

## Caring for brushes

USE AND CLEAN THEM PROPERLY,  
AND THEY WILL LAST FOR YEARS

BY DAVID SORG

It seems that most people would rather wash their house cat than their paintbrushes. Whenever I give a finishing workshop, I bring along some paint stripper to try to save the brushes that participants haul in; they're often as stiff as the last board they were used on. Oh sure, their owners apologize... maybe blame their kids. But I know.

You can start making cleanup easier before you ever open a can of finish. First, choose the right brush. I rarely use natural-bristle brushes anymore. Synthetics are easier to clean, and several manufacturers make synthetic-bristle brushes that apply oil-based and water-based finishes as well as natural bristles. I like Purdy's Syntox ([www.purdycorp.com](http://www.purdycorp.com)) and Wooster's UltraPro Soft ([www.woosterbrush.com](http://www.woosterbrush.com)). Of course, these cleaning techniques will work on natural bristles, too.

Remembering a few things when using the brush will help when it comes time to clean it. Before it touches the finish, dip the dry brush about halfway into the appropriate solvent. This will coat the bristles with solvent instead of finish.

Try to keep the finish from creeping into the metal ferrule, where it will be hard to get out later. This is easier said than done when brushing undersides or upper vertical surfaces. Start with these surfaces before the brush becomes saturated with finish, or flip the work over.

When done for the day, take the time to wash up, or at least to put your brush into hibernation. Don't head off to watch a couple of innings of baseball before you clean; it will just make things harder.

### Clean oil-based finishes after the final coat

Let's talk about cleaning oil-based finishes. (This is generally where the moaning begins.) The good



## Cleaning starts before brushing

Newer synthetic brushes work with either water- or oil-based finish, but don't use one brush for both. Some resins will always remain and will gum up if you use the same brush for different products.



**Solvent before finish eases cleaning.** Before finishing, dip the brush halfway into the appropriate solvent, then brush out the liquid onto a newspaper or a lint-free rag.



**Don't overload the brush.** To avoid loading the hard-to-clean ferrule with finish, dip the brush no more than halfway into the finish and press out the excess against the side of the container.



## Oil-based finishes

### 1. THE COFFEE CAN TRICK

*Don't clean oil-based finish from the brush between coats. Suspend the brush in a container of solvent, and wipe it off before the next coat. This doesn't work with water-based finishes.*



### 2. CLEAN USING A SOLVENT

*Save used mineral spirits, pour off the liquid, and use it for the initial cleaning. The final solvent rinse should be with virgin mineral spirits. Lacquer thinner works on oil-based finishes, too. It's quicker, cleans better, smells worse, evaporates faster, and is more flammable. Your choice.*



### 3. FOLLOW THE SOLVENT WITH CITRUS CLEANER

*Use household citrus cleaner after the solvent rinse. All brushes need a final water cleanup, and citrus cleaner helps the transition between oil and water.*



news is that you don't necessarily have to clean the brush each time you use it. If I'm brushing a traditional, multi-layered varnish that is recoated each day or every other day, I don't wash the brush after each coat. I wipe the excess finish out of the brush with a lint-free rag, then store it in a coffee can filled with solvent (see photo 1, left). For most oil-based finishes, the solvent is mineral spirits. For lacquer, it is lacquer thinner. The method is the same for both.

The next day, I press out the extra solvent against the side of the can, and put on the next coat. After the final coat, you'll have to wash the brush; if left indefinitely in the solvent, the bristles will start to grow crystals of finish.

Start by wiping the excess finish from the bristles. The object is to carry away the finish by running as much solvent through the bristles as possible. Flushing it down the sink is expensive and unfriendly to the environment. There's an alternative: You can reuse solvent and lacquer thinner almost indefinitely by letting the solids settle out and decanting the liquid.

If you're an occasional finisher, a single coffee can or wide-mouthed jar is most of the cleaning setup you'll need. Fill the jar halfway with solvent and dip the brush in it, then wipe the brush semi-dry with paper towels. Repeat a time or two, especially if you got a lot of finish up in the ferrule. Then hold the brush a little above the container and dribble on some virgin solvent. Wipe. Repeat.

If you let the used solvent settle for a few days, you can pour it off into a fresh container from time to time. Frequent finishers use a two-can system starting with the "dirtier" can and proceeding to the "cleaner" can. The dirty can is replenished from the clean can, which is replenished with virgin solvent.

When you think you've got the brush clean enough, follow up with a water rinse. With one difference, this rinse is exactly the process used to clean up water-based finishes, as described below. The difference is that you should use a water-based orange cleaner, instead of detergent, for the first couple of rinses. The citrus cleaner seems to be more miscible with mineral spirits, easing the transition from the solvent you were using to water.

A little sludge is normal on the first rinse with the orange solvent. If you find a lot of sludge, you probably didn't rinse the brush enough in solvent.

### Clean water-based finishes after every use

Brushes used with water-based products should be cleaned after each use. There's no excuse not to, because it is so easy. Start by pulling a paper towel



## Water-based finishes



**Detergent helps water do its job.** On a molecular level, detergent helps water to remove marginally soluble material. Without it, your brush will be grungy.



**Start with a massage.** Under warm, not hot, running water, use your fingers to massage the finish down. Using dish detergent, lather, rinse, repeat. A brush comb, available at paint stores, will ensure that all the old finish is removed.

or rag downward along the brush to get rid of the extra finish. Try not to squeeze the finish up into the ferrule. Next, put the brush under the water tap with the bristles down and let cool or warm (not hot) water pull out more finish. Massage the bristles from the top down until most of the finish seems to be gone.

At this point, squeeze a little liquid dishwashing detergent (I like Dawn) into the bristles near the ferrule and work up a lather. Rinse well and repeat. This may be all that's needed if you started cleaning while the finish was still fresh. If things were getting a little gummy, do it again, and work the lather with a brush comb. I make my final determination by bending the bristles backward to see what comes out right at the bottom of the ferrule/top of the bristles. Nothing should emerge. If you see soap bubbles or a drecky film, keep going.

Once it's clean, I give the brush one good downward shake, then use my fingers to bring the bristles to their original shape and hang it on a nail to dry. The next day I replace the factory cover if I have one, or wrap the brush loosely in paper to keep out dust. Store brushes either hanging from the handle or up-ended in a jar or can so that no weight rests on the bristles.



**Hang it out to dry.** Proper storage helps brushes retain their shape, and a newspaper wrap keeps the dust at bay.

### How about not cleaning?

There are two finishes that don't require cleaning at all: shellac and brushing lacquer. Both are permanently resolv-

able. Just soak the brush for a while in denatured alcohol or lacquer thinner, as appropriate, and it will be as good as new. This assumes that you're using a dedicated brush. If you spread your brush around different finishes, follow the same cleaning routine as for oil-based finishes, using the appropriate solvent.

I opened with a mention of paint stripper, and I'll close with it as a last resort. It's worth a try for that brush-wash job gone bad. It won't help much if there's a bunch of old stuff in the ferrule, and it might even ruin the brush, but what's there to lose? I have not found an "environmentally friendly" stripper that works. Use the kind with methyl ethyl ketone (MEK) in it. Somewhere on the label it will say: "Known by the State of California to cause..."

various nasty things.

Or, you could just buy a new brush. ☐

## Lacquer and shellac

**Don't bother to clean brushes used with lacquer or shellac.** These finishes always remain soluble in their solvents, so cleaning these dedicated brushes is a questionable practice at best.

