

OIL PAINTING

BRUSHES

Brenda Hoddinott

R-02 INTERMEDIATE: COLOR BASICS

This article is designed to help you prepare a practical shopping list for buying useful brushes to enhance your painting experiences. Good brushes are a painter's most important tools. I share many of my favorite types of brushes and discuss their uses. You also discover lots of basic information about brushes to help you become a better informed shopper when you finally hit the art store.

- **INTRODUCTION:** This article is designed to help you dig through the maze of artists' brushes, and zoom in on those that are most practical for your specific needs.
- **BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH BRUSHES:** A basic understanding of brush construction is very handy when you are wandering around an art supply store trying to decide which brushes to buy.
- **COMPARING SOFT HAIRS AND STIFF BRISTLES:** Even though there are lots of different types of brushes, they can be separated into two basic groups, based on whether their bristles/hairs are soft or stiff.
- **EXPLORING BRUSH SIZES AND BRUSHSTROKES:** The sizes of the brushes you use play a big role in determining how your finished paintings will look.
- **IDENTIFYING SHAPES AND TYPES OF BRUSHES:** Different types of brushes are easily identified by their unique shapes. For example, some brushes are designed for pushing paint around on the canvas, and others can be used for drawing or blending.
- **EXAMINING TYPES OF HAIR AND BRISTLES:** Brushes are made from either natural or synthetic hairs or a combination of both, and vary greatly in softness, quality and cost.

Recommended for artists and aspiring artists, of all levels and abilities, with an interest in learning about oil painting brushes.

11 PAGES - 13 ILLUSTRATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

When you take a trip to any major art store, expect to be totally memorized and overwhelmed by all the types of brushes on the shelves. You'll see hundreds of shapes, brands, colors, and sizes. Choosing your first set of paint brushes is probably the most traumatic aspect of shopping for painting supplies!

The selection becomes a little smaller when you locate the paintbrushes that are specifically designed for oil painting. However, even when you find the correct section, you discover many shapes, such as script liners, filberts, rounds, flats, brights, and fan brushes. Then, to further confuse you, each shape comes in a variety of bristles (hairs) such as synthetic, hog, mongoose, and sable. And, after that, you have to choose from all the different sizes of bristles and lengths of handles!

Catch your breath and relax! This article is designed to help you dig through the maze of artists' brushes, and zoom in on those that are most practical for your specific needs.

Here's a photo of several brushes from my collection. Some are much worn - as a matter of fact, a few of them are over ten years old - but each of them has a unique personality when working on a painting!



Figure 01: a few of my favorite oil painting brushes

BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH BRUSHES

Good quality artists' paintbrushes are expensive, but you begin to appreciate this when you find out how they are made. Manufacturing high quality paintbrushes is a surprisingly complex procedure. An understanding of the basics of brush construction is very handy when you are wandering around an art supply store trying to decide which brushes to buy.

A paintbrush has the following three fundamental parts, and each plays an important role in determining if a brush is suitable for your oil painting needs.

- **Brush hairs (sometimes called bristles):** are on the end of a paintbrush and are the means by which you apply paint to your painting surface.
- **Ferrule:** is a cylinder (usually made of metal) that holds the brush hairs (or bristles) in their proper place, and joins them to the handle.
- **Handle:** is the part of a paintbrush held by the artist, and is usually made of wood and available in short and long lengths.

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A brush begins its life as a pre-measured bundle of natural hair or synthetic fibers. The brush is then shaped, bound on the end, inserted into the ferrule, and measured for suitable length. In a good quality brush, you find at least as much of the brush inside the ferrule as what you see on the outside. The visible part of the brush hair (the head of the brush) is usually less than half the total length, which gives the brush a nice springy feel as you paint.

Bristles (or hairs) are then positioned into the ferrule, and secured with a setting compound specifically designed for its final use.

The top section of the ferrule is bent so as to sturdily fasten the brush head. Its other end is dented into the wood of the handle to securely hold it in place.



Figure 02: a small selection of brush hairs and bristles securely fastened into various types of ferrules.

Brush hairs/bristles can be long, short, thick, or thin, and are made from natural or synthetic hairs, bristles or fibers (or a mixture of any of these), and are responsible for carrying paint to your canvas, placing the pigment exactly where you want it, and/or moving the paint around to create an image. Hog bristles and sable are popular natural products used in the manufacturing of brushes. Synthetic brushes are usually less expensive and often work just as well!

A good quality ferrule (the tube which connects the brush hairs to the handle) is a tapered cylinder without any seams. Refer to the next photo: the first three ferrules are shaped for brushes known as flats or filberts; the next three are shaped to hold rounds or script-liners; and the one on the far right is designed to hold a fan brush.



TIP

Stay away from brushes with a seam in the ferrule. These brushes are usually very poor quality and won't last very long.

Figure 03: The size and shape of the ferrule determines the size and shape of the brush head.

You can choose brushes with either short or long handles. Short handled brushes work well for artists who like to work on a small easel or at a table, and/or prefer detailed or close up painting. If you find a long handled brush you absolutely love, you can always have the handle cut shorter so its end doesn't poke you in the eye as you work.

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A long handled brush is great for artists who prefer to work at an easel, at arms length away from their canvases. Most artists who love to paint loosely on large canvasses tend to prefer long handled brushes.



When you shop for a paintbrush, check that the ferrule is firmly attached to the handle. A brush with a loose ferrule probably has a poor quality handle, which may separate from the brush and fall apart after a couple of uses.

Paintbrush handles comes in tons of different colors, and are usually made from nicely finished wood that has been varnished or painted. However, on occasion, you may discover brush handles made from something different.

Watercolor brush handles are short since the work is usually at close range. Oil and acrylic brushes have longer handles for use at a greater distance on upright canvases. There is no reason not to use any brush you feel would best suit the work, unless of course the recommendations of the brush manufacturer state that the brush is only suitable for a specific medium. Long-handled brushes can be cut for watercolorists, or extensions can be added to short handled brushes for oil painters.

If the handle of a brush looks cheap and poorly finished, chances are it's a poor quality brush.



Figure 04: a small sampling of brush handles

COMPARING SOFT HAIRS AND STIFF BRISTLES

Even though there are lots of different types of brushes, they can all be separated into two basic groups, based on whether their bristles/hairs are soft or stiff. Beginners to oil painting need to experiment with both types before they can choose their favorites. Soft and stiff brushes are available in numerous shapes and sizes to suit individual artistic needs.

Stiff brushes are the work horses of oil painting and are primarily used for applying paint to a surface (such as canvas or wood). Relatively inexpensive stiff brushes often work as well as the more expensive ones, and are ideal for thick oil paint. Natural hog bristles/hairs are a traditional option and are very popular with oil painters. But, before you buy, check out some of the wonderful new synthetic varieties now available.



When choosing brushes, press the bristles into the palm of your hand to see how they feel and how quickly they bounce back into their original shape. Oil painting brushes need to be somewhat firm but also flexible and springy.

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This very loosely rendered painting of flowers is done entirely with stiff brushes.

I could have used blending brushes to smooth out the paint, but I chose to leave it as it was, with the brush work and the heavy texture of the paint clearly showing.



Figure 05: painting of flowers rendered with stiff brushes

Soft brushes work beautifully for blending paint in sections of your painting where you don't want brush marks to show. You can choose from natural hairs, such as sable, but I find many of the good quality synthetic alternatives work equally well and are cheaper.

As you check out soft brushes at the art store, you may discover that some of the brush tips feel stiff to the touch. Manufacturers sometimes pre-shape their brushes and protect them with a coat of hardening agent, which holds the hairs stiffly in place until you wash them. Before they hit the display aisles of art supply stores, many brushes are even fitted with protective plastic sleeves to make sure they aren't damaged before you buy them.

This section from one of my paintings is only about 3 inches wide. I've enlarged it so you can see the fine details (the full sized painting is 12 by 24 inches).

The blending of colors and values, and the fine details, were done with soft brushes.



Figure 06: detail of painting rendered with soft brushes



Always hold soft brushes up to a bright light, and check them over very carefully for unruly hairs, before you buy them.

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EXPLORING BRUSH SIZES AND BRUSHSTROKES

Some artists think they should blend all their paintings so the brush strokes can no longer be seen. This is totally a matter of personal preference.

I think big, simple brush strokes are gorgeous, and the thick texture of the paint adds a really cool three dimensional feel to the painting's surface.

The sizes of the brushes you use play a big role in determining how your finished paintings will look. I encourage beginners to start painting with big brushes; they hold more paint and allow for nice big bold strokes. The smaller the brush the more fussy picky artists tend to become. Bigger brushes also encourage you to stay focused on your entire canvas, rather than on intricate details which tend to be unrealistically difficult for beginners.



Figure 07: tiny section of painting, rendered with big brushes, results in very noticeable brushstrokes

The brushes I use for oil painting are various sizes from very tiny to big. Most brushes are numbered according to size - but, giving you their numbers won't help. Many different countries manufacture paintbrushes and the numbering systems tend to vary.

I used small brushes for this section of a painting, and the colors are very smoothly blended, the brushstrokes are barely visible, and the subjects are very intricately detailed. The larger sections were painted with a small brush that was springy and fun to work with.

I used an even smaller brush to add details, and a very tiny script liner brush for the very intricate work.

In reality, this segment is only 1 inch wide, but I've enlarged this illustration so you can see the details.



Figure 08: view of a tiny section of a painting (four times its actual size), rendered entirely with small, soft brushes

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IDENTIFYING SHAPES AND TYPES OF BRUSHES

Good brushes are integral to achieving the results you desire. A poor quality, badly shaped, or damaged brush may be frustrating to work with and will prevent you from painting to the best of your ability. In this section, I discuss brushes that I personally use. As your painting skills improve, try additional types of brushes to see which work best for your artistic objectives.

Different types of brushes are easily identified by their unique shapes. Some brushes are designed for pushing paint around on the canvas. Others can be used to draw or blend. You need an assortment of various brushes to help you create paintings you'll love.

FLATS: have square ends and relatively long bristles and are great for making long, clean-edged strokes of color. They tend to respond quickly to each subtle variation in pressure as you move the brush on your painting surface.

The strokes of flats are angular and they work beautifully for painting strong edges such as the sides of a building. Their thin edges can also be used for painting sharp lines. Flats come with soft hair or stiff bristles in various sizes from very tiny to several inches wide.



Figure 09: flats have square ends and long bristles

Wide flat brushes are great for working on big canvases. They tend to be less expensive at hardware and painting supply stores, than at art supply stores. Large flats handle nicely for covering solid areas and backgrounds because they are springy without being too soft. Small flats work well for painting finer details, especially for subjects that need strong edges. They are great for laying in rough outlines of color and getting into tight corners of the painting.

BRIGHTS: are shorter than flats, but also have square ends. They allow more control over how much paint you apply, than a flat brush, because the hairs are shorter and the brush is less springy (more firm).

They hold a lot of paint when adequately loaded, allowing you to make either long bold or short repetitive strokes.



Figure 10: brights have square ends and short bristles

FILBERTS: are available with either soft hairs or stiff bristles and differ from flat brushes in that they are rounded on the tip. They are approximately the same length as flats, but create a softer, less angular brushstroke. I think of them as a hybrid between a round and a flat because when they are manufactured, they start off as a round and are then flattened by the ferrule to retain their rounded edges.

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Filberts come in lots of different sizes. Large filberts are great for painting larger sections of paintings, such as backgrounds, and their brushstrokes are big, loose, and broad. Smaller ones make gorgeous delicate, rounded brushstrokes that look wonderful in detailed areas.



Figure 11: filberts have rounded ends and long bristles

ROUNDS AND SCRIPT LINERS: have brush hairs that are available in various sizes including fat, thin, long, and short, but they always come to a point. Both rounds and script liners are highly versatile and work well for drawing a preliminary composition on your canvas. They perform best with very thin paint.



Rounds are great for painting and blending detailed sections of your subject. Script liners are fantastic for rendering very intricate details in that their smooth ends hold a lot of paint, thereby allowing you to paint long, continuous thin strokes of color.

Figure 12: Both rounds and script liners have pointed tips, but the brush hairs of script liners (also called riggers) are much longer and thinner

BLENDING BRUSHES: are used for blending brushstrokes so as to create a smoother surface. Blending brushes are not designed to move paint around on your canvas, but rather to smooth out the brushwork. Work them VERY gently and lightly across your canvas, in circular, diagonal, or side to side strokes. Apply very little pressure, or you'll end up with a muddy mess of color and a ruined painting.



Remember, many artists blend very slightly or do not blend at all. Rather, they prefer to leave big bold brushstrokes of color.

Fan brushes come in both bristle and soft hair and are available in various sizes. Unlike other types of brushes, blenders usually work best when they are dry. Take note of how the shape of the top section of the ferrule contributes to the unique fan-shape of this brush.



Figure 13: my personal favorite type of blending brush is a soft-haired fan brush (named so for obvious reasons)

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When shopping for a blending brush, gently pull on the hairs. If any come out of the ferule, don't buy the brush! Nothing is more frustrating than picking brush hairs out of wet paint!

EXAMINING TYPES OF HAIR AND BRISTLES

Brushes are made from either natural or synthetic hairs, or a combination of both. Brushes range greatly in softness, quality and cost. Following are three of the most popular brush types:

- **BRISTLE** Brushes are perfectly suited for oils, are made from hog (pig) bristles, and are stiff enough to easily move thick oil paint around on your painting surface. Bristle brushes are the workhorses of painting and are flexible and springy. Inexpensive bristle brushes tend to work as well as more expensive one; however, they usually "shed" as they get older. Therefore, buy the best quality you can comfortably afford.
- **SABLE** is a soft hair, ideal for creating gentle and smooth effects with oils. The better the quality of a sable brush, the more paint it can hold while still maintaining its fine point. Kolinsky red sable is considered very high quality brush hair, and tends to be quite expensive. However, when properly taken care of, the very fine hairs are very durable and last for years and years. Regular red sable is a little coarser than Kolinsky, but is generally much less expensive.
- **SYNTHETIC HAIR OR MIXED BRISTLE** brushes are durable, easy to clean, and ideal for either beginners or professionals. Today's synthetic brushes are much better quality than their predecessors. Generally speaking, I find the synthetics to work as well as the natural hairs, and they tend to be less expensive. However, the very best quality ones can be as expensive as natural hairs.



Buy the best quality brushes you can comfortably afford and you'll have wonderful friends that will serve your painting needs for many years to come.

Any brush can apply paint to a surface. However, the key is to find the brushes that work well for you in making the types of marks you like. My best advice when shopping for brushes is to simply choose several different shapes, sizes, and types and experiment with each, until you find your favorites!



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PAINTBRUSH RELATED TERMS

Blending brushes: are used for blending brushstrokes so as to create a smoother surface.

Bright: is the name of a shape of paintbrush with short bristles or hairs and a squared tip, primarily used for short controlled strokes and impasto.

Bristle Brushes: are made from hog (pig) bristles, are flexible and springy, and are stiff enough to easily move thick oil paint around on your painting surface.

Brush hairs (sometimes called bristles): are on the end of a paintbrush and are the means by which you apply paint to your painting surface. They can be long, short, thick, or thin, and are made from natural or synthetic hairs, bristles or fibers (or a mixture of any of these).

Brush head: is the visible part of the brush hair or bristles.

Fan brushes: come in both bristle and soft hair, are available in various sizes, usually work best when they dry, and are often used for blending paint. The unique shape of the top section of the ferrule contributes to the fan-shape of this brush.

Ferrule: (pronounced fer'-el) is a cylinder (usually made of metal) which holds the brush hairs (or bristles) in their proper place, and joins them to the handle.

Filbert: is a versatile paintbrush shape similar to a flat, but with rounded corners, which works beautifully for making thick or thin strokes with soft edges.

Flat: is a popular shape of brush with long bristles or hairs and a squared tip, for making diverse types of controlled and broad, sweeping strokes suitable for backgrounds and loose brushwork.

Handle: is the part of a paintbrush held by the artist, is usually made of wood, and is available in short and long lengths.

Round: is a highly versatile type of brush with a pointed round tip. Rounds are capable of yielding thick to thin strokes, and work well for "drawing" on your canvas.

Sable Hair: is a soft hair, which is ideal for creating soft effects with oils.

Script Liner (sometimes called a Rigger or Liner): is a paintbrush with long thin hair and a pointed tip, which is well suited for producing long continuous lines without frequent reloading, and is fantastic for rendering very intricate details.

Synthetic Hair or Mixed Bristle: brushes are durable, generally inexpensive, easy to clean, and ideal for either beginners or professionals.

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BRENDA HODDINOTT

As a self-educated teacher, visual artist, portraitist, forensic artist, and illustrator, Brenda utilizes diverse art media including graphite, technical pen, colored pencil, chalk pastel, charcoal, conté crayon, and oil paints.

My philosophy on teaching art is to focus primarily on the enjoyment aspects while gently introducing the technical and academic. Hence, in creating a passion for the subject matter, the quest for knowledge also becomes enjoyable.

>Brenda Hoddinott<

BIOGRAPHY

Born in St. John's, Newfoundland, Brenda grew up in the small town of Corner Brook. She developed strong technical competencies with a personal commitment to self directed learning, and the aid of assorted "Learn to Draw" books. During Brenda's twenty-five year career as a self-educated civilian forensic artist, numerous criminal investigation departments have employed Brenda's skills, including Royal Canadian Mounted Police and municipal police departments. In 1992, Brenda was honored with a commendation from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and in 1994, she was awarded a Certificate of Membership from "Forensic Artists International".

Her home-based art career included graphic design, and teaching recreational drawing and painting classes. As supervisor of her community's recreational art department, Brenda hired and trained teachers, and designed curriculum for several children's art programs. In 1998, Brenda chose to end her eighteen-year career as an art educator in order to devote more time to writing, drawing, painting, and developing her websites.

Drawspace http://www.drawspace.com incorporates her unique style and innovative approach to curriculum development. This site offers downloadable and printable drawing classes for students of all abilities from the age of eight through adult. Students of all ages, levels and abilities have praised the simple step-by-step instructional approach. This site is respected as a resource for fine art educators, home schooling programs, and educational facilities throughout the world.

LEARN-TO-DRAW BOOKS

- **Drawing for Dummies:** Wiley Publishing, Inc., New, York, NY, this 336 page book is available on various websites and in major bookstores internationally.
- **The Complete Idiot's Guide to Drawing People:** Winner of the Alpha-Penguin Book of the Year Award 2004, Alpha - Pearson Education – Macmillan, Indianapolis, IN, this 360 page book is available on various websites and in major bookstores internationally.

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