

A new face to go with a new home

Creative Software
Corel Painter 8

by Lidka Schuch

In early May, Corel released what could be the hottest Painter upgrade yet. Shortly thereafter, it was announced that the company, which had peaked just 30 months ago at a total market value of over US\$400 million, had been sold to San Francisco-based Vector Capital for about a quarter of that amount.

I remember many years ago when I got my first trial version of Painter 2 (at that time it was under the Fractal Design banner). Ten minutes of playing with Painter's natural media brushes was enough to sweep me off my feet forever. It's not only sad that Corel Corporation is no longer Canadian-owned, it's also too bad that, after changing hands so many times, a wonderfully unique program like Painter still doesn't get the recognition it deserves.

A FACELIFT BRINGS PAINTER UP TO INDUSTRY STANDARDS

The most important part of this upgrade is Painter's sleek new interface, finally standardized to conform with other products. In truth, it makes the program almost unrecognizable.

The **Tool Palette** now has standard dimensions (elongated, vertical, rectangle), and by default appears in the top left corner of the monitor. Tools are grouped by function, and there are now Primary and Secondary Color swatches. Remember the old, clunky Art Materials palette? All its default selectors (Paper, Gradient, Pattern, Weave, Look and Nozzle) are now incorporated into the Tool Box.

Painter now has more palettes than ever before, but they can be collapsed into the title bar (CorelDraw was the first program to have this design, a long time ago), grouped or ungrouped, hidden or re-

vealed. In combination with the Property Bar, which displays options for each selected tool, this makes the work area far less cluttered.

The **Property Bar**, broadly advertised by Adobe as Photoshop's Options Bar, has been part of CorelDraw's interface since its beginning about sixteen years ago. It's unfortunate that it took three upgrades under the Corel banner to finally incorporate this ingenious idea into Painter. The Property Bar greatly simplifies changing tool settings because all controls are always in the same place.

IT'S ALL ABOUT PAINTING

It has never been easier to create Painter brushes and keep track of them. If Painter's standard brushes weren't enough, you could always make your own (and what artist wouldn't try?). The problem has been not just understanding how the sixteen control sets affect a brush, but also how to hunt for the controls among the many palettes.

Brush Creator makes this all quite simple. Not only can all brush controls be found in the same place, but Painter can also generate random stroke variations, including hybrids made from two selected brushes.

Brush Tracker remembers the last 25 brushes used, and they can be saved for reuse. This helps a great deal if you're dealing with 400 brushes and their endless variations.

Color Mixer is designed to simulate the experience of blending colors; it's as close to real life as it can get in the digital world. And you can add a new swatch to the Color Set palette.

Digital Water Color media is the only new category of brushes. Unlike the existing Water Color media, Digital Water Color brush strokes can be mixed and blended with any other brush category (no special layer is needed), but there are only two controls — diffusion and wet fringe — resulting in effects that are not-so-realistic.

Over the years, each version of Painter has introduced a new effect, and this upgrade is no different. **Sketch Effect** is an amazing filter that will change any image into an artistic-looking drawing based on the set values of sensitivity, smoothing and threshold controls.

AND IT'S ALL ABOUT COMPATIBILITY

These improvements make Painter fully compatible with Adobe Photoshop and a perfect companion program for anyone who dabbles.

Alpha Channels are now easy to understand and use, and the palette looks almost like Photoshop's. However, there is a maxi-



COREL PAINTER 8

System requirements

Macintosh

Power Mac G3 or better
Mac OS 9.2.2 or higher, Mac OS X.2 or higher
128MB RAM
Minimum 1024x768 resolution, 24-bit
Wacom tablet recommended

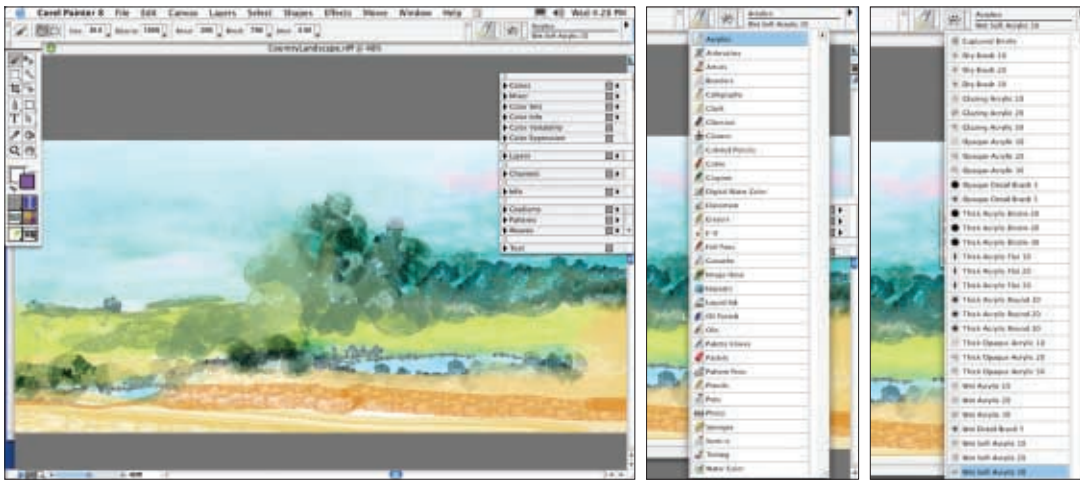
Windows

200 MHz or higher Pentium processor
Windows 2000 or XP
128MB RAM
Minimum 1024x768 resolution, 24-bit
Wacom tablet recommended

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Corel
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Painter 8's *INTERFACE* is now clean, simple and up to standards, and the *Property Bar* makes it a breeze to choose any of the astonishing 400 variants of natural media brushes. Simply select the *Brush tool* and choose the brush category and variant from the two pulldown lists.

num of only 32 channels permitted, and there are still no color separation channels (RGB channel is a composite of all three colors).

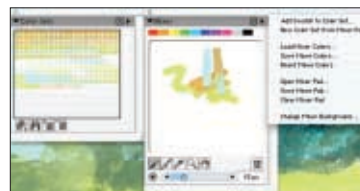
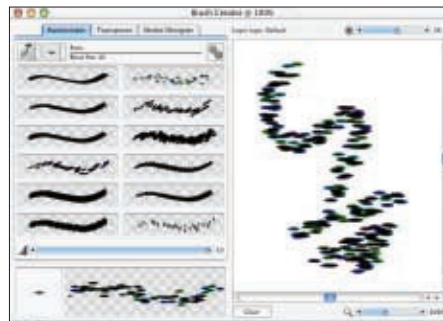
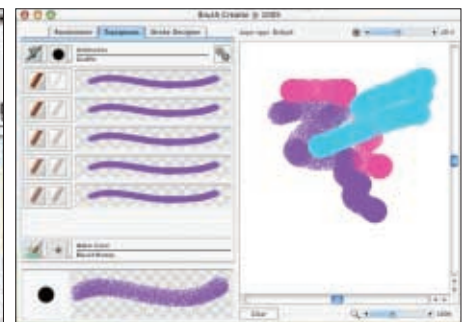
Layer Mask also works the same as in Photoshop — you can hide or reveal areas of an image by painting or removing the mask.

Layers can now be grouped into sets, just as in Photoshop — and yes, they do get transferred this way to Photoshop.

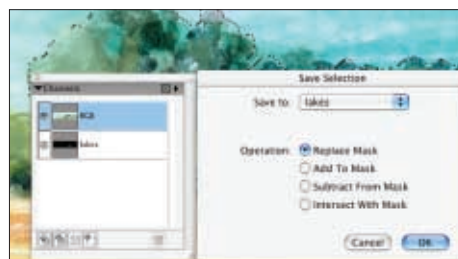
However, as with the previous upgrade, performance isn't perfect. It seems as if the more complex Painter becomes, the less reliable it is. The last version often crashed for no reason, and it didn't like Suitcase 9 at all. This version doesn't crash (at least not on OS X) but there are reports of Painter 8 just vanishing, taking unsaved changes with it (see Tom Arah's report at www.designer-info.com/Photo/painter.html). And we never managed to get layer masks to behave properly.

Nevertheless, this version has brought Painter right up to industry standards. Its unique set of tools at a price of only US\$299/~CDN\$400 (or US\$149 to upgrade from v7) makes this program a real steal — so I just hope this review doesn't wind up being a eulogy. 🙄

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Both **BRUSH CREATOR** and **TRACKER** can be found in the *Window* pulldown menu. Use the *Stroke Designer* to design the stroke, the *Randomize* tab to choose between randomly generated variations of the created stroke, and the *Transpose* tab to merge two different brushes. Brush Tracker keeps track of the last 25 brushes used, and brushes can be saved. You can use the **COLOR MIXER** to create blends of colors. Hold *Option* (Mac) or *Alt* (Windows) and click with the *Eyedropper* to source a color from the existing image.



Selections can be saved and loaded by clicking the icons on the *Channels* palette and using settings in the resulting dialogue window which are similar to Photoshop.