

Tools of the Artist: Creating Your Own Supplies

Quite often art is seen as a final product rather than a process. Jack Wise did not approach his painting and calligraphy in this way. For him, the preparation of materials was also a form of preparation for the creation of his art, directing his focus towards the movement of the brush. He instructed his students in how to make their own brushes, and told them that even the circular grinding motion of an ink stick into ink was a significant action of meditation and discipline.

The Western hemisphere's tendency to be dependant upon machines and to use more than we need, destroying our planet in the process, was another concern of Jack's. He admired Chinese calligrapher Lin Chien-Shih's technique in that respect. Wise wrote that, in Chien-Shih's paintings, "the colours used are traditional Chinese mineral colours -ground by hand - the brushes are made by hand - the paper is made by hand ... his work is absolutely independent of the technology which we are conditioned to depend upon." (Jack Wise, West Coast Review, "From Cross-cultural Fertilization to Interface", V. 7, April 1973, 10)

Make Your Own Paper

Paper is made from cellulose, which is found in plant fibres. Paper is made by washing, boiling, beating and often bleaching these fibres, which are held together by the gluish substance called hemicellulose, also found in plant fibres. The Chinese were the first to make paper, during the Western Han Empire, somewhere around the year 200 B.C.E. They specialized their paper making after the standardization of their written language, and by the 5th century C.E., fine hemp papers were used for Buddhist sutras and mulberry bark papers for official documents. Calligraphers would select papers for their texture and quality.

The directions below use old newspapers instead of mulberry bark, but the process is very similar, using a net to strain the fibres from a pan of water, which will later dry into your own sheet of hand made paper!

Materials

- *two newspaper pages cut or torn into 3x3 cm squares
- *two tablespoons of white glue
- *2-3 cups of water
- *a sink or pan filled with 10 cm of water
- *one coat hanger
- *one pair of panty hose
- *blender or food processor

Process

Take the coat hanger, untwist the hook and bend the wire into a square, refastening the ends to hold the shape. Stretch the panty hose over the wire frame, creating a net. Make sure the fabric is flat and pulled tight, then fasten with knots. Set the net aside.

Add the paper and water to the blender slowly, about a handful at a time, mixing until it is a doughy blob, then blend for 2 minutes. Dump the mixture into the pan or sink, with the glue added to the water, and stir it around with your hands. Slowly scoop up the pulp with the net starting from the bottom, to let the water drain away. Count to 20 as you move the net up. Set the net aside to dry. When it is completely dry, gently peel the paper away from the frame. It can be flattened by setting an iron on high heat with no steam. Try adding food colouring, scraps of coloured paper from the recycling bin, leaves, dryer lint and other materials to give colour and texture to your paper!

Make Your Own Brushes

Jack Wise had many brushes, some that were very expensive and some that he made himself from simple materials. The brush was the tool he used to create his particular type of art, and it was also the traditional tool of the masters of Chinese calligraphy. He talked of each brush having a "unique singular voice" and a story to tell, and liked to experiment with new and different brushes. The brush is an ancient tool, made from reed fibres in ancient Egypt, goat, fox and human hair in Asian traditions, and plastics in our own time.

When Jack Wise taught at the Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts, he had his students create their own brushes, in this way:

*Find a piece of wood or bark.

Visit your firewood pile, a beach with driftwood or some other source of dead wood. Please do not remove bark from living trees.

*Select a piece that pleases you in some way, or perhaps feels good in your hand. Fir or cedar are good choices.

*Take a rock or hammer and pound one end of your wood piece, until it becomes macerated and fibrous, like a brush.

*Experiment with making marks with your brush, with paint, ink, or even water on rocks or pavement.

Once you try your brush, you may wish to create brushes from other materials. Try painting with a stick or twig, a feather or leaves. Take hair or fur (your own, or some shed by a pet), and tie it firmly to a stick, piece of bamboo or even a pencil. What are the differences between the brushes you have made, in the way they absorb the paint and ink, the way they move and the marks they make? These are all important qualities that make each brush unique.