



Opus Art Supplies • Resources for the Creative Individual

Airbrushing Materials

An airbrush is one of the most creative and versatile tools for any art practice, but also widely used for many other applications. Understanding how an airbrush works and its many features is the starting point before choosing which airbrush will work best for you.

CHOOSING AN AIRBRUSH

Internal Mix

Internal mix airbrushes mix paint & air pressure together inside the airbrush, usually just before leaving the tip. Most professional airbrushes are internal mix, giving maximum control of paint and air pressure.

External Mix

External mix airbrushes mix outside the tip, which results in a coarser spray pattern and less control than with internal mix types. External mix airbrushes tend to be inexpensive 'sprayers' that are more suited for situations where one might use cans of spray paint. At Opus we only carry internal mix airbrushes. We also sell Atomizers, which are a simple external mix spray tools that function manually.

Single Action

Single action airbrushes work like spray paint but they allow control over the flow of air: the more you press the trigger, the more air you release to mix with the paint.

Dual Action

Dual action airbrushes allow you to control the flow of both the air and the paint. The trigger moves in two directions: pressing down controls the air flow; pulling back controls the paint flow. When the trigger is pushed down fully (air) and pulled all the way back (paint), this will produce the largest spray possible. Lightly pressing down while lightly pulling the trigger back will produce a finer line. With practice, a dual action airbrush can give you a wide range of spray patterns, from a very fine line to a large spray.

Gravity Feed

Gravity Feed airbrushes feature a paint cup that is fixed to the top of the airbrush, allowing gravity



Iwata Eclipse HP-CS

to feed the paint into the airbrush body. The gravity feed allows the airbrush to operate at low air pressure, which helps with control in detailed work. Compared to a bottom feed system, the gravity feed system also requires less paint to fill the cup and no paint is lost travelling through tubes, giving a degree of economy with paint. As the gravity feed airbrush is typically used for detailed work, it will often feature smaller paint cups. These are beneficial as they are less likely to obscure the view of the airbrush nozzle, which is important with detailed work.

Bottom Feed

Bottom feed airbrushes feature a bottle of paint that is attached below the airbrush body, where a siphon is used



Iwata Eclipse HP-BCS

to draw the paint into the airbrush. The position of the cup allows for a clear line of sight to your work. Bottom feed airbrushes allow for larger bottles of paint, which is good when painting larger areas. This type of airbrush generally uses detachable bottles, allowing you to switch from one colour to another with ease by changing bottles. On the other hand, bottom feed airbrushes can be a challenge for people doing very fine detail because the bottle can limit how close the nozzle can be placed to the painting surface. Some people also find the larger bottle and bottom position a hindrance to their hand movement and comfort.

Side Feed

Side feed airbrushes have a bottom or gravity feed cup that can be mounted on either the left or right side of the airbrush. Like bottom feed airbrushes, side feed



Iwata Revolution HP-TR1

airbrushes also provide a clear line of sight to your work. The removable cups allow you to adjust the angle of the cup, which is beneficial when working on more extreme angles or upside down. The versatility of the side feed design also makes it possible to switch between gravity or siphon feed cups depending on your preference or to gain the benefits that each cup system features.

CHOOSING AIRBRUSH PAINT

Before purchasing colours, it's important to determine which paints will work best for the surface you are spraying and the effect you are looking for.

AIRBRUSH PAINT FOR PAPER OR CANVAS (FINE ART)

Airbrush and High Flow Paints

Airbrush and High Flow paints work well on both paper and canvas. They are convenient and easy to use as they do not require thinning in order to be able to spray them through an airbrush. As colours that contain large or heavy pigment particles (cadmiums, cobalts, micas, etc.) are more difficult to "atomize" (mix and disperse in the flow of air,) they are generally not available as airbrush or High Flow paints. There is a good range of colour options available with airbrush and High Flow paints, though not as expansive as with regular acrylic colours.

Acrylic Paints

Acrylic paints provide a greater choice in colour options than airbrush paints though most acrylic paint will need to be thinned with an airbrush medium to be sprayed through an airbrush. **Fluid Acrylics** can generally be mixed 50/50 with an airbrush medium to create the desired consistency for airbrushing. **Heavy Body Acrylics** will require a greater ratio of airbrush medium, following the manufacturer's instructions. The addition of experimentation and practice will translate in a mix that is ideal for a smooth and consistent spray. **Acrylic Inks** are created at a consistency that work very well with an airbrush, without any need for dilution.

Unless otherwise specified, water is generally not recommended as a way to thin acrylics for an airbrush as the water will weaken the paint's ability to adhere to a surface, and in some cases, it can cause the paint to repel on the surface it is being applied to. Instead, an **airbrush medium** should be used to thin acrylics. If mixing colours with a larger particle size, more medium may be required. If you are using an airbrush that is designed to do very fine detailed work, some of these colours may not be able to go through the airbrush, regardless of the amount of medium being used (e.g. metallics, cobalts, cadmiums, etc). Care should be taken to ensure that hazardous pigments are not used in a spray form.

AIRBRUSH PAINTS FOR FABRIC, METAL, FIBERGLASS & PLASTICS

Among the different lines of airbrush paint available, some may be more or less suited to particular surfaces. Companies may indicate which surfaces their airbrush paint is best suited for. In cases where it is unclear or where your project uses a unique or non-traditional surface, further research or testing may be required.

TRANSPARENT VS OPAQUE PAINTS

Most brands of airbrush paint will state whether the paint is transparent or opaque. Regular acrylic paint lines may indicate this as well in their colour swatches. You can mix transparent and opaque colours together to create new colours that can vary in the degree that they are transparent or opaque.

Transparent Colours

Transparent colours are very good for blending and layering. Layering colours allows you to create new ones, such as layering blue on top of yellow to produce green. Transparent colours tend to be glossier than opaque colours and have more depth of colour when layered. Transparent colours are not recommended where solid coverage is needed, or as a base ground to paint on.

Opaque Colours

Opaque colours are good for covering areas with a solid, even colour. Opaque Colours work very well as a base colour where a transparent colour would require a lot of layers to cover evenly. Opaque colours tend to be less glossy than transparent colours and do not have depth of colour (flat).

AIRBRUSH ACCESSORIES

COMPRESSORS & AIR SOURCES

The best airbrushes allow you to control the amount of air being fed into the airbrush. In most cases, airbrushes work best at 35–40 PSI (pounds per square inch). However, for custom, detailed work, having a much lower air pressure can help reduce the possibility of spraying too much air or paint on a project. When you need this kind of control over your air pressure, a compressor is the way to go.

A good compressor will have a moisture trap, that simply helps prevent moisture from working its way into the airbrush and mixing with the paint. If you're working

in a house, studio, or any other space where noise might be an issue, you might consider a silent compressor. Such compressors feature a built-in tank that will hold air and turn on as needed, allowing them to work with much less noise.



Many people are tempted to purchase air compressors that are designed for air tools to use with their airbrushes. While these can be adapted to use with an airbrush, they are generally very loud and the air pressure may be inconsistent or too strong.

If a compressor is not available, cans of compressed air can be used, but they do not always provide consistent pressure as they begin to run out of air. The amount of use you can get from a can of air will also vary depending on how you are using your brush. In some cases, where a lot of air is being used to cover large areas, the can will not last long. If you are using cans of air regularly, you should strongly consider purchasing a compressor. It does not take many cans of air to equal the cost of a good compressor.

BOTTLES AND JARS

Different types of bottles for siphon feed airbrushes are available. **Plastic (translucent) bottles** can be used for both solvent and water-based paints. Many of these are designed to be long and narrow, allowing you to get closer to your painting surface than some paint jars might allow. **Clear bottles** are available for water-based paints, where it's necessary to see the colour of the paint.



FILMS & STENCILS

While a good airbrush can provide a wide range of functions, sometimes an accessory tool can help you achieve particular results with much more ease.

Frisket Film

Frisket film is a clear adhesive film that can be applied on top of a painting and cut lightly with a knife to create a stenciled design, allowing you to mask off parts of your surface smoothly and cleanly. There are different types of frisket films available, including film that will stretch over curved surfaces. Once a design has been cut and painted

over, the film is pulled off to reveal the design. Generally frisket film stencils are not reusable.

Free-form Stencils

Free-form stencils are any stencils that are cut to a desired design or shape that can be used repeatedly. Stencils can be purchased in pre-cut designs that have been developed by other artists, or you can make your own stencils by drawing a design on a blank piece of stencil film and cutting it out. For quick and single-use stencils, paper or card stock can work well but it will not last as long as something made from stencil film.

Free-form stencils can be mounted to your surface by using low-tack spray adhesive, or they can simply be held in place with your hand. Found objects can be used to paint an interesting edge or shape while things that can be painted through (fabric lace, or mesh) can give interesting effects that a cut stencil cannot provide. Tapes are also useful. Low-Tack masking tapes can be a good way to block out areas or shape. When curved edges are desired, flexible masking tapes are very helpful.

HOLDERS & WORKSTATIONS

An airbrush holder (hanger) or workstation is convenient and practical and can be an essential tool in the prevention of damage to your airbrush. A holder or workstation will give you a place to rest your airbrush securely in between use, such as when mixing paint. This will prevent it from getting knocked to the floor and damaging the nozzle. A secure holder also keeps you airbrush upright, ensuring that paint in gravity feed brushes will not spill out from the reservoir. Workstations will accommodate several airbrushes, plus many of your supplies. Some compressors come equipped with airbrush holders. A cleaning station can also act as the holder for your airbrush.



Air-Port Hanger (M) with Magnetic Mount (Korajen Corp./Iwata)

CLEANING & AIRBRUSH CLEANERS

When changing colours while airbrushing, clear the airbrush by spraying some cleaner through it. If you are using water based paints, you can use water between colours to clear out your airbrush. If you are using your airbrush for an extended period of time, spraying cleaner through may help reduce paint build up at the nozzle or in the airbrush.

When clearing out an airbrush to change a colour, or just to clean it, you should use a cleaning station. A **cleaning station** will trap the spray and help filter out pigment that would otherwise be atomized into the air. Most airbrush manufacturers will make a cleaning station that is designed to hold their airbrushes. If you are purchasing a cleaning station that is from a different manufacturer, it is good to check to ensure that the airbrush nozzle will fit properly into the station.



It is recommended to always use the appropriate cleaner for the type of paint that is being used, especially with solvent based paints. Most brands of airbrush paint will have their own cleaner available. **Airbrush designated cleaners** should also work well for most water-based (acrylic) paints. Follow the recommendations for cleaning water or solvent-based paints according to the airbrush manufacturer's instructions.

You should thoroughly clean your airbrush when paint begins to accumulate and affect the performance of the airbrush. You should only need to take apart the airbrush where it was in contact with paint, but if in doubt, you can easily take the entire airbrush apart. Most professional airbrushes are made from stainless steel and have Teflon coated parts, making them very easy to clean.

SAFETY

When painting with an airbrush, safety is an important issue. Some paints contain hazardous pigments that when atomized and inhaled, could be harmful to one's health. The best protection when painting with an airbrush is a good **respirator** (not a dust mask) with filters and cartridges that will keep out pigment and vapors. Another way to protect yourself when airbrushing is with good ventilation. This can be done by working outside with a respirator or working with a ventilation system, such as a **spray booth** that will help trap and filter harmful particles.



Suggested Links

<http://www.iwata-medea.com/>
<http://www.iwata-medea.com/resources/start-airbrushing/>
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/airtips.php>

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