

Graeme Harris visits the factories of da Vinci and Schmincke

In January 2008 I was privileged to visit two highly respected German manufacturers of artists' materials, Schmincke and da Vinci, both recent additions to the Gordon Harris stable of world-leading art material brands.



Above: Herr Defet (right), owner of the da Vinci brush company, shows Graeme Harris how he personally quality checks each da Vinci Maestro brush.



A da Vinci brushmaker hand-making sable brushes at their factory in Nuremberg.



Master Brushmaker, Mannela Scharf (right) putting her 24 years brushmaking experience to the creation of a top of the range da Vinci Maestro Series 11 no. 16 Kolinsky Sable brush.

da Vinci

Nuremberg, famous for its castle and historic walled city, infamous for the Nuremberg trials, has been a centre of European brushmaking since the early 1800's. Brushmakers, da Vinci-Defet trace their company history back to 1890 and are committed to continuing this rich heritage of manufacturing in Nuremberg. To the amazement of its competitors da Vinci has invested heavily in a new factory – not in China – but in Nuremberg. New custom-designed machines automate the manufacture of synthetic hair brushes, contrasting with the hushed atmosphere of the nearby brushmakers room where the nimble fingers of the professional brushmakers create all of the natural hair brushes.

Herr Defet, now in his 80's, comes in to the factory every day and sitting at his table in the brushmakers room performs the final quality inspection of every da Vinci Maestro brush. Any aberrant hairs that will not conform to create the perfect brush tip are deftly removed with a quick flick of Herr Defet's small knife. The evening before my visit to the new factory I was invited to visit the old da Vinci brush factory. Now transformed in to Gallery Defet, I encountered large numbers of the local art scene attending an opening. The exhibition, "Ende einer Dienstzeit" was to

honour the retirement of a Professor Dienst from the Art Akademie and included one piece each from many of the students he had taught over his career. The Professor's name, Dienst, translates to Service, and the exhibition title – End of Service.

Along with Gallery Defet the factory conversion includes attractive studio spaces rented to artists at economical rates. Herr and Frau Defet (an artist herself) have been consistent supporters of the arts over some decades. The corridors and offices of the new factory building are lined with art collected over the years.

da Vinci have bet the company on a dual strategy of high-tech efficiency and hand craftsmanship to uphold their core values of quality and Made in Germany. There is a certain re-assurance in knowing that if you spend your hard earned cash on a da Vinci brush it had to get past Herr Defet's critical and exacting eye first.

Schmincke

Like da Vinci, the famous artists' brand Schmincke encompasses a rich history of artists' materials manufacturing, dating back to 1881. The two companies also share a commitment to producing products of the highest possible quality and

making all of their products in Germany. Automation is used where efficiencies can be gained, but never at the expense of product quality.

"We engaged two PhD students from the University to design a machine to automate the manufacture of Schmincke's highly-regarded, but painstakingly handmade, Soft Pastels", explained Nils Knappe, Managing Director of H. Schmincke & Co. After some months the students reappeared with their design for the machine. "It will work extremely well", they promised, "there is only one hitch, you will need to make the pastels harder". "No thanks", was the prompt answer from Schmincke.

Throughout my tour of the factory it was the same care and commitment to the quality of the end product – the paint or pastel an artist may use to create a wonderful piece of art - that shone through. Taking the extra time required to mill a colour up to 7 times to reach the optimum level of fineness, storing oil paints for 3 to 4 months in order to remove excess oil so that only the necessary amount ends up in the tube, a production/filling time of 3-5 months for each pan of watercolour. This care and time spent, together with the use of only the best raw materials and generations of traditional know-how, are the reasons the products made in this smallish factory in Dusseldorf are used by artists in almost every country in the world.



Schmincke pastels being hand crafted at their factory in Dusseldorf.