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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Pointing Your Brushes



Ask the Expert: "Nothing makes me feel happier than seeing all the brushes at the art supply store standing up straight with perfect, sharp pointed tips. How do I get that same feeling in my own studio? After the first use, my brushes never look new again."

A: Whether you can keep your brushes in as close to new condition as possible depends on how you use them, how you clean them after use, and how you store them between uses. The overall quality and type of brush are also important factors.

When brushes are displayed for sale, the tufts are groomed to a "perfect" shape and kept that way through the use of starch or a glue-like dressing. This makes them look attractive, and also communicates the characteristic shape of the brush style, distinguishing a flat from a round, a filbert from a bright, a rigger from a fan. The brush dressing also protects the tufts while in shipment and storage. This starchy stiffener has to be removed from the brush before use, however.

Gum arabic, methyl cellulose and other common packing starches won't affect paint if mixed into colors, but the brush won't perform as it should until the filaments are free from dressings. Most artists rub the dry tuft between their fingers to break up the hairs; some rinse the brush in water after purchase.

While the brush is in use, take care not to scrub or abrade the tuft against a rough surface. By using several brushes

instead of one or two, wear and tear can be minimized. Using a sufficient load of paint on the brush helps lubricate it as it moves across the canvas or paper.

Marathon painting sessions can be rough on brushes. Keeping the instruments saturated with water, medium and thinner can bloat handles, loosening the ferrule (the metal sleeve that holds the tuft to the handle). If paint begins to dry inside the ferrule, brush filaments will tend to splay out and take on the look of an old broom. When possible, take breaks to wash used brushes and grab fresh ones. Try not to wait too long before washing; rinsing is good, but it takes a proper washing, preferably with brush soap, to remove all residue.

After washing, tufts can be groomed to a tidy appearance while wet. Good brushes with long filaments will normally return naturally to their correct shape. Cheaper brushes with short hairs that are clipped after assembly are harder to re-shape. There's no practical advantage to using gum or starch in the studio to point brushes in storage, but it doesn't hurt if it makes you feel good. A thin solution of gum arabic or methyl cellulose (both available at the art supply store) can be applied after washing for artists who really like the hard, "new brush" point, but artist's brush soap can also give a groomed appearance if left in the brush after washing, with the added benefit of conditioning hairs to prevent breaking and distortion.

Some artists also use oils or fats to condition brush hairs. This practice has some historical tradition behind it, but in practice, it's important that any non-drying grease or oil be scrupulously washed out before use, to prevent interference with drying and staining of absorbent painting supports.

High quality synthetic filament brushes that have become distorted can sometimes be restored to the original shape by immersing the tip in boiling water for no more than five seconds. Take care not to immerse the tuft past the ferrule, and no longer than five seconds.

One final piece of advice: plastic tubing used for protecting tips in shipment should not be placed back on brushes after washing. Brushes need to be allowed to dry thoroughly, and plastic tip covers could encourage mold growth if used in the studio. Place brushes on their sides to dry so that water is allowed to drain from the ferrules. Wait for brushes to dry before placing them upright.