Brushes

Learning how to use and control brushes is important as they are used not only for drawing and painting but for things like erasing and selecting too – the selection brush, the eraser, the spot healing brush, the blur tool, the sponge tool, the clone stamp etc all use brush options. We'll start by looking at the brush tool itself.

You can select the brush tool from the toolbox or you can use the keyboard shortcut, B. As usual there are Options that relate to the tool such as shape and size. You can change the size by dragging the slider or by typing in a number. Brushes use the foreground colour so, if you want to change the colour your brush is using then this is where you set it.

First, let's have a look at the brushes that come with Elements. On the left hand side of the Options bar you'll find a drop down box which is the brush picker and initially it contains the default brushes. These range from the standard hard round and soft round brushes in various sizes to more unusual ones like spatter brushes and novelty brushes like leaves and grasses, which act more like stamps. As usual, if you hover your mouse over a brush it will give you a description. Although many brushes come with a specified size you can change this from the Options bar.

However, inside the brush picker is a drop down list of more brush libraries – very few people I've taught have realised that these are even here. I'm not going to go through them all but I just want to point out some of my favourites. Do have a look at Calligraphic brushes where you'll find brushes that mimic the thick and thin strokes from a wide nibbed Italic pen. The Dry Media, Faux Finish and Wet Media brushes contain some interesting textures. Some brushes look very different at different sizes so do try as many variations as you have time for.

In the brush picker is a list of display and save options indicated by the double right-hand arrow. The default display is Small Thumbnail. I don't know if it's an age thing but I now prefer to use Large Thumbnails – I can see much better what each brush will look like when I'm using it.

Two of the brush Options are Mode, which refers to blending modes, and opacity, which you've come across when we looked at layers. I would strongly recommend that you don't use these with a brush. To my mind it's much

better to put brush strokes on a separate layer and use the layer's blending modes (which we'll look at in a separate tutorial) and opacity. This gives you the possibility to change your mind at a later date. Say you are creating a collage; you might have a photographic background and then want to add some brush lines. If you add the lines on to your background layer using a particular opacity then you can't later strengthen the lines, without re-doing them. You also can't add other elements between the background and the lines.

Lastly, on the right-hand side of the Options bar is a brush symbol. If you click on this you will get a drop-down list of what are called brush dynamics. These are great! You will really need to spend some time playing with these and observing what the effect of each one is.

Remember that any line you draw with the brush tool is actually made up of a series of individual elements. These elements can be affected by the settings you use. All will become clear …

➢ Fade – this setting lets you determine how soon in a stroke the 'ink' will run out and the line fade away. A low number means that the stroke fades quickly and a higher number means it fades more slowly. Rather weirdly a setting of zero gives no fade at all. So zero sets no fade at all and one is the maximum fade – who thought that one up!

➢ Hue Jitter – this setting lets you draw/paint using a mixture of the foreground and background colours. So, say you set the foreground colour to red and the background colour to green, then your strokes will include both these colours plus varying mixtures of the two.

➢ Scatter – this determines how strictly the elements of your line stick to the line of your stroke. This is usually most visible with special effects brushes like the maple leaf but can give really interesting effects when applied to brushes that wouldn't usually have them such as a hard round brush.

➢ Spacing – this affects the distance between the brush elements during a single stroke. If you select a round, hard brush and set the spacing to a number bigger than zero then your stroke will start to read as a series of dots rather than a continuous line,

➢ Hardness – this affects how much feather is added to the stroke. So, the less the hardness set, the fuzzier the edge of the line. Although I haven't been through ALL the brushes to check, the hardness setting only seems to be available on the standard round brushes.

➢ Angle – this setting lets you change the angle of a line element. Obviously this will not do much to a round brush but does have an effect on special effects brushes.

If you come across a combination of brush/settings that you particularly like, print a sample of it along with the settings you used. There are SO many combinations that it may take you some time to work out how you got it last time. How do I know that – yup, I really must follow my own advice!

Don't forget that if you have been playing round with a lot of settings you might want to put everything back to the defaults – you can do this with the little triangle at the far left of the Options Bar – Reset this Tool.

When I was doing some research for this tutorial I found a few tricks and tips, some that I already knew and some I hadn't come across before – some are specific to brushes and some work with other tools as well.

Notes:

➢ To create a straight line – shift-drag or click once at the starting point then hold the shift key down and click again at the end point.

➢ To increase/decrease the brush size, you can use the square bracket keys – the left hand square bracket decreases the brush size and the right-hand square bracket increases the brush size. The amount of change depends on the original size of the brush. Small brushes change by 5 pixels at a time, medium brushes by 10 pixels at a time and bigger ones by 25 pixels at a time.

➢ If you have a tool selected that uses a brush then you can right-click on the image to get the brush picker rather than having to go to the Options bar.

Create a custom brush

Although there are many brushes already in Elements and others can be downloaded, it's really nice to be able to create your own that you can then keep and use in the future.

This is a 2 stage process – first you create your brush and then you save it for future use.

Create the brush – the sequence is the same if you use a whole image or a selection but whichever you use, the longest side must be less than 2500 pixels.

➢ Edit > define brush – this option is greyed out if your selection/image is bigger than 2500 pixels. Give the brush a relevant name and click on OK. This step only creates the new brush it does not save it for future use.

Note that the new brush will be created in the active brush library.

Save the brush

➢ Edit > preset manager. Click on the brush you've just created.

➢ Click Save Set button. At his stage you can either create a new brush library – libraries have the extension .abr – or you can select a library you have created previously. You will need to restart Elements to see the new brush library in the brush picker

You can save your new library/brush somewhere other than the default folder location but it won't then appear in the brushes drop down list unless you manually load it..

If you edit an existing brush and want to save the modified version to use later, then you can save it to a new name by using the method above.

I must admit I found the Preset Manager tricky to start with but, as long as you follow the instructions above carefully, you should be ok.

Now to finish off this tutorial I just want to have a quick look at a couple of other tools that use brush options. First the **Selection brush** which is under the Quick Selection tool – keyboard shortcut A. This tool simply takes any brush stroke(s) and makes it/them a selection. Don't forget that you have a myriad of brush shapes and sizes to use but you'll notice that you don't have the brush dynamics options, apart from hardness.

The other tool I want to mention here is the **Eraser** – keyboard shortcut E. This also uses brush options so you can select the shape that you are going to remove**.**

Remember that the eraser uses the background colour set at the bottom of the toolbox.

Assignments:

1. Select your favourite six brush/settings combinations with a sample of the result and a note of how you achieved it.

2. Create a custom brush of your own and then create a void image using your brush. The effect of a void image is that you appear to be looking into the centre of the image. For example looking into a cave mouth or looking between trees to a view beyond. This does not need to be figurative – I just want the impression of depth.

   Tips:
   ➢ Larger images appear to come forward and smaller ones recede.
   ➢ Full opacity tends to indicate something close and misty appears to recede.
   ➢ Warm colours tend to look close, whereas cooler colours recede.

3. Create a simple landscape using ONLY the brush tool. This can be as abstract or as figurative as you like. You can use a photograph as your inspiration or you can work entirely from your imagination.