



ALL WASHED OUT

Extend the life of your tools through proper maintenance

By Karen Gaspers

Painting contractors know that keeping applicators in top condition is the best way to extend the life of their paintbrushes and rollers. An essential part of maintenance is properly cleaning and storing these all-important tools. Understanding the correct methods for doing so can be the difference between brushes that continue to deliver a high-quality performance over a longer period of time and brushes that break down and need replacing far too often.

CLEANING BRUSHES

No matter how much of a hurry a contractor is in, he or she needs to take the time to thoroughly clean his or her brushes. It helps avoid heel hardening, which can decrease the amount of paint a brush can hold as well as change its stiffness and flex point. According to Tim Klotz, painters apprentice coordinator for the Apprenticeship & Journeyman Training School of the Painting and Decorating Foundation in St. Louis, it usually takes three generous rinses to properly clean a brush.

If right-handed, Klotz said to hold the handle in your right hand and dip the brush deep down into the water or thinner, then bring it up so that the bristles are pointing straight up over the top of the thinner or water. With your left hand, squeeze the bristles so the water or thinner is forced down through the heel of the brush. Between each rinse and at the end, spin the handle of the brush between your palms to remove the excess water or thinner. At the end of the last rinse, there should be no more paint color coming out.

During this process, don't be tempted to kick out your brushes. According to Klotz, removing excess liquid by tapping the

metal ferrule against the raised toe of a work boot is a common practice but a "big no-no." That's because it bends the metal ferrule, and it's the ferrule that holds the bristles straight and in line. A bent ferrule causes the bristles on the bent edge to stick out on the side of the brush like a bad cowlick. Kicking also loosens the tacks that hold the ferrule to the wood, which loosens the whole ferrule and ultimately the bristles from the handle.

Another practice that's hard on brushes is using a wire brush, said Bruce Schneider, training coordinator and end-user marketing manager for Purdy, Portland, Ore. Although common in the industry to remove dried paint or reshape the bristles after spinning, Schneider said using one will ruin a good brush. "While a wire brush will remove the dried paint, it also damages the filament," he said, "and with very high-end paintbrushes, it knocks off the flagged ends that make brushes lay off paint so well."

Instead, Schneider recommended a brush comb. A brush comb cleans the applicator from the inside out and doesn't damage the filaments, he said.

In addition, Klotz offered these cleaning tips from his years of experience:

- When cleaning a natural bristle brush in a hot solvent, such as a lacquer thinner, give the applicator a final rinse in mineral spirits. "The hot solvents take all the oil out of the bristles," Klotz said. "By rinsing in mineral spirits, it helps put some of that back."
- If working with deep-color latex paints, there are some that will require a final rinse in mineral spirits to get thoroughly clean. "I don't know what it is, normally you'd wash it in warm soapy water, but there's something in these deeper paints that will not come out unless you give them a rinse in oil," Klotz said.
- Don't leave brushes soaking overnight in thinner or water. "This disfigures the bristle tips because the weight of the brush is sitting on the bottom of the container," Klotz said. "You can't make a decent edge when the tip is messed up."

STORING BRUSHES

After cleaning, both Schneider and Klotz recommended storing brushes in a wrapper to protect them. The best practice is to save the "keeper" the brush is in at the time of purchase. "The keeper is an

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integral part of the tool and helps the tool maintain its shape,” Schneider said. Unfortunately, the keeper will wear out faster than a properly cared-for brush. When that happens, a piece of glossy paper, such as a magazine page, along with a tape tab will work just fine, both Schneider and Klotz said.

Klotz added that many painters forgo wrapping their brushes if they will be using them the next day. This is so that the brushes can air out. It’s especially important to have dry brushes if a painter will be working overhead the next day – otherwise the thinner or water will start leaking out and down the painter’s arm. But Klotz recommended wrapping clean brushes even in this situation. Just be sure to put the brush in a place where it will get plenty of air so it can dry out, he said. Even better, consider having two sets of brushes. That way each set can be used every other day, giving them plenty of time to dry out between uses, but still keeping them protected, he said.

With synthetic brushes, simply storing them in a keeper after cleaning is all that’s necessary to keep them in working order. However, for brushes made with organic material, a bit more care is required before they are ready to go back in the keeper. Repeated use and cleaning in solvents



will cause the natural oils to leach out of the bristle, Schneider explained. He recommended working a little raw linseed oil or even kerosene into the bristles to keep the hair from drying out and fracturing. For long-term storage, say six months or more, he said most painters will dip the brush in liquid wax to encapsulate the bristles and keep the oils from drying out. Once this is done, the brush can be put back in the keeper.

Schneider also suggested hanging brushes when storing them. “Let gravity work in your favor,” he said. Hanging will help a brush maintain its shape.

Finally, Klotz suggested marking and storing your best brushes separately. “You want to triage your brushes,” he explained. “Use the nicest ones for fine finishes – enamels and varnishes. As they start to wear, you want to use them for applications such as primer and stains – things that don’t matter so much. That way you keep your best brushes and move them down the pecking order. In the end, they become dust brushes after sanding.”

CLEANING ROLLER COVERS

To clean or not to clean is the big question with roller covers, and the answer depends on the situation, Klotz

and Schneider said. Sometimes, it's not worth cleaning them. For example, if a contractor used a roller to apply an oil-based paint and will need to clean the cover with solvents, or when it's more cost-effective to buy a new cover versus paying an employee to clean one. "Most painters will store the roller, in the paint they're using, in a 5-gallon bucket until the job is completed," Schneider noted.

Yet there are situations in which it's wise to clean a roller cover, Klotz said. Two examples are rollers used for fine finishes, such as enamels or varnishes, and rollers used for smooth finishes with dark or glossy colors. "That's when you should clean, because a used cover won't leave lint on the wall," he explained.

Cleaning a roller cover is just like cleaning a brush. Rinse with thinner or soapy water. Spin between each rinse and again at the end to remove the excess liquid. Keep cleaning until no more paint comes out. "One quick rinse usually won't do it," Klotz said. For roller covers, Klotz added that using a

mechanical spinner, which has a higher velocity than a person's hands, is a good choice.

STORING COVERS

After washing a roller cover, Schneider said the most important thing to remember is to not let the cover rest on its side. "It will create a flat spot that will translate to the substrate...thump, thump, thump," Purdy recommends stringing roller covers on a rope or standing them up on dowels to dry. Not only does this avoid the flat spot, it also allows gravity to help pull the thinner or water out of the cover, he said. Once the cover is thoroughly dry, put it back in the bag it came in.

And put it in something where it won't be damaged, Klotz urged. "It gets thrown in the bottom of a box, then you throw a hammer on it, and now it's smashed," he said.

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TIPS OF THE TRADE

They don't have much to do with cleaning and storing brushes or covers, but these two tips from Tim Klotz are worth a mention:

◆ **Clean the roller frame.** It's important to remove the dry paint that builds up around the bearings on the roller frame. If not, the roller will start to stick - freezing up when it should roll. And don't try to fix the problem by adding a few drops of oil, Klotz said. That will result in oil spots on the wall. "The only solution is throwing out the frame. There really is no repairing it."

◆ **Keep a pair of scissors in your tool kit.** Sometimes the bevel on a roller cover, especially an inexpensive one, is not cut off completely straight. That will affect the amount of roller tracks on the wall. Having a pair of scissors handy lets a contractor do a little trimming, Klotz said.

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