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ASK THE EXPERTS

Product Profiles: Asian Art Supplies



Ask the Expert: “How do traditional Asian art materials differ from Western ones? In particular, inks, watercolors, paper and brushes.”

A: The subject of Asian art materials is a broad one, because what is usually presented as a single product category in Western art supply stores is actually a small assortment of items from multiple countries and cultures, emerging from artistic traditions developed over centuries. This topic can't possibly be covered in a single article, but there are some key fundamental differences we can examine between traditional papers, paints and brushes from Asia compared to those which originated in Europe. An awareness of these differences can help artists experience these amazing products, and add whole new dimensions to their artwork.



Ink: Asian-style ink is available in stick form or as a prepared liquid. This material is commonly called 'Sumi ink' for its association with Sumi-e, the Japanese art of

ink painting, but similar inks are used in Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean painting traditions as well.

Traditional ink sticks are made of lamp black (amorphous carbon) pigment and hide glue binder, pressed into molds and dried slowly under carefully controlled humidity to prevent warping and cracking. (One technique involves holding freshly made sticks in beds of damp sawdust, moving them to progressively drier beds until they are ready.) Ink in stick form must be prepared by grinding with water on an inkstone like the Japanese Suzuri Stone.



Modern black India Ink is actually a direct descendant of older Asian inks. Contemporary India Ink formulas include gums, shellac and synthetic polymers which impart water resistance along with consistent coverage and surface quality when dry.

Sumi and India Ink are ideal for all techniques involving dip pens and brushes, from detailed to broad and gestural. High concentrations of solid pigment and insoluble binders make these generally unsuitable for use in fountain pens, though some India Ink is filtered for use in technical pens.



Watercolor: The main differences between traditional Asian and European-style watercolors are binder and color assortment. Some Asian watercolors are still made with hide glue binder, which is less soluble than Gum Arabic (used in most modern watercolor paints). Hide glue based watercolor dries a bit more resistant to re-wetting and lifting than Western-style paints. Many brands of Asian watercolors now use Gum Arabic binder, with an assortment including modern versions of traditional colors like Red Ochre, Chinese White and Vermillion.



Brushes: The Asian-style brush most Western artists are familiar with is the "Sumi Brush", a round, pointed brush with a long tuft and bamboo handle. Unlike European-style watercolor rounds which have tufts made of a single type of hair or homogeneous mixture, Asian round brushes may incorporate a soft core wrapped in a different, stiffer outer hair. This combines the paint retention and sensitivity of goat hair (core material) with the structure and resiliency of horse hair (outer layer).

Asian brushes are not intended to be used with heavy pressure of the hand, so they don't generally have the "snap" of European-style brushes. Instead, a Sumi brush is suspended from the hand. By controlling the weight of the brush, the artist creates variation in line and gesture. Sumi-style brushes may have a loop of string attached to the end so they may be hung to dry without losing shape. Western-style watercolor brushes should be blotted after rinsing and laid flat to dry.

Paper: Asian-style papers that are widely available for ink and watercolor painting tend to be lightly sized or completely unsized, and as a result are very absorbent. Actually, one advantage of making unsized paper in the Japanese style is that handmade sheets can be stacked wet at the mill and pressed without sticking together.

Heavy sizing on European-style watercolor paper renders it stiff and dimensionally stable while holding colors on top in a luminous layer. By contrast, Asian mulberry papers absorb color readily into a soft, velvety field. Some Asian papers facilitate crisp lines and edges, while others must be treated with hide glue and alum to render them less permeable and reduce feathering of wet marks.

Questions? Ask the Expert

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