

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF BRUSHES

By Rachel Ann Keebler, Cobalt Studios, The Painter's Journal, Spring 2003

Our brushes...for many of us, scenic brushes are the primary tools used to make artwork for the stage and screen (not to mention theme parks and casinos!). While there are those brushes that can take abuse (nothing like an old chip brush), for the most part the bristles on our fitches must be clean and stay together sweetly, and not with stiff, glommed up tips. The handles need to stay tight and ferrules should not be split.

Well, THAT'S a mouthful! The fact that we use water-based paints creates most of our problems.

CLEANING

When I was in summer stock, we used Ivory Soap and warm water if we could get it (now I use thinned oil soap). For started, swish the brush vigorously in a partially full bucket of clean water a few times to speed up the process, then soap up the brush like you are washing your hair. Rinse in the bucket or under running water, repeating the process until the suds are not colored or the water squeezed from the brush is clean.

STAYING TOGETHER

We found that unless somebody ran a brush upside down under flowing water (pounding the pigment into the ferrule), repeated incomplete cleanings or let a brush dry while standing on its bristles, the brush would stay nicely shaped. "Retraining" a brush that has been let to dry in a compromising position can be done by wetting the brush, soap sudsing it, squeezing it to shape it and then wrapping it in newspaper for the night. The only other reason for a splayed brush is if the manufacturer placed the bristles in the brush curving outwards...oops! You would know this the first time you used the brush.

PREVENTING STIFFNESS

Getting all that binder washed out will prevent the brushes from stiffening when they dry. Periodically these brushes get a treat with hair conditioner – especially when storing from one summer until the next. This keeps them from drying out and getting brittle.

The ferrule is what holds the bristles onto the handle. Never use a wire brush on the base of the bristles; it will damage the ferrule. There are other ways to deal with dried-up paint there. First, dampen your brush thoroughly before using: this discourages paint from drying inside the brush. Next, keep a big bucket of water handy as you work. If you have finished using your brush for a while, rinse it vigorously, rub the base of the bristles with your fingers, then rinse again. Shake the brush once and then lay it next to the bucket. It won't be totally clean, but it won't dry out and it won't be left floating in the bucket.

SAVING A BRUSH

There are inevitably times when paint does dry on the outside of a brush. Again you should still avoid the wire brush. A good stiff nylon scrub brush will do the trick. If the brush was left out in the hot sun all day, you may have to reach for the commercial chemical "brush cleaner" (a mild liquid paint stripper) and use as directed. This is when I use a brush comb; otherwise I don't seem to use them.

STORING BRUSHES (tips not glommed up)

When the brush is not washed thoroughly and hung up to dry, the bristles get glommed up. The residual binder runs down to the tips and dries there. Aside from calling the brush police every time a brush gets washed, storing the brushes flat on a screen-bottomed shelf or drawer is a good way to treat them and provides good airflow for drying.

HANDLES TIGHTEN FERRULES NOT SPLIT

This can be an ongoing problem, as most handles are made out of wood and are subject to the swelling and the shrinking that goes on with the absence or presence of water. If your handles have dried out between shows, you can soak the brush in a bucket of water for a couple of hours. If repeated swelling and shrinking has loosened the nails that secure the ferrule, they may need to be replaced. I have seen ferrules made with tightened with copper wire, re-tightened down and re-soldered. Splitting ferrules are another problem. Mr. Wolf, of Wolf Paint in NYS, told me that the glue that holds the brushes together and in the ferrule should fill the ferrule cavity completely up to the brim! This not only prevents the bristles inside the ferrule from collecting pigment, but from getting wet and swelling, thereby splitting the ferrule. This certainly makes sense to me. Unfortunately, I have noticed that recent manufacturers do not do this. It is easy to tell because the "plug" of bristles falls out after the ferrule splits and you can see what's going on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rache Ann Keebler is the owner of Cobalt Studios in White Lake, NY. She has been a member of USA 829 as a scenic artist since 1981, and has painted numerous shows throughout the country. Some highlights include: Doonesbury, the Real Thing; Baby; La Cage Aux Folles; 9 ½ Weeks; Chaplin; K2; State Fair; thirteen years of the Hasty Pudding Show, drops for Baryshnikov Productions and Twyla Tharp, nine years of Manhattan School of Music operas, and many others. She has taught at both the North Carolina school for the Arts and Temple University.