

Maru Bake Hairsplitting Directions

There are two types of brushes traditionally used to apply 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 *bokashi* (gradation printing).

Maru bake are made from horsehair and cedar. 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 bristles 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 without leaving marks. After using the brush for some time you will 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 work outside if possible.

First singe the ends of the bristles. Place a heavy metal pie pan or frying pan that you don't use for food (Goodwill is a good source) 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 with scissors 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 dragon skin, taking care not to scrape your knuckles. Rub back and forth 10 to 20 times in one direction, then turn the brush 90° and rub another 10 to 20 times before turning the brush again. Try to rub the same number of times in each direction so the bristles are evenly shaped. Dip the brush into the water frequently. Depending on how hard you work, a small brush will take twenty minutes to half an hour at the very least. With a large brush, it may take an hour or more. Some people will work for several hours before they are satisfied with the results.

When you are finished, wash the brush with mild soap and water, rubbing the brush against the palm of your hand. Rinse thoroughly. Allow the brush 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. If you like, you can continue to condition the brush in this manner every time you clean it. The softer and fluffier it becomes, the better it will work.

Cedar tends to split if it dries out too quickly. Professional printmakers in Japan wait six months to a year for the wood to cure before using a new brush so the wood can harden.

Another tip is to wrap plastic tape tightly around the handle two or three times to help prevent splits (see drawing).



If a small crack develops the bristles will not fall out because they are looped over a wire which holds them in place, so this is a cosmetic problem rather than a functional one. If the crack is large, remove the top cap and push wood glue or household cement into the split, then put the brush into a vise or use a clamp to press it back together while it dries. Put it into the vise with the bristles up so the glue doesn't seep down into the bristles.



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