

Cleaning Paintbrushes and Rollers



A spinner makes quick work of a messy task

by Johnathan Roger Foster

In a house painter, and over the years I've found that a lot of people, even those in the building trades, don't know how to clean their painting equipment. Try lending out your brushes, and you'll get promised to the high heavens that your brushes will come back as "good as new." In the worst of cases, you'll get back an object that can no longer truly be referred to as a brush. Granted, it may look like one, but what once was an ordered collection of soft, pliable and distinct bristles has become a solid, unified mass that spreads paint about as well as a putty knife. This sorry scenario is unnecessary because cleaning paintbrushes and roller covers is simple; it just takes the right equipment (photo above) and a little time. I'll begin by explaining how to clean tools used with oil-based paint.

Brush cleaning—Cleaning brushes involves putting them through three or more solvent rinses. But before you use any solvent, use a putty knife or a rag to scrape or wipe any excess paint buildup off the brush, especially around the heel,

Brash and roller cleaning tools. From the left in the photo above: a roller scraper and, below it, a three-in-one, a brush and roller spinner, a wire brush, an organic-vapor respirator and, below it, a pair of acid-resistant gloves. On the far right is a roller pan.

where the bristles go into the ferrule—the metal band that wraps the bristles.

Next, put on your gloves and organic-vapor respirator and pour some thinner into a roller pan. If you have any used or dirty thinner (more on this later), it's smart to use it for the first rinse. Thinner is not cheap or convenient to dispose of, and dirty thinner will work for a first rinse.

If you're in no hurry, let the brush soak for a few minutes in the thinner. Spread the bristles out by swishing the brush around in the solvent. Work the solvent into the heel of the brush. Next, use a wire brush to loosen up and remove paint from around the heel of the paintbrush. Brush at a 45° angle—in one direction only—away from the handle toward the tips of the bristles. Use the

wire brush around the entire heel of the paintbrush, flat sides and edges alike. Once this is done, dip the brush into the thinner, and while holding the brush handle in one hand, use your other hand to bend the bristles back toward the handle about 45° to 90°. This action forces thinner into the heel of the brush. Again, soak thinner into the bristles, then bend them back. Soak, then bend. Do this about 20 to 30 times.

Then push the paintbrush handle into the tang at the end of the spinner (top photo, facing page). A spinner will cost you about \$30, but it's worth it if you have good equipment or if you paint more than just occasionally. Make sure you force the handle all the way up. The end of the paintbrush handle should be held by a smaller pair of tangs within the end of the spinner. Spin the brush out in a bucket or a trash can. I like to use a 5-gal. drywall bucket (middle photo, facing page). Make sure you hold the brush down toward the bottom of the bucket because the action of the spinner will fling paint and thinner everywhere. I recommend using eye protection.

I wear glasses, and they've saved me from getting thinner in my eyes. If you don't have a spinner, you can spin the brush by twirling the handle back and forth between your palms.

Subsequent rinses follow the same scenario as the first. If you have slightly used thinner, use it for the second rinse. Repeat the cycle of forcing thinner into the brush and spinning it out.

For the third (and possibly fourth and fifth) rinses, you should use clean thinner. Put the brush through as many rinses as it takes to get it clean. If the brush isn't new and has a lot of paint in the heel, it may need four or five rinses. You'll know the brush is clean when you see no, or at least very little, dirty thinner come out of the brush as you force thinner into the heel.

Cleaning roller covers—The process of cleaning roller covers is similar to cleaning brushes. Again, be sure to wear gloves and a respirator. Before I start with the solvent, I scrape any excess paint off the roller with either a roller scraper or a three-in-one (bottom photo, right). A roller scraper costs about 50¢, and it's curved to fit the diameter of a roller cover. A three-in-one also has a curved edge for scraping roller covers, but it also has a handy hook and a blade that are useful for scraping built-up paint off a brush ferrule, scraping paint out of corners, and it can be used as a putty knife in a pinch—all sorts of messy tasks. A three-in-one will cost you about \$5.

For the first rinse, soak the cover for five or 10 minutes in some used thinner to make things easier. If the roller cover has paint inside the cover, wipe it out with a rag. Hold the roller cover with both hands and use a wringing or twisting motion (like gunning a motorcycle) to work thinner into the nap of the roller cover. After you've wrung most of the paint out of the roller cover, slip it onto the spinner and let her rip. Keep the cover well down in the 5-gal. bucket when you spin it out. Again, repeat the process, using cleaner thinner for each subsequent rinse.

Covers don't clean up as well as brushes, so don't try to get every last bit of paint out of them. This is especially true when the nap of the roller cover is $\frac{3}{4}$ in. or more. If you don't have a spinner, an alternative is to work the cover in thinner repeatedly and then instead of spinning out the cover, scrape it out with a roller scraper or a three-in-one. Admittedly, the results won't be as good as they would be with a spinner, but this is what I do in a pinch, and well, it'll do.

Here's something to consider. A roller cover is cheaper than a good paintbrush; it usually costs \$4 or less. It will take about 10 minutes and at least a quart of thinner to clean up a roller cover. One guy I worked with figured out that it was cheaper for him to throw away roller covers and buy new ones than it was to spend the time and the materials to clean them. Of course, if you have an expensive ram's wool or mohair cover, it's a different story. And one advantage of a well-used cover is that it leaves a lot less fiber and junk behind when you roll out a coat of paint.

If you're cleaning several brushes and roller covers at once, you can run everything through the same batch of thinner with each rinse to cut down on the amount of thinner you'll use.



A spinner firmly holds a paintbrush in its two sets of metal tangs. A roller cover fits over the tangs for spinning. A spinner costs about \$30.



Centrifugal force flings paint and solvent off a brush or a roller cover when you use a spinner. Keep the brush or roller cover toward the bottom of the bucket when you spin it.



A three-in-one is handy for scraping excess paint off a roller cover. A blade on the end of the tool is good for removing partially dried paint from a paintbrush ferrule or for opening cans of paint. A three-in-one costs about \$5.

Once your brushes are clean, put them in their covers or fold a half sheet of newspaper around them, which will help them maintain their shape. Let your roller covers dry, then put them in the plastic slip covers they come in, or do what I do and keep all your covers in a plastic garbage bag.

You'll know how good a job you've done cleaning a brush the next time you use it. The bristles should be soft and should move freely. They should not be stiff and stuck together. If you have to break the bristles loose when you take the brush out of the cover, you'll know you should have cleaned it a little more.

Cleaning out latex paint—Cleaning brushes and rollers used with latex paint is done in the same way as cleaning oil-based paints, but latex is easier to clean out. For starters, it's not necessary to wear gloves. And you can clean a brush or a roller in a sink under running water. Just work the tool in running water, then spin it out. Sometimes I use dish soap to help the cleaning process. It's not a good idea to use a kitchen sink that has rubber flaps covering a disposal unit because latex paint tends to stain the rubber. If there's not a sink handy, you can always use a hose and a bucket. Another nice thing about cleaning up after latex paint is that there's no paint thinner to deal with after you're through.

Paint thinner and other solvents—It is considered safe, while cleaning painting equipment, to wash small amounts of latex paint down the drain, but paint thinner and solvents like toluene and xylene are problems. Paint thinner is a hazardous substance, and it is illegal to dump it out back somewhere or pour it down the sink.

Because of the cost and the aggravation of getting rid of used paint thinner, I recycle as much of my used thinner as I can. I pour waste thinner into a 5-gal. bucket, put a cover on it and let the sediment settle (a coffee can works fine if you're dealing with smaller amounts of thinner than I am). In a month or two I pour the clear liquid into the original containers for reuse. I break up the remaining sediment, which has the consistency of soft chalk or clay, and leave it out until it is bone dry, then I throw it away.

Throwing out the dry sediment is technically and legally allowable. (The only harmful solids that I'm aware of are found in lead paints, which have been outlawed for all or nearly all applications.) Of most concern is the solvent or liquid part of the paint, and that is why I let the sediment get bone dry before I throw it away. When I throw sediment away, I ask myself whether the stuff is dry enough to put into the water table I'm going to be drinking out of because that is exactly what I'm doing.

In my locality a person can make an appointment to take used thinner to the county health department for disposal. The thinner is blended with fuel and is used to fire a cement kiln. Your local health department can tell you how to get rid of used thinner responsibly in your area. □

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