

Trinity Iconography Institute



How to Select a Brush for Iconography

By Fr Jon Buffington

A brush needs to match its medium. Synthetic brushes that work so well for acrylic would be a disaster for working in egg tempera. Egg tempera is an extremely subtle medium, requiring a brush that can apply a transparent wash as well as a layer of color in subtle and delicate ways to avoid “picking up” the underlying layers of pigment. For this purpose, you need a soft, natural brush.

ROUND, NATURAL SABLE BRUSHES

You will need 2 or 3 good quality ROUND, NATURAL sable brushes in these sizes:

- (1) of size “1” or “3”
- (1) of size “5” or “6”

Purchase at least 2 round, natural sable brushes.

Try to find natural **Kolinsky Sable**. Sable brushes do not use actual sable, rather they use the fur from the tail of the marten. These springy hairs provide a round belly to the brush head and come to a tight point at the end. If you are shopping in person and the brushes you are looking at seem loose, ask for a bit of water in which to dip them and see if they come to a point when wet. If they don’t “point”, select another brush.

Kolinsky is the best of the sables and will hold its shape for many years if treated with care. The best of the best is Isabey Kolinsky. They are also the most expensive. No Kolinsky brush will be cheap even on sale.

Other good brands: Da Vinci, Princeton & Windsor & Newton offers round natural sable brushes. I have found ZEM brushes on Amazon and these are surprisingly good too.

SYNTHETIC BRUSHES

You will also need two ordinary brushes for specific tasks:

- ¼” or ½” synthetic** FLAT brush for applying gold adhesive and natural shellac
- A synthetic ROUND “mixing” brush - a size 4 round is sufficient