

Enhance Your Work with the Right Paint Brushes

Posted by **Paul Heaston** on May 27, 2013 in **Fine Art** | **5 comments**

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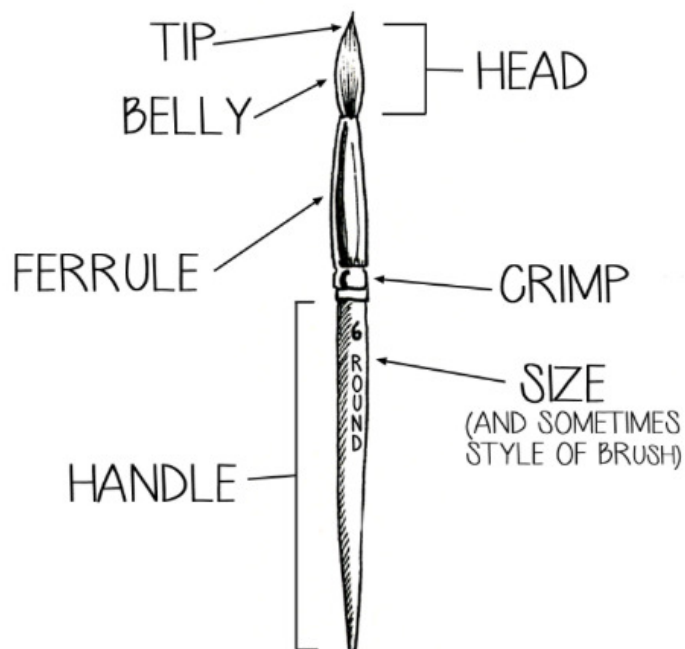
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These days there are so many different kinds of paintbrushes in the art supply store it's easy to be confused about which kind to buy. I often find myself grabbing a handful of different kinds and hoping for the best. What kind of brush is really best for watercolors? For oils or acrylics? What is the difference between a *sable* and a *bristle*? Is a squirrel brush really made from what it sounds like? And what the heck is a *Filbert*? Fear not! Here's a quick overview to help you sort through the chaos and find the brush for you.

Let's start simple: the basic artist's paint brush:

ANATOMY OF A BRUSH



A brush has three major parts: the head (or the bristles), the ferrule, and the handle.

The **head** of the brush can be broken down into the **tip** (or point, or toe), and the **belly**. The belly is the fattest part of the head closest to the ferrule, and serves as a reservoir for paint. The tip is where the brush will make contact with the surface you are painting. Depending on the style of brush tip, the tip can make all sorts of different kinds of strokes.

A brush head can have two kinds of bristles: **coarse** (or stiff) and **soft**. Coarse brushes are great for working in oils or acrylics where they can push thick paint around and leave visible strokes. Soft brushes are preferred by watercolorists because of their flexibility and ability to change the shape of the stroke depending on the amount of pressure applied.

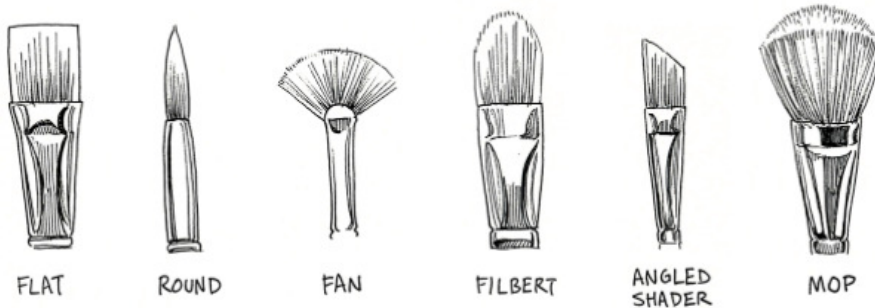
Brushes can also be either natural or synthetic. Natural brushes are always made from animal hair, which is something to consider depending on how you feel about that sort of thing. Coarse natural brushes are commonly made from boar's bristle, and many painters simply call them "*bristle brushes*." The highest quality soft natural brushes are *sable*, which is actually weasel fur, but others can be made from squirrel (yup, squirrel), badger and mink. Synthetic brushes can be made from various plastics and can vary greatly in quality and price, but they are generally less expensive than natural.

The **ferrule is the metal piece that connects the head to the brush handle**. A well-constructed brush should have a high-quality ferrule with a strong *crimp*. Cheaper brushes often have ferrules with weak crimps that can detach from the handle, or cheap glue that loses bristles easily, so remember that a ferrule is as important to the quality of a brush as the head.

Last but not least is the handle. Handles can be made of wood or plastic and can be long or short. Many artists who work very close to a painting (or work on a flat surface, such as watercolorists) prefer short handles. Long handles are great for standing a bit further from the painting surface.

Now let's quickly look at some different brush shapes.

BRUSH BREAKDOWN



There are many more different kinds of brushes, but most fall under one of these six types.

Flat brushes are just what they sound like- flat and wide, and straight along the top. They can create a wide stroke when pulled in one direction, and a narrow stroke when turned and pulled along their edge. They are excellent for filling a lot of space quickly with paint, and are commonly used with oils and acrylics. A shorter flat brush is known as a bright.

Round brushes can be used with oils, acrylics and watercolors. They create a narrower stroke that can vary in width depending on the amount of pressure applies, and they are also great for creating dabs, dots and very small, precise strokes. Very long, very thin rounds are also called riggers.

Fan brushes are also known as blenders as their soft, fanned-out bristles are excellent for blending and feathering one layer of paint into another.

Filbert brushes are quite versatile, combining many of the features of flats and rounds to create a wide variety of strokes.

Angled shaders, also known as slanted or angular brushes are good for creating sweeping curves and calligraphic brush strokes, as well as fine-tuned and precise marks.

Mops look a lot like the powder brush in a makeup kit. These are round brushes preferred by watercolorists because of their ability to hold lots of fluid paint, making them perfect for washes.