

Microsoft Surface Pro 7 review: the perfect tablet for Illustrators

The Surface Pro 7 is the creative hardware of choice for the Illustrator – and by this we mean professional vector artists and graphic designers whose main tool is Adobe Illustrator. It's also a great tool for creative directors and designers for whom easy portability and the ability to draw are more important than the performance of a high-spec laptop such as Apple's 16-inch MacBook Pro.

Microsoft's tablet computer is also becoming an option for artists whose digital mark-making follows the process of traditional drawing and painting – artists who would currently be drawn to Apple's iPad and apps such as Procreate – though this has less to do with the upgraded hardware but that Adobe has released a Windows version of its new painting app Fresco that's only available for Surface tablets and Wacom's MobileStudio Pro (as well as the iPad).

So what's new about the Surface Pro 7? There are new chips and ports, but from the outside, not a lot. It looks identical to the Surface Pro 6. It's an A4-ish tablet that runs Windows 10 with a thin bezel around a 12.3-inch screen. Attach a Type Cover keyboard-with-trackpad to the bottom and push out the kick stand from the back and it becomes a moderately comfortable laptop. Pull off the keyboard and leave the kick-stand out and it balances nicely for bingeing on *Abstract* or *Drag Race* on Netflix.

Flatten it down and pull out the Surface Pen and you're ready for sketching, drawing or painting. The Pen attaches to the side of the Surface magnetically, but as with the iPad Pro it falls off easily in your bag or even when carrying the tablet

to meetings unless you keep a firm hold on the pen as well as the tablet – and I generally found myself putting the Pen in my jacket or a separate pocket in my bag when travelling anywhere. This is something Microsoft has attempted to address with its ‘concept car’ reinvention of the Surface, the Surface Pro X – which has a slot inside the keyboard to hold a drip pen-style flattened stylus as well as a mobile phone processor to slim it down even further. You can read my hands-on with the Surface Pro X, and we should have a review unit soon.

Unlike the iPad Pro, the Pen doesn’t charge wirelessly – it uses an AAAA battery instead (like AAA but smaller). These are cheap and readily available from the likes of Amazon – but tricky to find from local stores if it runs out at the wrong time.

The Surface Pen has been one of the most criticised elements of the Microsoft's Surface offering over the years – including by me. The current pen is much improved over previous generations, heavier and better balanced than the old biro-like stylus. If you're used to a Wacom pen, it'll still feel a bit lightweight – though the same is true of the Apple Pencil.

Apple's second-generation Pencil is still the best tablet stylus on the market – both in terms of balance and style – but the Surface Pen is a worthy competitor.

How good is the Surface Pro 7 for drawing?

Drawing on the screen is a similar experience to that on the iPad Pro – pressure and tilt affect your stroke as you'd expect, though there's no rotation support as you get with Wacom tablets. The level of pressure sensitivity is the same as the Apple Pencil – 4,096 levels – but half that of Wacom's latest pens (8,192).

The Surface Pro 7's screen is one of its weakest features. It's not the resolution – at 2,736 x 1,824 it's a smidge less dense than the 12.9-inch iPad Pro at 2,732 x 2,048 – nor the shape; the 3:2 aspect ratio is less restrictive to draw on than a widescreen display. It's the colour gamut and accuracy that's the issue.

Testing with a DataColor SpyderX Elite calibrator, we found that the Surface Pro 7 could output 98% of the sRGB colour space but only 79% of AdobeRGB, so you'll see less subtle shading in gradients and the like than on the iPad, MacBook Pro or a high-end Windows laptop such as the Dell XPS 15 or Razer Blade 15. This is disappointing as this is the same as the previous two generations – going back to 2017's singularly named Surface Pro (which we'd probably refer to as the Surface Pro 5, as it came between the Surface Pro 4 and 6). For a

device aimed at creative professionals, we'd expect at least 90% – and 100% should be possible.

The key difference between the Surface Pro 7 and the iPad, of course, is that Microsoft's tablet runs Windows. Whether you see this as a merit or flaw is a personal preference – though it's worth setting out what those differences are in reality. The iPad offers a more focussed experience – with apps specifically designed for the platform and, despite iPadOS's promise of multi-tasking, it's relatively tricky to use more than one application at a time.

The Surface Pro 7 gives you the full desktop experience and a much wider range of apps and tools – but not all work brilliantly on a 12.3-inch touchscreen display or the modestly powered processor. Photoshop (below), Illustrator and Premiere Pro reconfigure their interfaces for touch in ways that work well – and the truly tailored Fresco feels very much at home – but InDesign is practically unusable. Adobe XD worked perfectly fine, though felt a little cramped at times. However, despite upgraded processor options based around Intel's new 10th-gen Core platform, After Effects and Cinema 4D creak – and we wouldn't recommend the Surface Pro 7 for either.

To make Adobe's art, design and video editing apps run well, you'll need a high-spec Surface Pro. If you want to use the Surface Pro 7 as your main computer, we'd recommend as a minimum the £1,399 quad-core Core i5 model with 16GB of RAM – though you'll see definite performance benefits if you upgrade to the £1,449 Core i7 model that we had for review. Both of these have 256GB of storage, and while Microsoft offers 512GB and 1TB options, these are pricy and you're probably better off investing in external storage on your desk or network.

If you're looking for a device just to take to meetings and sketch on and do office tasks while travelling – and have a powerful desktop as your main machine – the £899/\$899 Core i5 8GB model with 128GB of storage is probably enough.

Microsoft Surface Pro 7 benchmarks

Below we've benchmarked our review unit against one of the top 13-inch laptops on the market – Dell's XPS 13 – and our highest-rated 15-ish-inch model, Apple's 16-inch MacBook Pro. While we'd nor normally recommend a 13-inch laptop for creatives, we're using the XPS 13 to look at the Surface Pro 7 against something of a similar size – and while of course the 16-inch MBP is more powerful than the diddy Surface, what we want to establish here is the difference to help you decide if the advantages of the tablet design is worth the performance drop.

(Dell has just announced a new XPS 13 at CES 2020. Read our sister site *Tech Advisor's* .)

The details are below, but in short, what they show is that a high-spec Surface Pro 7 is more than powerful enough to use your mainstay creative apps on – though it's clearly no MacBook Pro.

The 16-inch MacBook Pro tested here is what we'd consider to be the base configuration for a creative pro. It has a 16-inch, 3,072 x 1,920 LCD screen; a 9th-generation Core i9 2.3GHz processor with eight cores, 16GB DDR4 RAM, AMD Radeon Pro 5500M graphics with 4GB RAM, a 1TB SSD and macOS Catalina. It costs £2,799/US\$2,799.

The Dell XPS 13 has a 13-inch, 1,920 x 1,080 LCD screen; an 8th-generation Core i7 1.8GHz quad-core processor, 8GB RAM, Intel UHD Graphics 620 graphics, a 256GB SSD and Windows 10 Home. At time of review it cost £1,379/\$1,309.

The Microsoft Surface Pro 7 has a 12.3-inch, 2,736 x 1,824; a 10th-generation Core i7 1.3GHz quad-core processor, 16GB, Intel Iris Plus Graphics, a 256 SSD and Windows 10 Home. It

costs £1,449/\$1,499 without the keyboard or pen.

Photoshop CC 2019 benchmark

Cinebench R20

Keyboard

The Type Cover keyboard-&-trackpad combo could best be described as 'usable'. You wouldn't want to write something as long as this review on it – but the same's true for Apple's iPad keyboard. Unlike most tablet keyboards, it's raised to a slight angle, which does make typing more comfortable and the keys feel like they have more 'travel' to them.

For long periods at your desk though, you'd want to connect a keyboard, mouse and monitor – I'd recommend one of these displays from our guide to the best monitor for art and design.

To help connect such peripherals, the new Surface Pro 7 has gained a USB-C port. While not the Thunderbolt 3 port you find on many pro-grade laptops, it's a welcome upgrade.

Colour options

The Type Cover is available in a variety of colours and textures from simple black plastic to gray, red or blue suede-like Alacantara that feels soft and warm to rest your hands on. The Pen is also available with blue and red options.

Our review unit came with a Cover and Pen both in the rather fetching Poppy Red – as well as a colour-matched Arc Mouse – and as a set it's very pleasing to the eye.

The black power brick is smaller than what you get with most laptops.

The Surface itself has two colour options. The screen bezel is always black, but the back and sides can be Platinum (ie silver) or Matte Black.

The accessories do make the Surface Pro 7 more expensive than you might initially think. The bare minimum you'd want to spend on a Surface Pro 7 to make it capable of running Illustrator or Photoshop is £1,399/\$xxxx – and then you'll need the £150 Type Cover and £100 Pen. However, unless the Surface Pro X is really the future of the Surface platform, there's a good chance you'll be able to use today's accessories with a future Surface upgrade.

Verdict

There are circumstances where the near-unique nature of the Surface Pro 7 means that it really is the best creative device on the market. If you're a creative director running between client meetings and need a combination of a digital Moleskine and a way to keep your admin and email under control. If you want the thinnest, lightest device you can run the full version of Photoshop or Illustrator or XD on, it's a no-brainer. Artists looking for the best drawing and painting experience are still better off with an iPad Pro and Procreate – but if you need to create vector art as well, then Illustrator on the Surface Pro covers both bases much better (sorry Affinity Publisher).

So it's not the best tablet, nor the best laptop – but if a hybrid suits you best, this is where you should spend your money.

<https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/reviews/creative-hardware/microsoft-surface-pro-7-review-perfect-tablet-for-illustrators/>