

The Right Tool for the Job

Every watercolor brush has a purpose. Here's how the wash, mop, hake and fan brushes can work for you.

As any craftsman knows, using the proper tool for the job makes your work much easier. It's simpler to turn a screw with a screwdriver than a butter knife. The same philosophy holds true with art brushes. Choosing the right one for the effect you want in your work will make your task much easier and more satisfying, and it will make your art look better, too. For instance, using a big wash brush to paint the sky in large watercolors (half-sheet or bigger) is going to result in a smoother, quicker, fresher job than trying to get the same effect with a ½-inch flat brush.

The wash

Technically all brushes you use with watercolor are wash brushes, since even the tiniest area is a wash of pigment. Generally speaking, however, a "wash brush" refers to a large painting tool, no matter which medium you're using.

The fan club

Table for Five (acrylic, 14x18) made great use of several different fan brushes. A "barbered" bristle fan suggested the lacy, bare branches and twigs, and the foreground grasses. I used a small, soft fan brush to smooth the shadow areas in the central horse.



mound of pigment and water so you won't run out before you're finished covering the desired area.

The mop

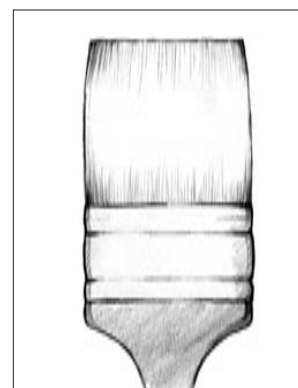
A mop brush is a larger, rounder, fuller version of the wash brush, usually made of soft, natural hairs such as squirrel—although some brands are synthetic. The brush shape is "moppy" but it usually assumes a point when wet. Often it's made with a quill-wrapped ferrule and tied with fine wire. These brushes are great for sweeping in broad areas of color, wetting the surface of your paper or, as its name suggests, absorbing excess moisture. By wringing it out on a paper towel before touching it to a puddle of watercolor, you'll be surprised how much water the hairs will wick up.

The hake

The hake brush is made with soft, white goat or sheep hair and has a flat wooden handle, which is often longer than the American or European handles. They may or may not have an aluminum ferrule. The brushes come in a variety of widths, roughly ranging from ⅝ to 3 inches. Often used in Oriental paintings, they're lovely for

A wash brush can come in several different configurations, from a wide, flat brush that looks like what you'd use to paint a wall in your house to an oval or square shape. The oval wash brush has a flattened ferrule (the metal sleeve that joins the brush head to the handle) and no point, so the effects are very soft. You'll even find angular wash brushes, with the hairs longer on one side than the other.

These brushes are natural (often sable, squirrel or ox hair) or synthetic, and the hairs are generally quite flexible. They're good for wetting paper, laying in large areas of color or lifting excess moisture. When you're working with the largest of these brushes, be sure to make a generous puddle or



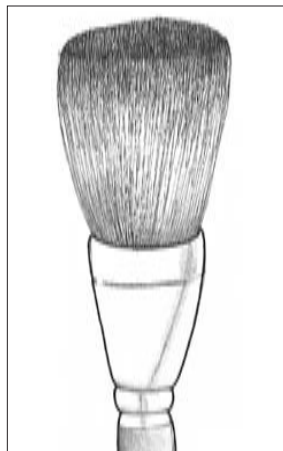
Wash this

The light blue lines above were painted using a sky wash brush (at left) with soft, absorbent synthetic hairs. It's a versatile brush—you can use the flat edge, the side or the corner. Notice the "blob" on the C-shaped stroke on the right. This is what happens if you allow wet pigment to pool in one place without picking it up with a damp brush or tissue.



The versatile wash brush

Above, find examples of several different wash brushstrokes. The purple stroke was done using a large flat synthetic sky wash, the blue using an oval brush with squirrel hairs and the red using a sable square or flat wash brush.



Mopping up

As its name implies, you can use a mop brush (at left) to mop up excess pigment, as in the rounded light area at the top of the example below. You don't have as much control with this brush as you do with a flat wash brush, but it's handy for large areas. Play around a bit, too; you'll find other things it can do.



painting large areas and broad strokes in oil, acrylic or watercolor. Sometimes hake brushes are used for calligraphy. Many artists also use them to apply gesso or varnish to their canvas. Hake brushes are relatively inexpensive and last a surprisingly long time with care.

The fan

Used by acrylic and oil painters, watercolorists and decorative artists, fan brushes are extremely versatile. They're named for their shape—the hairs or bristles fan or spread out from a flattened ferrule. Fan brushes come in a wide range of sizes, most often from 3/16 to 1 3/4 inches, and in white bristle (usually hog), red sable and synthetic. You can choose which you need based on the effect you're after. Oil and acrylic painters like to use the firmer, more emphatic bristle brushes for applying paint, but watercolorists also use them for their versatility.

Sometimes called “fan blenders,” these brushes blend very well, especially the softer-haired ones. In addition, they can create textures of hair or fur, lacy tree branches, grasses, weeds, foliage and more.

I often “barber” an inexpensive fan brush in order to make a less uniform, more spontaneous tool. A pair of nail



The fan in action

I use fan brushes (above) for a lot of effects, with either watercolor or acrylics. The brown lines, strokes and jabbing marks at right were made with a medium-sized bristle brush. The blue strokes were done using a larger bristle brush with a less-pronounced curve in its fan, and the red marks were painted with a tiny 20/0 brush that works well in blending acrylics.



clippers or sharp-pointed scissors will work—just give the hairs an uneven, ragged “pixie cut,” then experiment. This makes a great tool for uneven grasses or wonderful wood textures.

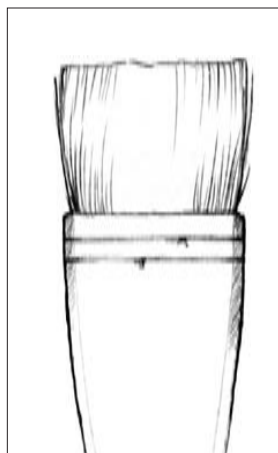
Experiment with brushes

As artists, we get attached to our favorite tools, but you may want to look at what other people are using to get an effect you've been trying to achieve. Perhaps someone in a class or workshop is using a brush you've never tried, or maybe one of the brushes discussed here sparks your interest. Now's your chance to break out of a rut. Experiment with brushes; you've got nothing to lose—except the price of a brush—and everything to gain. ♦

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Hake brushwork

The strokes below were made with a hake brush (at right). It can perform as a conventional brush or in a calligraphic way.



Wash, then mop

Large, flat wash brushes worked well in the sky and distant bay as you can see in this detail of *Maine Gull* (below; watercolor, 15x22). The lighter clouds and the sun effect were lifted with a mop brush while those areas were still damp.

