

TAUNTON'S

Fine Woodworking



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Match the brush to the finish

NATURAL HAIR OR BRISTLES FOR SOLVENT-BASED FINISHES



Despite some manufacturer's claims, brushes with synthetic filaments can't match a natural-filament brush when applying a solvent-based finish. Most woodworkers refer to a brush's bristles rather than its filaments, but that is rather like calling all cheese cheddar. Bristle refers only to hog bristle, also known as China bristle because that is where nearly all of it comes from. Sold to brush-makers for \$8 to \$12 per pound, bristle is the workhorse among natural-filament brushes.

The other natural filament you're likely to find in brushes is European ox hair, which comes from these animals' ears. Slightly less stiff than hog bristle, it is also softer and at \$80 per pound, much more expensive. You can buy ox hair/bristle blend brushes such as Elder & Jenks' Capital Ox (\$20), or you can buy a pure ox-hair brush from Tools for Working Wood (\$40). Once you get the feel for brushing a finish, either type of brush is well worth buying if you are using solvent-based varnish.

Your grandfather may have sworn by his badger-hair brush and some catalogs offer "badger-style" brushes. However, genuine badger hair costs around \$400 per pound, so it is likely that the brush is really hog bristle with a black streak painted on the bristles to resemble badger hair. Read the fine print closely.



\$15

A GOOD START

Your first brush should be made from hog (China) bristle. The black or beige color of the bristle makes no difference, and you can get a fine 2-in. brush for under \$15.



\$40

TOP OF THE LINE

The Cadillac of solvent brushes is made from pure ox hair. Very fine and soft, it will lay down a coat of varnish with almost no brush marks, but costs at least \$40 for a 2-in. brush.



\$20

NICE COMPROMISE

An ox hair/bristle blend works very well. It can't quite match the surface left by pure ox hair, but this won't matter if you are rubbing out the finish. Expect to pay \$20 to \$25 for a 2-in. brush.

Taklon is the exception to the rule

One synthetic filament, Taklon, works for both solvent- and water-based finishes. The filaments are extremely fine and leave virtually no brush marks, but their flexibility makes them suitable only for thinned finishes and they can't deliver as much finish per stroke. A good way to get a really smooth final coat for fast-drying finishes like lacquer or shellac is to thin them by at least 50% and use a Taklon brush to lay down a coat almost devoid of brush marks. You can expect to pay around \$30 for a Taklon brush.



PERFECTLY SMOOTH FINAL COAT

Taklon does an incredible job laying down a thin, smooth coat of solvent-based finish.