

Selecting an Airbrush System

Joe Fleming – Airbrushing Wood

If you are in the market for an airbrush, I recommend the following:

- Airbrush brands:
 - Buy quality.
 - Professional grade brushes will range from \$120 to \$600 (brush only). You can do pretty well for under \$220. Iwata, Grex, Harder and Steenbeck are the brands I would recommend.
 - There are some decent hobby grade brushes in the \$60 to \$140. Less expensive brushes tend to have lots of plastic and large fluid nozzles. This means that they don't perform detail work very well. Paasche, Badger, and Iwata have brushes in this range.
 - Avoid knock-off brands: Master, Harbor Freight, Etc. A \$30 airbrush is worth \$30 if you are lucky. Their machining is inferior, and their tolerances and finish are generally poor. They might work for a while, but the performance will deteriorate and the brush will become a maintenance headache. I own several and they are, in my opinion, junk. The aggravation you will get is expensive.

- Compressors:
 - If you buy an airbrush compressor, avoid the little rectangular compressors that cost less than \$100. They do not push out a sufficient amount of air for a good airbrush. They are designed for fingernail manicurists and maybe cake decorators and are to be used for airbrushes with 0.2 needles or smaller.
 - Get a compressor that puts out 0.6 to 0.7 cfm or more at about 50 to 60 psi. This will give you a good range of capability when spraying different viscosity materials. One warning. I would avoid the Master brand compressor that sells for around \$70 to \$80, or similar. They have the correct specs but they have a poor piston design that leads to making "puffs of air" that show up as successive dots of paint when painting fine lines. They also don't last. I have one so I know. I won't give it to a woodworker because I don't want them to be frustrated, so it sits in my classroom arsenal and sees very little action.

- Features in order of importance:
 1. Teflon seals for all of the wet areas of the airbrush. Rubber sucks and most cheap airbrushes use rubber. This is a hard requirement to me.
 2. Get a dual action vs single action. This is a hard requirement to me.
 3. I recommend a 0.3mm needle/nozzle to start. Avoid 0.5mm and larger for the first needle/nozzle (too big and can't do detail work). 0.2mm will struggle with some paints and finishes (too small).

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4. Top gravity feed vs siphon/bottle/side gravity. Side/bottom/siphon have these disadvantages for woodturners despite what Nick Agar says:
 - We generally only use a few drops of color at a time. If you fill the color cup to the top, you waste a lot of paint. If you use up the five drops, add five more drops. For dye, Joe's rule is 10 drops. We are woodturners, we are inherently frugal.
 - **BTW - Joe's rule of what to do with excess paint: Dump it out. NEVER, NEVER, NEVER pour it back into the bottle. Why? Risk of color contamination, risk of foreign debris into the paint, risk of dried bits of paint getting back into the bottle. Dried paint does not dissolve in the paint. It stays solid and will plug up your airbrush on subsequent uses. This really sucks when it happens in a demo in front of 50 people. Believe me - I have experience on this one.**
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 - In order for a bottom/side/siphon to work, the entire paint channel needs to have paint in it. This is ALWAYS more than 5 drops. Built-in waste.
 - Those siphon tubes are a pain to clean. We are woodturners and we are inherently lazy.
 - I find that the friction fit of a lot of the siphon cups and bottles to be problematic to stay put. More than once, I've had one fall off. Big mess. We are woodturners and we are inherently adverse to unnecessary cleaning. I've seen my share of shops. I know this to me true.
 - Siphon/side/bottom cups get in my way for the style of painting we do. I find them awkward. We are woodturners and if a tool is more trouble than its worth, we won't use it which means a waste of money (now we are back to frugal).
5. Needle travel limiting adjustment (this is a knob on the back of the handle)
6. Crown needle cover vs cone needle cover