

Choosing Brushes for Watercolor

Scope of this demo

Assuming

- newbie: what should I buy?
- what should I add or upgrade?

Goal

- what to think about/look for as you select your first few brushes (or first few higher-quality brushes)
- enough about various brush options to understand what you're seeing in this demo (but I'm staying with "mainstream" types for Western styles of watercolor painting, because that's what I teach)
- avoid spending money on stuff you don't need
- identify a small, affordable collection of good brushes that you can use forever
- NOT A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW! (Plenty of others have done that; Google it if you want to go down that rabbit-hole.)

PLEASE, PLEASE DO NOT email me or comment to start an argument about which are the "best" brushes, or to get me to "defend" my choices or explain why some brush is better than some other brush. Or send recommendations to me to collate pass along to everyone. I'm not going to engage in those arguments, and I'm not going to collate crowd-sourced recommendations. Taste in brushes is as personal and varied as taste in food. Everyone has their own preferences about how much weight to give to different factors and what trade-offs they are happy with. Arguing about "the best brush for watercolor" is a fool's errand.

However, please DO share info in the comments about favorite alternatives to these brushes. Tell us the name of the brush, so people can find it online, where you are in the world (not all brushes are easy to find in all areas). Share a bit about why you like it, and/or

which of the brushes in this demo would be most similar (if you are able to tell). If you're looking for more alternatives, scroll through the comments to see what others are suggesting.

Also, please DO share recommendations of independent art supply stores in your area (please tell us where).

Resources:

Fascinating videos on brush-making:

Winsor & Newton Series 7 Kolinsky sable brush-making: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKqfC0E82gU>

Escoda Brush factory tour: <https://youtu.be/7FIGZ-7vti4>

A Chinese master brush-maker shows the process of making a traditional Chinese brush: <https://youtu.be/5DzWM-708aw>

Chart of different kinds of natural-hair brushes and their uses: <https://www.dickblick.com/info/brushhair/>

Chart of different kinds of brush shapes: <https://www.dickblick.com/info/brushshape/>

Brush basics

Brush parts

handle, ferrule, bristles or brush hairs, belly, tip

Snap/Spring/Water-carrying capacity

“Snap” —tendency of the brush to return to its original shape.

More snap = less water-carrying capacity and softness. This is a trade-off and people become attached to brushes on both ends of the spectrum.

If you're a beginner, don't agonize about this. I'll suggest a nice, inexpensive “starter” brush that's middle-of-the-road. It takes time to discover what sort of techniques and styles you'll gravitate to, anyway. Trust your own instincts on how brushes feel to you, and try to arrange to try out expensive brushes before you buy (more on that later). Just know that people get very attached to their preferences and sometimes insist that *their* favorite should be everyone's favorite. You don't *have* to listen to that if *your* hands and your way of working tell you otherwise.

Natural/Synthetic/Blend

Natural hair:

- **Kolinsky sable** (actually, a weasel)—“gold standard”; good point, medium snap and water-carrying capacity, both controllable and expressive; quite expensive)
- “red” sable—once, meant a lesser grade of weasel hair, and requires even more brush making skill to keep a good point; pretty much on the way out now with much better and cheaper synthetics available
- **squirrel**—softer, carries lots of water; much less spring, but can still come to a very nice point; can be floppy and leave flecks and drips (which many people like)
- **goat/sheep**—very soft, widely used Chinese and Japanese brushes, great for carrying large volumes of water (hake brushes), for watercolor or calligraphy brushes, often combined with stiffer hairs

Choosing Brushes for Watercolor

- camel/ox—too soft for watercolor, in most cases; more useful for woodworking, dental, cosmetics; but also used in sign-painting (dagger-striper), once used as inexpensive entry-level brushes, now also on the way out due to much better synthetics

Synthetic:

- mostly nylon and polyester (often proprietary, under all sorts of weird names), behavior can be adjusted with the same material, so, for example, not all “golden taklon” brushes behave the same (read descriptions or try to test first, if they’re expensive)
- many synthetics are designed to mimic properties of various natural hair, so you can get an idea from that; if it’s supposed to mimic squirrel, it will be softer/floppier than if it’s supposed to mimic Kolinsky; if it’s intended for oil, acrylic and watercolor, it will probably be stiffer and springier than if it’s intended specifically for watercolor

Blends:

- a mix of natural and synthetic hair to meld properties of both, reduce price, and add longevity/durability to natural hair brushes

In the past 5-10 years, synthetics have gotten so good, that I would not recommend anyone buy a natural-hair brush at least until you have enough experience to know specifically what characteristics you value. And maybe never. I don’t anticipate every buying a natural-hair brush again, except maybe if there’s some great sale on it, but some people doing very specific kinds of work will still appreciate the nuance and be willing to pay for it. Be sure you need it. The performance difference is very small, and I suspect soon synthetics will be superior.

Chart of different kinds of natural-hair brushes and their uses: <https://www.dickblick.com/info/brushhair/>

handles

- long-handles for painting at an easel, typically means for heavy-body acrylic and oil
- short handle may be watercolor, acrylic or oil, check description, if it says it's for all three media, it's probably NOT good for traditional watercolor techniques
- travel or pocket brushes; super-short handles or collapsible

sizes

- flats are width in inches
- larger number = bigger, but round sizes vary across manufacturers and sometimes even across one manufacturer's brush lines (grrr)
- quills are much larger than same size number on a round
- some suppliers have started giving measurements, so search around (may find the info you need somewhere other than where you buy)

shapes

- round: most common all-round watercolor brush
- flat (regular flats v. "wash"/"skyflow" v. hake): for making more rectilinear or geometric brush strokes; good for buildings and similar shapes; not all flats carry a lot of water for covering large areas, those that do are often called "wash" or "skyflow" brushes; an inexpensive alternative is a hake
- quill/mop: can have a pointy shape like a very full round, or a very rounded shape; made of very soft bristles that carry lots of water, for covering large areas with wash
- cat-tongue: sort of a like a "squished" round, has a flat profile where the bristles join the ferrule, but a pointy tip like a round; usually in softer hair for covering large areas with wash, but also making pointed brush strokes
- rigger/liner: long slender brushes for making fine lines

Choosing Brushes for Watercolor

- dagger/striper: usually somewhat larger than a rigger, but again, used for making fine lines, pinstriping and sign painting, can be fun for making weedy or branch-like shapes
- special effects brushes: fan, stipplers, etc., intended for other media but sometimes adapted by watercolorists to create texture effects
- Chart of different types of brush shapes: <https://www.dickblick.com/info/brushshape/>

(Travel) brush comparison:

I'm doing this demo with travel brushes because I have had so many questions, but all of these brushes are available with regular handles (regular handle versions are a little cheaper).

Richeson Grey Matters #12: synthetic

Golden Maple #12: synthetic

Escoda Tajmyr-Reserva #12: Real Kolinsky sable

Princeton Aqua-Elite #10: synthetic designed to mimic Kolinsky sable

Escoda Prado #12: synthetic designed to mimic Kolinsky sable

Silver Black Velvet #8 (largest avail as travel brush): synthetic squirrel

Princeton Neptune #10: synthetic squirrel

(Isabey makes a lovely real squirrel travel brush, but I do not have one to demo; it is consider a "quill" brush, so the size 0 is similar to a size 8 or 10 round)

Great inexpensive starter brush: Princeton Snap! Golden taklon, size 10 or 12, around \$6-10

Also, you can convert a regular brush to a travel brush with this travel brush adapter from an Etsy seller: [\[\] https://www.etsy.com/listing/782097211/watercolour-travel-brush-adapter?gpla=1&gao=1&](https://www.etsy.com/listing/782097211/watercolour-travel-brush-adapter?gpla=1&gao=1&) (does require you to cut the handle to the right length to fit into the adapter)

Carrying non-travel-style brushes while traveling:

Several styles of cases. This is my favorite type: https://www.amazon.com/MEEDEN-Brushes-Zippered-Holder-Handle/dp/B01GCBBRXE/ref=sxsts_sxwds-bia-wc-p13n1_0?cv_ct_cx=brush+case&dchild=1&keywords=brush+case&pd_rd_i=B01GCBBRXE&pd_rd_r=802d0200-b477-4b9b-b76b-0257d1c0076b&pd_rd_w=3LFnV&pd_rd_wg=zASAl&pf_rd_p=42e41e42-79c0-42f8-8a91-d71b944e9fa8&pf_rd_r=1SV46QQVBT7M2RY8G2BE&psc=1&qid=1600470413&sr=1-1-791c2399-d602-4248-afbb-8a79de2d236f

Many other options: plastic tubes, fabric and bamboo roll-ups, plastic boxes (all fine for the brushes, so personal taste in size, capacity and materials).

how to buy

the best way to buy watercolor brushes

Many independent art supply stores will let you try watercolor brushes (with clear water) before you buy, especially the more expensive ones. This, or trying a friend's, is the very best way to decide what kind of brush suits your style of painting and your hand. Balance, feel on the page are very important to learning to control your brush—it needs to feel good to YOU. Nobody else can tell you the best brush for you.

if you can't try before you buy

Start with golden or white taklon, or a synthetic that mimics Kolinsky or squirrel. It's impossible to know ahead of time what you'll like best, but any of these will be fine to start. Take a guess on whether you'll like a softer or springier brush. Worst case scenario: you might decide you guessed wrong and wind up with one of each. You'll use one more, but still be glad to have the other to cover a wider range of situations.

starting out collection:

-ONE round size 10-12 that comes to a good point is a great all-round starter brush (try: Princeton SNAP, Princeton Aqua Elite, or Escoda Prado for more snap/spring; Princeton Neptune or Silver Black Velvet for a softer brush that carries more water; there are many other similar options, these are just some I've used and many of my students have liked)

NOTE: Smaller rounds (size 2,4, sometimes 6) often point *less well* than 8,10,12; 8-12 is usually the sweet spot for a good sharp point in a round

Or

-ONE 1/2"-1" flat (try: Princeton Snap, Simmons Sienna)

NOTE: This type of flat has more spring and comes to a sharp "chisel" edge for painting. It carries *less* water than most size 10-12 rounds, so it NOT a good brush for larger washes. It's for painting sharp-edged *shapes*.

first things to add:

For thin lines, tree branches, telephone lines, ship's rigging, etc.

- size 0-1 rigger/liner, inexpensive ones work fine (or a dip pen, such as Tachikawa with G-nib)

As soon as you start laying washes on larger areas (around quarter-sheet or larger)

- 2-3" hake (e.g., Yasutomo, Creative Mark) Note: they all shed hairs, it's normal and no problem for us watercolorists; wait till the wash dries and brush them off
- or a mop, cat-tongue or quill (can't recommend any mops because I've never bought one, Silver Black Velvet has nice cat-tongue and "jumbo rounds", Princeton Neptune is a nice inexpensive quill, size 6 or larger would be good)
- bigger and smaller flats, if you do a lot of geometric shapes/buildings
- there are also flat "wash" brushes made of softer hair such as squirrel or squirrel mimics or soft taklon (Silver Black Velvet, Simmons Sky-Flow Wash); many students seem to have more trouble with streaky washes using these "flat wash" brushes rather than a hake or a mop, and they are expensive, so I would start with hake and only add one of these if you really come to love flats and want something a little less soft than a hake)
- if you use masking fluid, I suggest you add one more Princeton Snap! round in a size 6 or so that you use just for masking

Everything else is for special purposes, or just because we all love to buy art supplies. :)

caring for brushes

There is an article all about this, with pics, on my website: <https://www.dragonflyspiritstudio.com/12-tips-happy-brushes-care-watercolor-brushes/>

using brushes

Watercolor brushes aren't like house-painting brushes. In house painting, the brush delivers the paint *and* spreads it around.

Choosing Brushes for Watercolor

In watercolor, the brush can be used to spread paint around sometimes, but more often, it is used to deliver a diluted mixture of paint and water (a wash) and to show the water where to go. The brush wets an area and the *water* moves the paint.

We can use our brushes as

- expressive mark-making tools
- guides to coax the water to go in a particular direction
- eyedroppers
- mops or sponges to remove some water

Washes are best laid with a light touch—you want to feel like the brush doesn't even touch the paper; it just glides on the water.

Mark-making brushstrokes usually involve more pressure, and changes of pressure and angle help create the mark.

There is an older video on my channel about exploring brush marks: <https://youtu.be/tGUUByqzRzM>

And a little “brush drawings” videos that might give you some ideas about playing with the marks your brushes will make:

<https://youtu.be/KNV4z78bPY0>

<https://youtu.be/OWbL9KaPJE8>

<https://youtu.be/4EJ3xVoblts>