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## THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-QUALITY APPLICATORS

The quality of the applicators used during a painting project can have a significant impact on the final appearance and performance of a coating system. While considerable attention is often given to selecting high-quality paints, the tools used to apply those coatings are equally important.

Brushes and rollers are the primary means of applying architectural coatings, and their design, construction, and quality can directly influence film build, coverage, surface appearance, and application efficiency. Even when high-performance coatings are used, poor-quality or inappropriate applicators can result in unsatisfactory results.

Using properly designed and well-maintained applicators helps ensure that coatings are applied at the intended film thickness and produce the appearance and durability expected from the coating system. costs.

### The Impact of Applicator Quality on Coating Performance

Coating manufacturers formulate coatings with specific application characteristics in mind. These characteristics assume that coatings will be applied using appropriate tools capable of delivering the recommended spread rate and film thickness.

Low-quality applicators can lead to several issues, including uneven coverage, reduced hiding power, inconsistent film thickness, excessive stipple or texture, lint contamination from rollers, and brush marks or poor leveling. In some cases, these problems may be incorrectly attributed to the paint itself when the root cause is actually related to the applicator.

Although high-quality applicators typically cost more than lower-cost options, the added expense is often justified by the improved finished result, better application control, and longer service life. High-quality brushes and rollers are generally designed for repeated use and tend to maintain their performance better over the course of a project or over multiple projects when properly cleaned and stored.

### Roller Covers: Nap Selection, Fabric Type, and Quality

Roller covers are widely used for applying paint to large surfaces such as walls and ceilings. Two of the most important considerations when selecting a roller cover are nap length and fabric type, both of which influence application efficiency and final finish appearance.

Nap length refers to the thickness of the roller fibers and determines how much paint the roller can hold and how effectively it can deliver paint to the surface. Selecting the wrong nap length can lead to application problems. If the nap is too short for a rough surface, the roller may not deliver enough paint

to properly cover the surface texture, resulting in poor hide and missed areas. Conversely, if the nap is too long for a smooth surface, it can create excessive stipple or texture in the coating film.

Typical nap guidelines include:

Surface Type	Recommended Nap Length
Smooth surfaces (drywall, smooth plaster, metal)	3/8 inch
Lightly textured surfaces	1/2 inch
Medium textured surfaces (stucco, textured drywall)	3/4 inch
Rough surfaces (block, masonry)	1 inch or greater

In addition to nap length, fabric type plays a major role in both productivity and finish quality (Figure 1). Woven roller covers, including microfiber and mohair, are designed to minimize lint and provide a smoother, more uniform finish. These covers are often preferred when applying primers and coatings with glossier sheens, such as enamels, because they shed less fiber and help produce a cleaner appearance.

Knit roller covers, such as polyester and lambswool, have a more open fabric construction that allows them to pick up and release greater amounts of paint. This can improve production rates and make them well suited for covering large areas more quickly, although they typically leave more stipple than woven covers. Oil-based and water-based paints are commonly applied using knit roller covers when greater paint loading and faster coverage are desired.

## Roller Cover Fabric Types

Woven Fabrics	Knit Fabrics
<i>Smooth Finish / Low Lint</i>	<i>High Paint Capacity / More Texture</i>
<p><b>Examples:</b> Microfiber, Mohair</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smooth, Tight Weave</li> <li>Minimal Lint Shedding</li> <li>Very Smooth Finish</li> <li>Lower Paint Loading</li> </ul> <p><b>Best For:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Glossy Paints &amp; Enamels</li> <li>Cabinets, Doors &amp; Trim</li> <li>Smooth Surfaces</li> <li>Smooth Surfaces</li> </ul>	<p><b>Examples:</b> Polyester, Lambswool</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open, Lofted Fabric</li> <li>Holds More Paint</li> <li>Faster Coverage</li> <li>More Stipple Effect</li> </ul> <p><b>Best For:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large Walls &amp; Ceilings</li> <li>Rough &amp; Textured Surfaces</li> <li>High Coverage Areas</li> <li>High Coverage Areas</li> </ul>

Woven rollers provide a smooth finish with less lint. Knit rollers hold more paint for faster coverage.

**Figure 1**

Roller cover quality is also an important factor. Higher-quality roller covers are designed to provide consistent paint pickup and release, reduced lint shedding, better durability during extended use, and more uniform finish quality. They are typically manufactured with better fabric construction and more secure fiber attachment, which helps keep the roller material intact during use and reduces the likelihood of fibers shedding into the wet paint film.

By contrast, lower-cost roller covers are more likely to have issues with lint, fiber shedding, or poor paint release, which can leave visible debris embedded in the finish and negatively affect the final appearance. In addition, some lower-grade roller covers may not hold up as well during use, leading to matting, uneven application, or premature wear. Although higher-quality applicators may cost more initially, they are often worth the investment because they provide better results and are typically designed for repeated use.

## **Brush Selection: Material and Design**

Brushes remain essential tools for detail work, cutting in around edges, and coating smaller surfaces, and their performance depends heavily on the bristle material and filament stiffness. Because most architectural coatings today are water-based, synthetic bristle brushes—typically made from nylon, polyester, or a blend of the two—are generally recommended. Nylon brushes tend to be more flexible and provide a smooth application, making them well suited for interior painting and other smooth surfaces. Polyester brushes are usually stiffer, which helps when working on rougher substrates or applying thicker coatings. Many high-quality brushes combine nylon and polyester filaments to balance flexibility and stiffness, offering good control and durability across a wide range of applications.

Brush stiffness also plays a major role in how a coating is applied. Stiffer brushes can be advantageous on rough surfaces, with heavier-bodied coatings, or in exterior conditions where greater control is needed. Softer brushes are often preferred for smooth interior surfaces, fine-finish work, trim, and cabinetry because they allow for more delicate film formation. Choosing the right stiffness helps ensure good paint pickup, controlled release, and a smooth, uniform finish.

Higher-quality brushes also tend to hold their filaments better and are constructed more consistently, reducing the likelihood of loose bristles shedding into the coating. Lower-cost brushes are more prone to shedding, which can create appearance defects and require rework to remove embedded fibers from the paint film.

## **Matching Applicators to the Coating and Surface**

Different coatings and substrates call for different applicator characteristics, and matching them correctly helps ensure a uniform film and proper thickness. Thick, high-build coatings often need rollers with a heavier nap and brushes with more stiffness, while smooth interior wall paints tend to work best with shorter-nap rollers and softer brushes that leave a finer finish. Rough masonry surfaces benefit from longer-nap rollers that can reach into surface irregularities. Using applicators suited to both the coating type and the surface condition makes it much easier to achieve consistent, reliable results.

## Applicator Maintenance and Preparation

Proper preparation and maintenance of applicators also contribute to better painting results.

Recommended practices include:

- Pre-wetting brushes and rollers before use
- Removing loose lint from new roller covers
- Cleaning applicators thoroughly between uses
- Replacing worn or damaged applicators

## Key Takeaways

The performance of architectural coatings depends not only on the quality of the paint itself, but also on the tools used to apply it. High-quality brushes and rollers play an essential role in achieving proper film thickness, consistent coverage, and a uniform appearance.

Using the wrong applicators or low-quality tools can lead to application defects, reduced hiding power, and inconsistent finishes, even when premium coatings are used. Although better applicators may cost more initially, they typically provide better results, greater durability, and improved value through repeated use. High-quality rollers are less likely to shed lint, and high-quality brushes are less likely to lose bristles into the paint film. These advantages help reduce rework and contribute to a cleaner, more professional finish.

By selecting appropriate roller nap lengths, choosing the correct brush and stiffness, and using well-constructed applicators, painting professionals can help ensure that coating systems perform as intended and deliver the desired results.

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