proper flow of ink or watercolor from the belly of the brush to the tip and helps the brush to maintain a proper point. If more than the first half of the brush-the tip to the mid-length of the hairs-is used, or if the brush is too dry, point and control are lost.

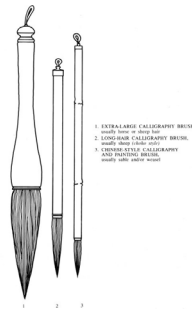
Any brush that is to be used with watercolor or ink should be wet before dipping it into the watercolor or ink. A large calligraphy brush should be prepared approximately fifteen minutes in advance by first thoroughly soaking it (hold the brush in water to soak-never allow the weight of a brush to be supported by the



hairs) in room-temperature water to allow trapped air to escape. The excess water may be removed by gently squeezing the hairs together without pulling on them. The brush should then be placed upright in a jar to stand for the remaining length of time. Preparing the brush for this length of time gives the hairs a chance to soften and the scales to open and allow for the reduction of surface tension to increase absorbency.

When it is time to clean up, it is preferable to rinse the brush with warm water. If Oriental ink (*sumi*) has been used, it is recommended that some ink, 10 to 20 percent, be left in the brush to dry. This will cause a slight stiffness and protect the hairs until the brush's next use. After the brush has been rinsed, it should be squeezed dry, reshaped, and hung tip down to dry. If wet brushes, particularly large brushes, are left standing upright in a jar to dry, or stored away before they are thoroughly dry, the hairs will mildew, rot, and fall out.

Calligraphy (Sumi) Brushes



Sheep or Goat Brushes

Sheep or goat brushes are popular in China and Japan. Sheep or goat hair is long, at least 2 inches in length. It is very absorbent and can be shaped into a fine point when wet. Sheep hair has a natural inclination to stay together when wet and will, therefore, make it possible to maintain excellent control even when all the protective starch has been removed and the hairs have been fully loosened.

Few types of hair will hold up well or make good control possible when the direction of a brush stroke is changed 180 degrees without stopping, or without lifting the tip of the brush off the working surface. Sheep hair is very elastic and is one of the few hairs that will survive this type of treatment.

Horsehair Brushes

Horsehair Brushes are used primarily by the Japanese. Horsehair is popular because the length of the hair makes it possible to create extremely large brushes. Horsehair does not have any natural ability to stay together when wet, and is often left partially starched, or is covered with an outside layer of sheep hair. Calligraphy brushes made only of horsehair are loosened only one-half to two-thirds from the tip; the remainder of the brush is left permanently stiff, and only the first quarter to one-half is ever used.

Horsehair is not as elastic as sheep and will not hold up as well if dramatic changes in direction are not accompanied by the lifting of the brush from the working surface. White horsehair, however, is an exception to this rule.

Weasel or Rabbit Brushes

Weasel or rabbit brushes, or brushes made of a combination of weasel and rabbit hair, are popular in China for calligraphy. Brushes made of these hairs are for smaller calligraphy pieces and for everyday writing. They are preferred for their quick response and point. These brushes are used fully loosened.

Samba Brushes

Samba Brushes are highly prized among Japanese calligraphers because of the hair's great resiliency and point. They are used either partially or fully loosened. Samba brushes have become rare in the West and when found are often expensive. To the beginner, a samba hair brush often tends to feel uncontrollable, if not wild.

Badger Hair

Badger Hair is used in Oriental brushes only in combination with other hairs. Badger hair adds resiliency to a brush.

WATERCOLOR (SUMI-E) BRUSHES

Since watercolor painting is more sensitive to the quality of the brush, greater care is often taken in selecting and assembling watercolor brushes than calligraphy brushes. It is not uncommon to use a watercolor brush for both watercolor and calligraphy, particularly in China.

The method of applying paint with a watercolor brush, although prescribed, is not as restrictive as is the application of ink with a calligraphy brush. Most brush strokes still involve a combination of up and down movements, onto and off the working surface, that are accompanied by parallel movements across the surface. The brush may be held at different angles, however, to give a greater variety of painterly effects. Skill at performing the various movements, coupled with knowledge of the way a particular style of brush will behave, allows the artist to create spontaneously artwork that is natural to the eye with a minimum of effort and great economy of form.

Watercolor brushes are used fully loosened, and the full length of the hair is commonly used. Those brushes that are made with combinations of the more resilient hairs are not designed for 180-degree changes in direction without first being lifted from the working surface.

Watercolor brushes can be divided into those that are used primarily for rendering and those used mainly for sketching or shading. Rendering brushes, which are the *menso* style, are used similarly to small Western watercolor brushes to produce detailed images through the use of multiple small brushstrokes and outlining. Sketching, or *chuhō-style*, brushes and shading, or *tanpō-style*, brushes are used for creating an image, often semi-abstract, with a minimum of brushstrokes. Sketching brushes are usually dipped into three values of ink to create shading in one stroke. The brush is first dipped fully into the lightest value, then it is dipped approximately one-half the length of the hair into the middle value, and, finally, the tip alone is dipped into the darkest value.

Weasel, cat, and rabbit hair are used primarily in brushes designed for rendering. Sheep hair, horsehair, deer hair from the inner arch, bamboo, and blends of

natural hair and synthetic filaments are used in brushes that are designed for sketching or adding color.



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Japanese Weasel Brushes

Japanese weasel brushes are sharply pointed, narrow, and small. The length of the exposed hair is longer than a Western sable brush of the same diameter. This brush closely resembles a designer's quill. This type of brush is commonly called *menso* and is used for detail drawing, line drawing, and illustration. It can be used either partially loosened or fully loosened.

Chinese Weasel Brushes

Chinese weasel brushes are sharply pointed and resemble Western watercolor brushes in shape and size. These brushes are used fully loosened. This style of brush is commonly bought in a set of three-small, medium, and large. The small is roughly equivalent to a size 7 Western watercolor brush and the large is comparable to a size 14. This style of brush behaves almost identically to that of a Western sable watercolor brush, and is one of the few Oriental brushes that can easily make the transition to Western watercolor technique.

Cat Hair Brushes

Cat hair brushes are detail brushes that resemble Western spotting brushes in shape and size. Only the short, white cat hairs, or the tips of the longer hairs, are used in brush making. These brushes are used fully loosened to apply the finishing touches to a painting, or to apply a glaze to ceramics.

Rabbit Hair

Rabbit hair is used in China to add resiliency to a brush. It is rarely found in a brush by itself.

Sheep Hair

Sheep hair is used in three types of brushes. The first is a flat wash brush, which is called *hake* in Japanese. There is a large variety of shapes and sizes of *hake* brushes. The best are those in which the hair is glued together and then sewn into a lacquered handle. All sheep brushes seem to shed some hair, especially when new. The better-quality brushes cease to lose hairs after several washings. *Hake* brushes are used for the application of delicate watercolor washes, for the application of adhesives, and even as theatrical makeup brushes.

Small to medium-size, short, round brushes made primarily of sheep hair are commonly called *saishiki* and can be categorized as *tanpoh-style* brushes. These brushes are used to add color or shading to a painting and are used fully loosened. They can be classified as rendering or sketching brushes.

Sheep hair is often used as an outer layer off a brush to add absorbency and control, particularly when the core is composed of horsehair.

Horsehair Brushes

Horsehair brushes used for watercolor, as opposed to horsehair calligraphy brushes, always contain some sheep hair. The sheep hair may be mixed in randomly with the horsehair, as is done in the less expensive brushes, or, better, it may be a separate outer layer. Since horsehair brushes for watercolor are used fully loosened, sheep hair is needed to help keep the horsehair together during use. The better-quality brushes are made from horsehair taken from the ear and belly of the animal.

This type of brush, which falls into the category of *chuo*, was developed in Japan, and is commonly sold in the West under either of two names, *choryu* or *seiryu*. This is the basic *sumi-e* brush, the *workhorse* of Japanese painting. It is common practice to dip this brush into three different shades of ink to produce an image that is shaded and sketched in the same stroke. There are rarely more than four available choices in size; these are designated small, medium, large, and extra-large. The Western equivalent for small is about a size 7 in an English watercolor brush, and extra-large would be near a size 14.

Deer Hair (Inner Arch) Brushes

Deer hair (inner arch) brushes are made in several styles. Deer hair (taken from the inner arch) is used primarily by the Japanese in brush making. It is used to produce both *chuo*- and *tanpoh-style* brushes. There is one style called *kumadori*, a *tanpoh* brush, in which the better grades are made with 100 percent deer hair. The lesser grades are blends of sheep, badger, horse, and, sometimes deer. *Kumadori* brushes look like extra-large Western spotting brushes; the length of the hair is short and the shape resembles the tip of a bullet. A *kumadori* brush is used for shading and to sketch semicircular shapes, such as plum blossom petals. Shading is sometimes accomplished by loading this brush with plain water and running the tip of the wet brush along a painted edge, causing it to bleed. This style of brush is popular among ceramists for applying glazes in designs to the surface of pottery.

Deer is often used in combination with such hairs as weasel and horse to produce an all-purpose sketching brush that resembles in appearance the *choryu*, or *seiryu*, brush, but which has a different responsiveness. The feel of this style of brush is like that of a Western watercolor brush, and it is commonly called by the name of *gyokuran* or *maruyama*. This brush is used fully loosened.

Bamboo Brushes

Bamboo brushes are made by leaving one end of a piece of bamboo to rot in the ground until it is soft. The individual fibers are then separated by mashing them with a mallet. This brush is used for both calligraphy and painting, when a distinct textured appearance is desired. Drawings or sketches with this brush will have an abstract quality.

Blends of Natural and Synthetic Hair

Blends of natural and synthetic hair in Oriental brushes would seem to contradict romantic notions about the purity of the tradition in Oriental artists' materials. Because of the substantial price increases in recent years, the temptation to use less costly ingredients for brush making is no longer being resisted. Because of the sensitivity of *sumi-e* to the lack of absorbency inherent in synthetic brushes, the proportion of natural hair to synthetic hair must be higher than would be found in Western brushes. If there is too little natural hair, the paint will collect at the tip of the brush rather than remain in the belly. The result will be too much paint deposited at the beginning of the brushstroke and not enough at the end.

Early efforts by the Yasutomo Company to strike an effective balance between synthetic fibers and natural hairs to produce a more affordable category of Oriental brushes have been moderately successful. Their first efforts are in the *choryu*, *menso*, and *hake* styles of brushes. These brushes are a reasonable alternative when cost is a serious concern.

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