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ASK THE EXPERTS

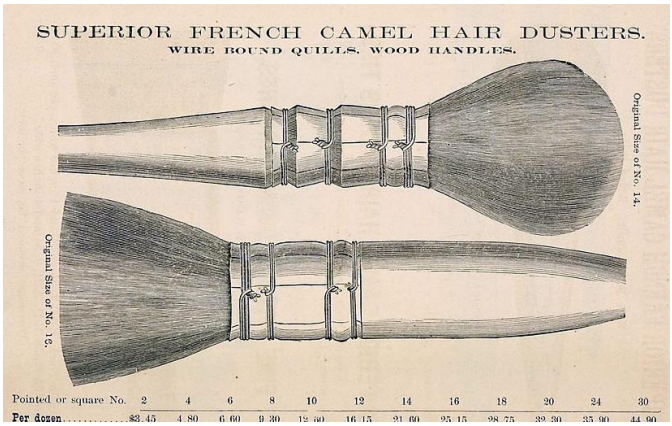
Product Profiles: Facts about brushes that may surprise you

Engraving of early metal ferrule brushes with single crimp

Nothing is more familiar to an artist than the paintbrush, but details about the craft, technology, and applications of brushes tell a fascinating story that reaches back centuries. Facts about this most seemingly ordinary tool might surprise even the most experienced painter.

The metal ferrule influenced the French Impressionist style:

Before the mid-19th century, artists' brushes were mostly round in shape. With the introduction of the metal ferrule (round collar that attaches the tuft to the handle), it was possible to make flats, brights and filberts. Flat brushes inspired the signature brushstroke of the French Impressionists, the "tache", a dabbing application of distinct, unblended marks.



Brushes with feather quill ferrules tied and crimped with wire

Feather ferrules have an important use:

Before the invention of the metal ferrule, large, natural feather quills were commonly used for attaching the brush tuft to the handle. Almost all brushes sold today use metal ferrules, but feather quill brushes are still used for painting on materials that are vulnerable to metal marks, like porcelain.

Well-worn brush with ferrule cut away, revealing full bristle length

Bristles on good brushes are much longer than they look:

At a glance, scholastic-grade brushes don't look especially different from professional-grade ones, but

there are significant differences in how the two types are made, and how they perform. One big difference is something that can't be seen from the outside: the total length of the brush filaments. Hand-domed, interlocked brushes are made using long filaments that often extend all the way to the wooden handle, under the ferrule. Inexpensive, machine-made brushes have shorter filaments that are clipped to shape, with a wooden plug filling up the space under the ferrule.

Using more paint helps preserve brushes

Scrubbing hard to stretch a small amount of paint tends to wear down bristles. A well-loaded brush moves more easily across the painting surface, reducing abrasion and wear.

A ruined brush can be restored (maybe)

When paint dries underneath the ferrule, does that mean the brush is finished? Not necessarily. Because better brushes have long bristles that extend far under the ferrule, it may be possible to clip away a thin strip of metal to clean out the dry paint. Use a file to score a line all around the ferrule about ⅛" from the tuft, then clip down to the scored line with cutters. Use needle nose pliers to scroll the strip off the brush, and use your favorite brush cleaner to remove the dried material. Use brush soap to finish the job, and groom the tuft back into shape.

Brush ferrules get loose as a result of soaking in water

Crimping usually provides a permanent connection between metal ferrules and wooden handles, unless brushes are left soaking in water for a long time. When wooden handles take up water, they swell, expanding the ferrule from the inside. When the handle dries out again and the wood shrinks, the expanded ferrule can wiggle around, and may even pull free from the handle.

The Rigger Brush is rarely used for its original purpose

The long-haired, pointed round brush known as the rigger (unlike the blunt-tipped liner) was so named for its use in depicting ship's rigging, a network of ropes. Today, the rigger is most often used for thin markings like grass or hair, for signing a painting, and any application where thin, continuous lines are desired.

Numbered brush sizes are not universal

Ever notice how a #6 brush is a different size in every brand? That's because the numbered size of a brush refers to the range from small to large within one specific product assortment. Even brush assortments from the same manufacturer have different numbering schemes. Actual diameter measurement should be used for comparing brushes between brands.

Tip Protectors on new brushes should be discarded in the studio

The plastic tube that protects a new brush in shipping and on display at the store has an important function, but placing them back on a brush after you've washed it can be a big mistake. Brushes need to dry thoroughly to prevent mold growth and degradation of the tuft and handle. Tip protectors prevent brushes from drying after they've been washed, and while a brush might look nice at first with the tip protector placed back on, keeping the tuft wet too long is not a good practice.