

## **Oil Paint Brushes: A Quick Overview of Oil Painting Tools**

Two qualities to look for in every oil painting brush are “spring” and “shape” resiliency. A brush should have enough spring to respond well to your hand when you make a stroke. It should give a little – but not too much – so you get the stroke weight you desire. A higher quality brush holds its shape, meaning the hairs don’t spread too much when loaded or stay spread after use.

### **Parts of a oil paint brush**

There are four parts of a paintbrush: **bristles, heel, ferrule and handle.**

**Bristles** These are the “hairs” that carry the paint. Bristles can be stiff hog’s hair, sable (or other soft natural hair) or synthetic. In a quality brush, the ends will taper to a fine edge, allowing more control.

**Soft bristle brushes** Soft bristles make smooth paint strokes. For blended, flat paint surfaces, sable, mongoose, soft synthetic brushes are ideal. The consistency of the paint needs to be rather fluid for these brushes, as they don’t have the strength to apply heavy body paint (like thick, buttery paint). This also means that they’re not useful for layering paint wet-in-wet, a technique that requires firm paint. Long-bristled, soft brushes are excellent for making irregular, “hairy” marks at the end of a brushstroke—a feature that’s helpful for portraying subjects that require fine lines, such as hair and grasses.

**Stiff bristle brushes** Brushes with coarser bristles are a good choice for creating rough effects or the thick layers of impasto. Hog bristle and stiff, springy synthetics are well-suited to heavy paint and will leave their painterly tracks in the pigment. They can be loaded up with paint and are a favourite among painters who work wet-in-wet—they can be dragged over wet paint, making them ideal for working in layers. When used with fluid paint, or not enough paint, these brushes make scratchy, meagre, and unappealing patches or marks.

**Heel** This is where the end of the bristles are joined to the handle. Avoid filling your brush with paint up to the heel. Paint dry will dry there if not cleaned properly, it’s hard to clean and will spread the bristles, making the brush lose its point.

**Ferrule** The ferrule is the metal band that secures the bristles and connects them to the handle.

**Handle** Handles are long or short, wood or plastic. Long-handled brushes are classic and allow you to take a farther view to keep your composition in perspective. When you hold your brush toward the end of a long handle, it touches the canvas in a more sensitive way. Think of your brush as an extension of your arm and fingertips rather than a writing utensil.

**Types of paint brushes** The two different types of brushes for oil painting are bristle and sable.

**Bristle brushes** While all brushes have bristles, it’s the stiffer hog’s hair brushes that are referred to as bristle brushes. The stiff hog’s hair grabs more paint so bristle brushes are great if you work thickly or like to accentuate brushstrokes.

**Sable brushes** Sable brushes are soft and can be made from actual weasel hair (sables are a kind of weasel), squirrel, rabbit or synthetic fibres. These soft brushes are perfect for finer details and smoother blending.

### **Oil paint brush shapes**



**Fan** This is literally a fan-shaped arrangement of bristles, used for blending and creating subtle texture. While it's not used to create the bulk of a painting, the fan is helpful in creating modulating marks and interesting textural effects. Fans can be used to blend and soften the hard edges of a painted form, or they can be used to stipple or flick paint onto the canvas, making them useful for depicting grasses or fur.

**Rounds** Round brushes are said to be less versatile because the stroke doesn't vary, but that's the attribute needed when painting details, smaller rounds are great for detail. Round brushes come in pointed and blunt tips. Both can be used to create a modulated, linear mark by applying more or less pressure during the stroke. Used on their sides in a scribbling motion, they'll make an irregular, broken patch of colour.

**Flats** Long, flat, rectangular brushes. Longer brush hairs carry more paint, so flats can cover more area per load. Held flat against the canvas, it creates smooth edges and sweeping strokes. Used on edge, relatively thin lines are possible. Sometimes flats are described by measurement, such as  $\frac{1}{4}$ " or  $\frac{1}{2}$ " rather than brush sizes. Flat brushes are versatile, their long bristles can lay smooth patches of colour; make long, bold strokes, or, when using their edges, execute fine crisp lines. Marks made with a flat brush have a distinctive square edge.

**Filberts** This is like a flat but with rounded sides, so it creates a softer edge and blends better than a flat. They have coverage, control and blend-ability. A favourite among figurative painters, these brushes can create a variety of marks from broad to linear, without the square edge of a flat brush. Filberts can also make a flat patch of colour with no distinctive brush marks when used on its side in a scribbling motion.

**Brights** These are similar to a flat brush, but the hairs on brights are shorter. This allows a bit more control than the longer flat brush. Smaller bright bristle brushes are good for texture. They're also ideal for short, controlled strokes. It can be used with heavy paint and, like the flat, will deposit marks with distinct, square edges. It's not suitable for layering wet-in-wet; the short, stiff bristles of a bright will remove the underlayer of paint rather than add to it.

**Liners and Riggers** Liner and rigger brushes are thin brushes with very long bristles. They create fine details. The length of the bristles holds a large amount of paint, allowing the creation of long lines with one brush stroke. Liner brushes are good for painting grass, branches of trees, ropes and fences etc. Use the brush by mixing paint with thinner or linseed oil, in order to ensure a smooth flow of paint, and to create extra fine lines. Artists use these brushes for creating delicate branches, tendrils, lettering, and other linear, calligraphic marks.



**Soft brushes** The **mop brush** is excellent for blending and removing brushstrokes. Use it gently, as if "hovering" over the canvas. They can also be used for varnishing, or glazing. Soft makeup brushes are ideal for blending



**Palette Knife** A palette knife or a painting knife is a tool designed to mix oil paints on an artist's palette, but can also be used for painting. Usually, the blade of palette knives is flexible. You can mix oil paint with a paintbrush or a palette knife; it's a matter of personal preference. When mixing colours in advance, use a palette knife.



**Angular brushes** Angular brushes are particularly versatile and allow the creation of precise details, fill large areas or create unique brushstrokes. They come with different angles and different hair length, and therefore with different names such as angular, dagger, sword etc.



**Old brushes** The bristles of brushes split with time. Old brushes have an advantage in creating randomness, so it is good to keep them for specific tasks. For precision, cut or tear off the hairs that split. In addition, it is possible to cut some brush hairs and create a new brush structure as needed.



**Summary & Tips** There are many types of brushes for oil painting. Choosing the type of paintbrush is a matter of personal preference, and the painter's painting style.

When using brushes **never** leave them on their tip in your turps jar etc. The weight of the brush will bend the bristles and render it permanently useless.

**Cleaning brushes after use** To clean oil painting brushes, first remove excess paint with a paper towel, then wash with a solvent like mineral spirits, rinse, and repeat until clean before washing with soap and water and drying. For a solvent-free method, use soap with warm water, working it into a lather, rinsing, and repeating until all paint is gone. Finish by shaping the bristles and allowing them to dry completely.

**How to store brushes** For protecting the bristles, dry the brush (after cleaning) while the bristles are facing up. If a paintbrush is facing down and leaning on its bristles, the bristles will bend, and their shape will be ruined. When completely dry, keep them in a case designed for brushes.

