

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, soak the printing brushes in water briefly prior to each day's use. Otherwise the bristles will become loose in their bindings and begin to fall out. All brushes will shed extraneous bristles, but if too many bristles are lost, the brush will never become tight again. Soaking also keeps the bristles flexible and responsive. A good rule of thumb is to soak the entire brush and handle for 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, wrap the brush in a towel and press the excess water from it. Otherwise too much water will be added to the ink.

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 will destroy the brush and it is harmful to introduce into 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* (the ones that 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 in a well ventilated area with good air circulation to aid the drying process. Never store your brushes before they are totally dry and never store them in plastic bags or closed containers. Many Japanese printmakers have wall racks and keep their brushes hanging in the open to make sure plenty of air can get to them at all times. If you have to put your brushes away for a long time, make sure they are completely dry and then place them in a cloth bag or wooden box. You can protect them against moths by adding aromatic cedar chips.

If a *surikomi* or *hanga bake* shed excessively, there are a couple of tricks you can try to get it to stop. First, try spreading a thick coat of waterproof glue on the root of the bristles (the end opposite the one you use to spread the ink). If that doesn't work, you can stick some thin bamboo or wood wedges inside the brush, cutting them as close to the bristle roots as possible to keep them from interfering with the printing.

The cedar handles on *maru bake* can split from becoming wet and then drying out. Traditionally, new brushes are allowed to dry for six months to a year before being used so the wood will harden. If that is not possible, try drying the brush in a refrigerator to avoid cracks caused by shrinkage in a heated room. 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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