Corel Painter 2020 review

Corel Painter 2020 finally tames the digital painting software's famously messy UI, and adds much-needed performance improvements through GPU support.

Corel Painter 2020 is now available and after last year's version – called Painter 2019 – introduced a Dark UI theme and performance improvements, it looks like Corel has decided to again concentrate on making the user experience a key focus. This year's version – with next year's name – brings improved brush selection, a revamped property bar, universal colour selection and colour harmonies and a really big deal: GPU acceleration.

At first glance I wasn't exactly overwhelmed with what was on offer with Painter 2020. I do feel that these versions come round too often and some could be pushed out as updates rather than making users pay for upgrades – but I will admit to be being pleasantly surprised at just how much better 2020 works. This is mainly down to the new performance optimisations and the introduction of the new Brush Accelerator, which evaluates your system and applies the optimal settings to allow Painter the best performance from your CPU and GPU.

How to use Corel Painter 2020's Brush Accelerator

The Acceleration engine can be accessed from the Welcome screen, under **Preferences > Performance** – as well as for each brush in the Advanced Brush Controls. You run it the first time you open Painter after you upgrade to 2020 – though it's worth running again after any hardware, OS or graphics driver upgrades you install in case they positively or negatively affect performance.

First, you make sure close off any other running applications, the hit Optimise Now. Painter runs a script that generates a large, new large document and proceeds to generate a bunch of brush strokes using a large brush, enabling Painter to test your system. Once the test is completed you get presented with a display telling you how your machine fared.

You have an overall score, a bar telling you how each component contributes to the performance, an indication of whether your system meets the recommended spec and then another breakdown on the key areas Painter looks at.

The new version's Brush Accelerator even makes Painter usable on an ageing computer, like this 2012 iMac.
If you want to test out the brushes that have been optimised to make use of the GPU, open the search from the toolbar and type GPU. This will display a list of brushes that will allow your GPU to help process brush strokes, making them faster and more responsive at larger sizes.

You can really see the difference this makes on large brushes by turning off the acceleration via the performance palette under the advanced brush controls, the brush lag is really noticeable. You can also search for AVX2 and multicore to view brushes that have those optimisations. At the moment not many legacy brushes can support these new accelerations – it's just the stamp brushes – but hopefully down the line more will be able to take advantage of the new system.

Taming Painter's UI

Painter's interface has always been an issue for artists due to its myriad of brush options – and with each new version, Corel has seeked to streamline and improve the user experience, while still maintaining access to the controls. 2020 is no exception and here Corel has made some changes that really are useful – though in part because some past versions have actually made matters worse.

First up, the Property Bar now groups tool options into relevant sections: Stroke, Size, Opacity, Grain, Media and the like. Everything is a bit easier to understand and more importantly the enhancements mean that there are more options and flyouts available directly from the Property Bar (*below*).

This means that less screen space is taken up by palettes and palette drawers, which you just don’t need a lot of the time. These flyouts themselves have combined relevant properties. For instance the new ‘grain’ group combines the paper grain options along with papers and paper libraries and they also have icons to display the relevant palettes as well.

As the Property Bar is now context sensitive, groups and icons all change depending on the brush you have selected. For

example, if you're using an airbrush the property bar will display options relevant to that category. Change to an oil brush and they're different again.

The Property Bar also changes to display the properties for whichever tool you have selected – whether a brush, selection, gradient or eraser.

This new Property Bar and how it streamlines the UI is a huge improvement, everything is far more appropriate to what you're working with making options easier to find and user friendly.

You can go a step further and via the preferences turn off the Property Bar labels and the Brush Selector labels making it even more compact. This is great for users who are already familiar with Painter and don't really need the labels.

Fewer advanced controls – but that's a good thing

The Advanced Brush Controls palette has also gotten an overhaul: with the new Property Bar displaying so many of the options the Advanced Brush Control palette feels more compact.

A new Shape and Media section has been added, mirroring the Property Bar. This section toggles the relevant controls in the Advanced Controls palette. There's also a new Stroke Options button in the Property Bar, where you'll find properties that modify brush strokes such as Mirror painting, Perspective grids and Align-to-path. This makes it far easier to switch these options on and off as you're painting without having to access their respective tools.

The Brush Selector (*below, right*) has been improved. It now has a new stroke preview mode which shows a better view of the dab and stroke along with the name for each brush. This can be changed to show more or less info by right clicking and choosing an option: variant display / dab, list, stroke or all

variants.

The dab and stroke preview have been updated to better represent the brush variant. The stroke shows orange for blenders – some of the stroke for light blenders and most of the stroke for heavy blenders – and the dab preview looks a lot better. This preview is replaced by an icon for the particle brushes and are specific to the type of particle (eg flow, gravity, spring).

As well as the main Brush Selector, which has been around for quite some time now, there’s also a new Compact Brush Selector (*above, left*). This has been optimised to take up less screen space and can be docked or added to a palette drawer. It’s worth noting that this can be made even smaller by right

clicking and choosing to show a different variant view (eg just the dab icon or the stroke). You also have the option of using the full Brush Selector as a palette as well. Right clicking on the Brush Selectors also gives you options to import or export brushes and libraries, purchase more brushes, hide the brush promotions and select libraries.

A new ‘last used brush’ toggle button has been added to the properties bar, which is handy if you’re going back and forth between a couple of brushes. This can be assigned to a keyboard shortcut, pen or tablet key/toggle or a custom palette command. The command is called ’select previous variant’ and can be assigned from the **Edit Preferences > Customise keys > Application Menus > Brushes**.

It’s taken some time but now the eraser has become more customisable. New dab profiles, size and opacity and other advanced controls can all be saved for the default Eraser brush – good news for those using the eraser on their Wacom pen!

Dodge and Burn tools have also been improved and show significantly less lag. On the subject of brushes, two new brush categories have been added, Fast Ornate and Fast Simple. As you might expect, both contain brushes that have been optimised to make use of any available performance improvements your system can offer and feel particularly responsive – even on an older machine.

Colour selections

Along with the GPU support, another area that’s been given a lot of attention are the Colour Selection tools. Painter’s Colour Wheel is now unified throughout the application – the Fill and Shape tools now have a wheel, sliders and swatches just like the Colour palette. A nice addition is that the main colour selection is now split to show the current and previous colour. This is really useful for making small adjustments to

the colour selection.

Colour ramp sliders are now in colour – making them much more understandable. The sliders default to RGB but like most users, but it’s preferable to switch the mode to HSV.

There’s a new compact Colour palette, which takes up less space than the default colour palette – but even that has options to turn off the bits of the colour palette you don’t need. You can access the compact colour palette via **Window > Colour panels > Compact mode.**

Compact mode is good to use in conjunction with the Temporal Colour Wheel, which I always have as a keybinding to the back button on my pen. The Temporal Colour Wheel also gets a small update with a menu button. This gives you options over whether to have it pinned on-screen at all times or unpinned so it opens on command and closes when you’re done – plus to clone colours, swap main or additional colours, and option for left-handed users so the selection isn’t hidden by the hand on display screens.

Colour harmonies have been added. This is really useful. There are six different modes: defaulting to Complementary, but with options for Analogous, Split, Tetradic, Monochromatic (light and dark) can also be shown. A good thing to remember is that you can choose a main colour then lock the harmony, if you don’t the colours will keep changing to any new picked colours. Harmonies can be saved out and added to the colour set libraries. I’ve found the monochromatic harmonies to be especially useful while working as they give you quick access to the values of your chosen colour.

There have been some improvements to the Layers palette that have been a long time coming to my mind. The context menu now offers you more options such as flipping the canvas horizontally or vertically, clearing impasto, preserving

transparency, pickup underlying colour and creating layer masks. Preserving transparency and pickup underlying colour are now also available via the Layers menu, with keyboard shortcuts also being available for these two useful commands.

You can (finally) lock the canvas layer and even better, you can no longer accidentally paint on a hidden layer – why has this ever been a thing you can do?

A couple of other layers bugs have been addressed : copying and pasting with paste actually coming top of the active layer rather than at the top of the stack and hidden layers no longer show up if you select multiple layers and merge them together. So no more hidden sketches or guide layers appearing in the merged flat image.

Verdict

All in all this is certainly one of the best upgrades we've seen to Corel Painter to date. Admittedly some of the improvements feel like they've been a long time coming – but it's great that they've been made.

The performance updates are obviously a big deal and everything really does feel more responsive – even older imported legacy brushes feel better (with a couple of tweaks). The Colour Selection tools, improvements to the Layers workflow and new Brush Selector are all good but to my mind the application as a whole has been greatly improved with the reworking of the Property Bar.

Over the years I've heard so many new users complain about how complicated Painter is in comparison to other applications – and to be fair, it is. There's so much you can adjust on 900+ brushes, all the palettes and controls are a nightmare to a new user or even an existing one.

With 2020 it feels like Corel has really turned a corner and

have given the best user experience yet – so much so that I'd recommend users who have tried it before and hated the interface to give it another spin.

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