

Caring for Japanese Printing Brushes

There are three parts to caring for maru bake, hanga bake, surikomi bake, dosa bake and mizu bake: proper moistening, proper cleaning and proper drying.

First, it is absolutely essential that you soak these brushes in water briefly prior to each day's use. Otherwise the bristles will become loose in their bindings and begin to shed badly. While all brushes will shed extraneous bristles, once the afore mentioned kind of shedding starts, the bristles will never become as tight as they were originally no matter how long you soak the brushes. A good rule of thumb is to soak the entire brush and handle about 10 to 15 minutes. Wooden handles absorb water more slowly than bamboo handles, and large brushes need to be soaked longer than small brushes. You will need to adjust the time allowed accordingly. After soaking, gently press the excess water from the brush with a towel before using.

Second, brushes must be rinsed out after use to rid them of any paste, ink or paint which, if left in the brush, will invite the growth of mold and bacteria. Mold is harmful to the brush as well as to future prints.

Run lukewarm water over your brushes. Gently dab each brush against the palm of your hand or the side of the basin. You might want to use a little mild hand soap or shampoo to help the cleaning process. Filling the sink part way with water and swishing the brushes around helps remove the last dregs of pigment from the brush. Repeat with fresh water until the water runs clear. "Gentle" and "thorough" should be your guidewords to avoid damaging the brushes. Next, gently press in a towel, and then shake the brush to remove excess water. Avoid pulling or

twisting the brush in the towel.

If in the process of a day's printing you need to use one brush for several colors, simply rinse it out. Some people keep one set of brushes for light colors, and another for dark colors, so they can switch without having to clean too carefully.

Third, thoroughly dry your brushes after each day's use. These brushes have very dense bundles of hair, which act like sponges to hold a supply of ink, so they dry very slowly.

It is best to hang your brushes to dry. The larger brushes have holes in the handle for hanging. The smaller brushes can be hung if string is looped through the handles. Printmakers often attach a small metal eye in one end of the maru bake (they look like small shoe brushes) to hang them.

If you don't wish to hang your brushes, place them on the edge of a table with the bristles overhanging the edge; ideally, in a well ventilated area with good air circulation to aid the drying process. Never store your brushes before they are totally dry. Many Japanese printmakers have wall racks and keep their brushes hanging in the open to make certain plenty of air can get to them at all times.

The cedar handles on maru bake can split from becoming wet and then drying out. Some printmakers wrap plastic tape tightly around the handle two or three times to help prevent this (see drawing). If a crack develops the bristles will not fall out because they are looped up over a wire which holds them in place, so it is a cosmetic rather than a functional problem.



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