

Maru Bake Hairsplitting Directions

There are two types of brushes traditionally used for applying pigment to the block: *maru bake* and *hanga bake*. Generally, the *maru bake*, which looks like a small shoe brush, is used for applying pigment over large areas and for gradation printing.

Maru bake are made from horsehair and wood. The horsehair used for these brushes comes from the tail of black horses, where the hair is thick and bristly, yet has enough elasticity to bear the pressure of rubbing against the block. The ends of the brush need to be split to make them soft and fine. This allows the brush to hold the pigment and spread it uniformly over the surface of the block. After using the brush for some time you may need to repeat this process to re-shape the brush and re-split hairs that have worn down.

This is not a difficult job, but it is messy and smelly, so wear old clothes or an apron and if possible work outside.

To split the bristles of the *maru bake*, first singe the ends of the bristles. **DO NOT SOAK THE BRUSH IN WATER FIRST.** Soaking the brush can cause the wooden handle to crack when the wet bristles get hot. Place an old pie pan or frying pan over a hot plate set on high. When the pan is hot, place the brush standing up on its bristles in the pan. You should be able to hear the bristles sizzle; if not, remove the brush, wait until the pan gets hotter, and try again. The bristles will turn a light brownish color and matt together. Care must be taken to leave the hair in the center part of the brush longer than the outer edges. Some printmakers trim the edges of the brush to a bevel before splitting the ends of

the bristles; others achieve this by tilting the brush on the pie pan so the outer bristles are singed more than those in the center.

After singeing, quickly dip the ends of the bristles in water and then rub them firmly and briskly over the metal dragon skin. Be careful that you do not scrape your knuckles. Dip the brush into the water frequently and turn the brush often as you rub. For a small brush, it may take twenty minutes to half an hour to finish the job. If the brush is large, you may have to work on it for an hour or more. You want to split the ends of each individual hair in order to make the brush uniformly soft. As you go, if you see that the shape is not to your satisfaction, you can re-singe small areas and continue rubbing the brush over the abrasive surface until you are satisfied with the final shape. If you want to re-singe the entire brush, allow it to dry thoroughly first.

When you are finished, wash the brush well with a mild soap, rubbing the brush against the palm of your hand. Rinse thoroughly. Allow to dry with the bristles pointing down in a well-ventilated area, out of the sun or direct heat. After the brush is dry, the ends of the bristles should look soft and velvety.

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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