

6. Hints for Buying a Graphics Tablet

The most popular tablets available for Macs and PCs are made by Wacom, CalComp, Hitachi, Mutoh (formally Kurta), Acecad, and Summagraphics. Each manufacturer has many different features, so it's best to choose a tablet based on your specific needs. The following is a list of considerations and features we've compiled from our own experiences with the many tablets now available.

Pressure-sensitivity. Highly recommended. Fractal Design's products take advantage of this feature spectacularly! Paint strokes can be wider or more saturated depending upon the amount of pressure applied. Pressure can control brush size, opacity, texture, and color. Not all manufacturers and models are pressure-sensitive, so be sure of the type you're purchasing.

Levels of pressure. Available levels of pressure range between 120 to 256. Painter can utilize the highest level of pressure that is currently available. However, whether or not a high number of levels is perceivable in actual use is debatable.

Tablet size. Because a tablet of any size will take advantage of your full screen area, larger tablets offer more tablet drawing space per unit of screen real estate. In practical terms, this means drawing a line all the way across a full-screen image might take 8 inches of hand motion on a small tablet, but might take 12 inches of motion on a larger tablet. For some users, this offers greater detail, control, and freedom of movement. For others, it just means their arm gets tired sooner. Therefore, when picking a tablet size, consider not only the space on your desk, but also your personal painting and drawing style. For most non-professional users, tablets with a 6x8" or 6x9" active area offer a convenient compromise. Professional artists may want to go for a 12x12" or larger tablet - but don't expect to hold these on your lap!

Stylus/pen. Variations include: pen attached to tablet with cord, cordless pens with batteries, and cordless pens with no batteries. We suggest that if you choose a tablet and pen combination that require batteries, always have extra batteries on hand in case they run out. Pens that require batteries are usually 'thicker' in the hand, and somewhat heavier. Also, some pens have programmable buttons on them. These can be useful, because you can set up a button to equal a double-click, for example.

Tracing screens. Some tablets have plastic overlays that allow you to slip something under to trace. This may not be a necessary option if you have access to a scanner.

Programmable buttons on the tablet. These can be useful for macros (i.e. open Art Materials Palette, Undo, etc.)

Connectivity. Some tablets connect through serial ports, others through Macintosh ADB ports. Keep in mind what ports you have available on your machine, and what other devices may also use them.

Tablet software. There usually are some useful customization features within the software. For example, you can isolate a part of your tablet as a smaller working area that allows you to get around a large screen or tablet with less effort. Or, you can change the mapping to trace an image at a different size. When tablet and software arrive, call the manufacturer to ensure you have the most current software version.

Price. You get what you pay for. Obviously, pressure-sensitive tablets cost more than the non-pressure variety. And, the price goes up along with the number of features.

Try before you buy? Unfortunately, graphics tablets are still hard to find in many retail outlets, making a presale test difficult. However, being able to use a tablet for a while before you buy is a great way to pinpoint subtle differences and aesthetic concerns. The best place to find demo tablets is a computer convention. At events like Siggraph, MacWorld, Windows World, Seybold, and ImageWorld, you'll find demo tablets of all varieties under one roof! And, most tablet companies demonstrate their tablets with Painter.

When in doubt, call and ask the tablet manufacturers questions. We hope you'll be using your tablet and Fractal products together for a long time - so buy smart. No matter what tablet you choose, you'll wonder how you ever got along without one!

Acecad	(800) 676-4223
CalComp	(800) 458-5888
Hitachi	(408) 747-0777
Mutoh (formally Kurta)	(800) 445-8782
Summagraphics	(800) 729-7866
Wacom	(800) 922-6613