

**“Introduction to Japanese *Sumi-e* Ink Painting” by Brenda Jordan, Director,
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In Japan, black is considered a color and black ink is used for both calligraphy and painting. *Sumi* ink is made from the soot of burnt lamp oil or pinewood, combined with animal glue and perfume. It is a water-based medium used to create all sorts of shades and tones, depending on whether the ink is freshly ground from an ink stick or old ink, and on how much water is used in proportion to the ink. Ink traditionally was pressed into cake or stick form; the painter would grind the stick onto an ink stone with water to create various colors of black. More water leads to a lighter color. More ink than water results in rich dark colors.

The brushes used for ink painting are made from animal hair, although some synthetic hair is now available. Types of hair used include squirrel, horse, rabbit, sika deer, tanuki (raccoon dog), and goat. Different hair has different qualities in terms of spring and resilience, and how the brush holds and releases ink. These brushes have a stiff inner core of hairs wrapped in an outer core of softer hairs, resulting in a brush that is flexible and yielding to the hand, and can hold a lot of paint. Traditionally, painters often learned to write using specific strokes for rendering Japanese characters, and many of the same standard strokes were applied to painting landscapes, flowers and birds, and human figures.

Painting was done on silk or paper, both of which were sized to keep ink and colors on the surface rather than sinking through the porous surfaces or smudging. Sizing is the process of applying a solution of glue and alum before painting; this helps the paint/ink to fix onto the paper or silk. Silk is more porous than paper and somewhat water-resistant when sized. Silk requires more painstaking techniques but also lends itself to a richness of colors. A painter might, for example, paint the hairs of a monkey on the back side of a silk format, and then again on the front, resulting in a sense of depth and softness to the monkey's fur. Paper, on the other hand, is more absorbent and lends itself to rapid and spontaneous styles of painting. The paper used, *washi*, is often called “rice paper” in English but actually is made from tree fibers such as the Gampi tree, the Misumata shrub, and Mulberry. Hemp, rice, bamboo and other natural materials are also used, and some papers also include gold and silver flecks, flower petals and bark. This type of paper is made by intertwining fibers, is soft and flexible, and does not yellow and become brittle like the short fibered papers of Europe and North America. It is, however, tasty to insects. Old woodblock prints, for example, may have holes due to having been eaten!

A painter using these materials can create all sorts of effects: tiny irregular dots making up trees and mountains; precise details of flowers, fish, and birds; sweeping splashes of ink to render horses or figures in an abstracted manner; strong lines to emphasize action; soft washes for clouds; layers of lines for fur or hair, etc. Painters used, and still use, these flexible materials to reflect their own style of painting or writing, or even to paint in different artistic styles depending on the type of subject. This expression of personal style is highly valued in East Asia, and a painter or writer's “hand” is considered a reflection of their character.