

Picture magic

You can use image-editing software to transform a photograph as if by magic. And now it's easier than ever – included in the products we review here are examples of a new breed of packages which are cheap, simple and fun

With the right program in the right hands, a photographic image can become something to be played with in a thousand ways.

Image processing and photo-manipulation can be an insanely complex activity, with a language all of its own. But though the products at the top of the price range continue to outreach each other with exotic new features, it's at the other end of the market that the real excitement lies.

As scanners and digital cameras drop in price, and technologies such as PhotoCD become more widespread, digital imaging is becoming increasingly popular for the home user. Colour printers, too, are getting continually better and cheaper, making it possible for the home user to output photographic images of a quality unimagined a few years ago.

In this roundup, we have four examples of a new breed of image-processing packages, which are cheap, simple and fun. They come with templates for creating greeting cards and stationery using your own photographs, as well as tools to manipulate and enhance the latter. Above all, they are for people who neither know nor care what Gaussian blur, Alpha channels or any other of the arcane image-processing jargon means. Suddenly, it's all got a lot more fun and a lot less complex.



Adobe Photoshop 4

Photoshop is the established number one choice for professional designers. The long-awaited 32-bit version sees a number of interface enhancements, such as right-mouse-button context menus and better control over zooming. Adobe has also borrowed from drawing programs in providing grids and guidelines to help line up floating selections. Better gradients allow you to add multicolour shading and free transformation lets you stretch and scale parts of an image with minimal loss of quality.

There is little you can't do in Photoshop. Layers let you combine elements from different sources – or create new ones – while still maintaining their independence. So you could, for example, make a cow jump over the moon, while still

being able to alter the colours and position of cow, moon and sky. Layers can also be used to 'adjust' other layers – a demonstration shows how to remove a stain from a photograph by adding a layer.

As well as a facility for Plug-ins (third-party add-ons for creating new features) Photoshop allows you to record actions and then replay them. Finally, photographers and artists may be relieved to see the 'watermark' feature which adds a hidden digital copyright signature to the file, which Adobe claims, will remain in place even when an image has been printed and rescanned.

Although there is a profusion of artistic filter effects, Photoshop still lacks the natural media brushes, such as charcoal, chalk and oil paint widely seen elsewhere. Another

Object layers – and a touch of motion blur in Photoshop.

failing is that of previews. When applying a filter to part or all of an image, you can only preview a thumbnail of the effect – if you want to experiment, you'll have to apply the filter then undo. Worse still, there is no image browser. You can only preview one image at a time in the 'File/Open' dialog and then only if it has first been saved in Photoshop.

Despite the interface improvements, Photoshop is still an extremely complex and difficult application. Fortunately, Adobe has done the user proud in terms of documentation. As well as a 7Mb help file and a reassuringly thick book, there is a CD-ROM full of tutorials and video demonstrations covering everything from the fundamentals to master classes with Photoshop experts on such esoteric subjects as rear-shutter motion blur.

Still the professional's choice but too complex and expensive for mere mortals.

- £470 (inc VAT) (average)
- Adobe: 0181 606 4000

Adobe Photoshop 4

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Types of graphics software

Graphics software comes in two flavours. Vector drawing programs such as Corel Draw or Adobe Illustrator deal in mathematically defined objects – everything in an illustration is an independent entity. Bitmap or image-editing software deals in photographic images made up of coloured dots. In practice the techniques are mixed and matched – vector software often uses bitmap techniques to create textures and image software uses vector techniques to create masks and cutouts.



Special effects with Corel's PhotoPaint – clockwise from top left – the original, wind, lighting and ripple.

Corel PhotoPaint 7

PhotoPaint first saw light as a bitmap-editing accessory for Corel Draw 3 in 1992, and was based on Zsoft's budget PhotoFinish. Since then it has grown into a heavyweight, and while still a part of Draw and other Corel bundles, is available as a standalone application. It comes with a wealth of



resources and accessories, including a media manager for previewing images on disk.

There are some wonderful effects to be had here. Corel's fills still leave the competition standing with fractal-generated effects that can simulate natural material such as rock or rippled water or stand alone as fantastic patterns. Unlike Adobe, Corel has never been reluctant to copy good ideas, so there is a whole range of naturalistic brushes that look as if you are painting with real oil or water colours, or spraying with a fine airbrush or graffiti spraycan.

The Image Sprayer – which again first saw the light elsewhere – lets you splatter the canvas with a random assortment of small images. It's particularly good for creating a field of flowers or a forest from a few assorted trees.

The interface takes some of the better points of both Picture Publisher and Photoshop, with a 'Property Bar' that changes to suit the tool in use, and 'Roll-ups' that function in a similar way to Photoshop's palettes. The latter give access to channels, layers and the 'Scrapbook', which doubles as a storage area for bits and pieces and an image file browser. If you make a mistake, there's an undo list, which can take you back to any stage since your last save. Unlike Picture Publisher's it isn't selective – you lose everything – but you can save actions as a script for replaying later. There's also a facility to make movies, editing artwork frame-by-frame.

As with Photoshop, there's a substantial printed manual and a set of CD-based tutorials. However, the tutorials here are interactive – you get to create the effects rather than sit back and watch the expert.

X-Res's effects work in real time.

Not so entertaining as watching Adobe's Photoshop guru Russell Brown in action, perhaps, but a more effective way to learn.

Powerful and complex, but easier to use than Photoshop.

- £145 (inc VAT)
- Corel: 0800 973189

Corel PhotoPaint 7

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Macromedia X-Res 3

Firmly pitched at the professional market, this has an uncannily similar look and feel to Photoshop, with tabbed palettes that can be stacked together, though unlike the latter you do get the standard Windows toolbar with Open, Save, Clipboard and other buttons.

Its selling point is the way it

handles images in memory. Small images under 10Mb (that may seem big to you and me but it's small change to graphics professionals) are handled normally, but larger ones are handled in X-Res mode. This way, only the part of the image displayed is updated as you go – the final version is 'rendered' only when you save the file, making for faster performance.

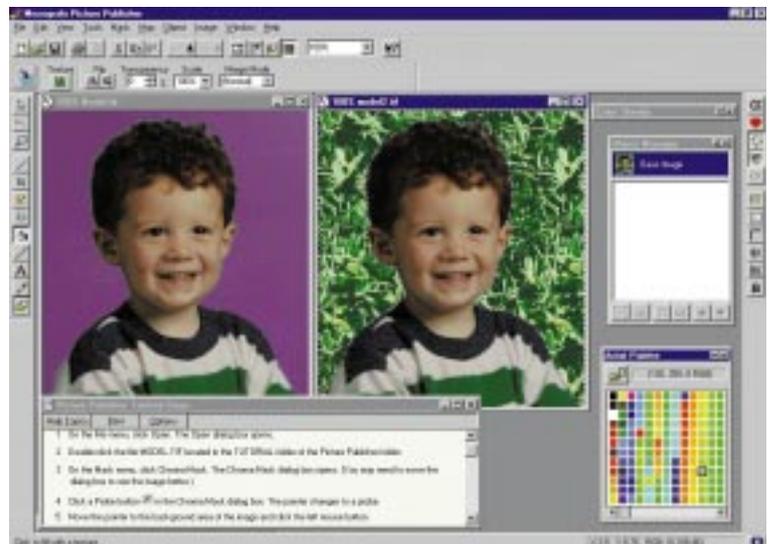
The theory is well borne out by the practice – on a 16Mb PC with over 50Mb of assorted images loaded, we were pleasantly surprised to find that special effects such as 'glowing edge' or 'fisheye distortion' worked in real time. No need for a preview – the entire image changes as you move the option sliders, so you can 'OK' when everything looks right, or 'Cancel' if you want to abandon your changes.

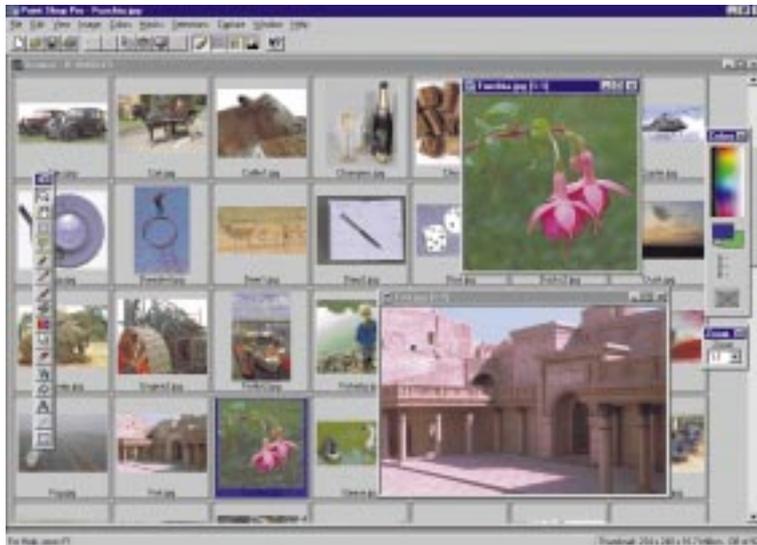
There's a good range of painting tools, including natural media and artistic effects such as 'Van Gogh' and 'Pointillist' multiple brush strokes. Many of these are pressure-sensitive, so if you use a tablet and stylus, this will work just like real media – the harder you press the thicker the line or more intense the effect.

Complementing these is a wide range of textures and graduated fills, though not up to Corel's standard. There's the usual gamut of filters and effects, support for multiple, floating 'objects' but, unlike the three other heavyweight packages, X-Res has no recorder or scripting facility. It does, however, provide you with a tool to convert batches of files between formats, and since this can be a lengthy process you could leave the PC doing this while you sleep.

Documentation falls firmly in the 'could do better' category. The help file is somewhat terse, and though there is a showcase of various Macromedia applications, there are no on-line tutorials as

Masking for beginners – changing the background of a photo from a Picture Publisher tutorial. (See review on page 75.)





Paint Shop Pro supports 35 file formats and has a very fine browser.

wasn't such a good idea. Normally you'd have to start all over again, but here you can undo just the contrast change. The program will wind back to this point, undoing everything on the way, then wind forward again, redoing the actions you wanted to keep.

As well as a printed manual, there is a set of on-line tutorials on specific tasks, such as removing red-eye or creating vignettes, but these are relatively uninspiring compared with Adobe or Corel's efforts. There are also 13 Wizards to automate processes, which include correcting common defects in scanned photos.

Not quite in the Photoshop feature league, but easier to use, with a great selective undo feature.

- £116.32 (inc VAT)
- Micrografx: 0345 089372

Micrografx Picture Publisher 7

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Paint Shop Pro 4.12

Paint Shop Pro is a shareware application that started out as a simple tool for viewing and converting between a huge variety of bitmap

such. There is a course of tutorials in the printed manual, but the tiny black and white illustrations do little to enlighten or inspire.

An impressive performer with large files, but it doesn't match the feature list of the competition.

- £586.32 (inc VAT)
- Computers Unlimited: 0181 200 8282

Macromedia X-Res 3

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Photoshop you don't get 'free transformation' handles to reshape them. The range of brushes and retouching tools is vast, and these have been reorganised into a branching hierarchy. To keep up with the competition, there's a new Image Spray tool similar to Corel's, and the same Digimark Watermarking seen in Photoshop.

Picture Publisher's killer feature is the undo list. As you work, your every action is automatically recorded. Say you open an image, change the contrast, do some retouching with the brush tools, then apply a ripple effect. You then decide that changing the contrast

Micrografx Picture Publisher 7

Like the products from Corel and Macromedia, Micrografx's Picture Publisher 7 is available either as a standalone package, or as part of a graphics suite. The interface is logical and uncluttered, with the usual tool palette to the left and another toolbar that changes according to the job in hand. If you're using a brush, for example, this will show you the options for size, shape and transparency.

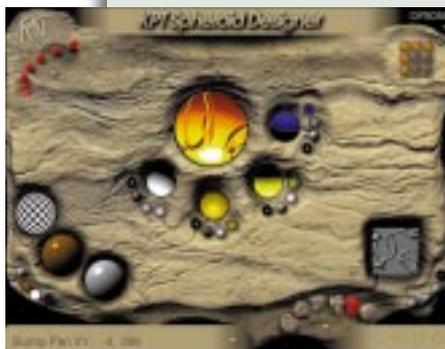
Picture Publisher has always been strong on masks – cut outs that protect the areas below them (or around them) from change. There's an Automask tool that will trace around the edges of different coloured regions, and masks can be 'feathered' – this is the technique behind creating glow and shadow effects. As well as shaped mask there is also a 'Colour Shield' which will protect (or operate on) up to 10 colour ranges. There's a new selector transform tool for moving, rotating or resizing objects, but unlike

Add-ons and Plug-ins

Plug-Ins originated as an open standard for third parties to create additional features for Adobe Photoshop – one factor that led it to dominance in professional circles. Since then, all serious image processors have come to support Plug-Ins.

Although Plug-Ins can do tedious things such as batch file conversion or provide drivers for strange devices, their most creative aspect is in special effects. Master of the genre is Kai Krause, whose Power Tools 3, offers astounding transformations. Not only are the effects weird, but the interface and names are stranger still. You can't really appreciate the true joys of Vortex Tiling, Spheroid Designer or Seamless Welding until you've tried them. Several Kai originals, such as 'Page Curl' have been copied so extensively as to become industry clichés.

Also from Kai Krause's Metatools is Power Goo. This doesn't fit into the traditional canon of image processing, but is about the most fun you can have without getting dirty or

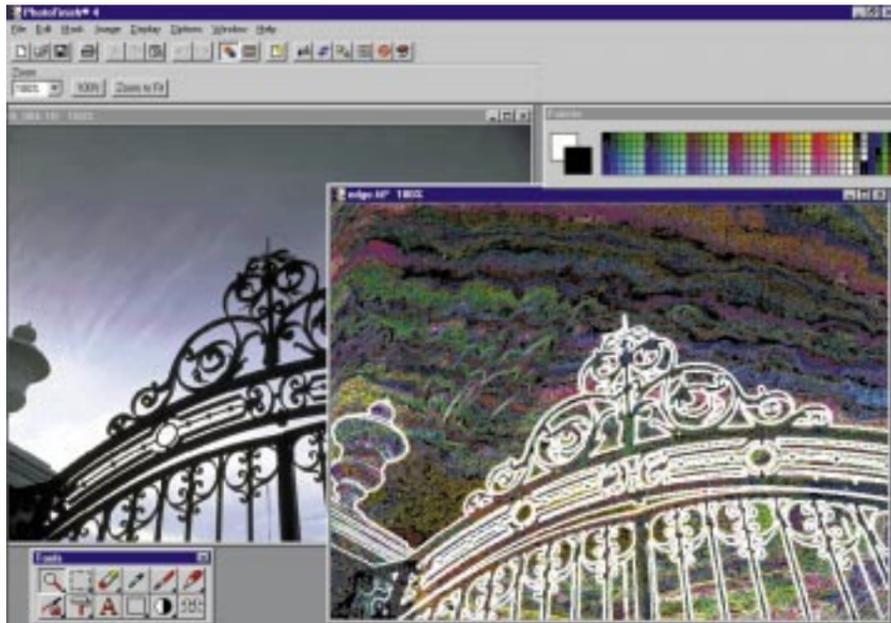


Above: Weird guy, weird interface, weird effects. Below right: Revenge is sweet – Goo your nearest and dearest.

arrested. Take an image – head shots of friends, family or celebrities work best. Load it into Power Goo and start tweaking in the marvellously eccentric, but logical, interface, pulling at the image as if it were putty. You can save snapshots of the results into a film strip and create 'Goovies' – videos that interpolate smoothly between successive frames.

PowerTools 3 costs £151.57, Goo £45.82 (inc VAT) from Principal Distribution (01756 70400).





file formats. Its selling point was speed – you could have Paint Shop up and working while Photoshop was still uncoiling itself from the hard disk, so it appealed not just to those who wanted a cheap and simple image processor, but to professionals who were already using a heavyweight application but wanted something faster for conversion and viewing.

Fun with filters – PhotoFinish does some edge detection.

Paint Shop Pro 4.12

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

PhotoFinish 4

Zsoft's PhotoFinish was one of the first budget image processors for Windows, sharing ancestry with both the original Windows Paintbrush and Corel's PhotoPaint, but when the company was acquired by Softkey, development slowed down. Now, at last, we have a fully-fledged Windows 95 version, with the modern conveniences of long file names, right-mouse-button menus and 32-bit operation. This version also replaces the incredibly dull collection of business images with a new, 1,500-piece library of photos: themes range from architecture to waterfalls. An excellent image browser is also included.

Cheap and easy to use, but limited, and now under strong pressure from the low-end competition.

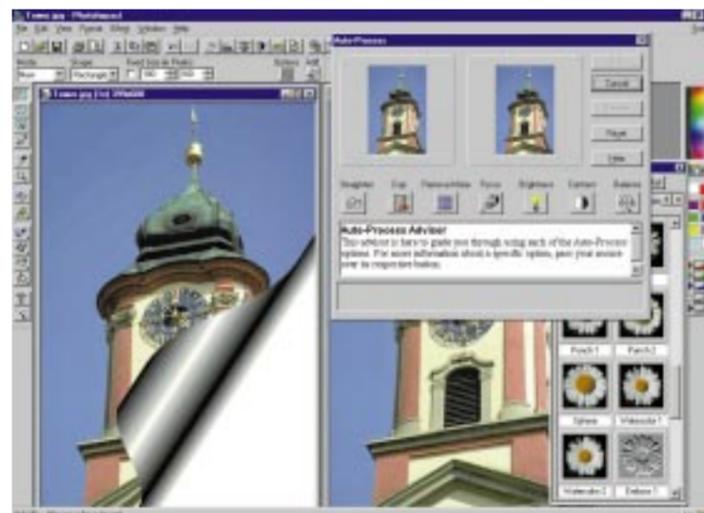
○ £39.99 (inc VAT)
○ Softkey: 0181 246 4000

PhotoFinish 4

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

PhotoImpact 3

PhotoImpact adds no fewer than seven icons to your start menu. There's a screen capture utility, a PhotoCD browser, a one-at-a-time file viewer and the PhotoImpact Explorer, which shows the folder tree on the left, just like its Windows namesake, and thumbnails of any graphics files in the



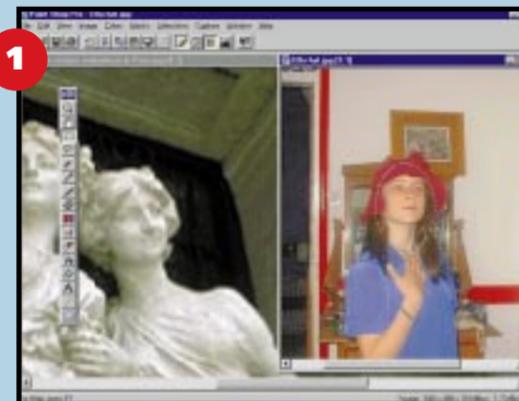
Beginners and power users are both catered for in PhotoImpact.

Still an essential at any level, but in danger of getting carried away with its own success.
○ Shareware – registration: £58.69 (inc VAT)
○ Digital Workshop: 01295 258335

Image retouching

The camera, it is said, cannot lie, but skilful post-processing can; and has done ever since the early days of photography. Over 100 years ago, some photographs of tiny fairies playing with two girls were so convincingly faked that many experts, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, were convinced. These days, it's all much easier, and even the most gullible magazine reader isn't going to believe the photographer had a giant beer bottle constructed in the middle of the Mojave desert, or that a stage-set of a Breughel painting was built around a car.

So, how is it done, and more importantly, how can you get your family, cat, dog, car or beer bottle in the frame? First you need to catch your image – in the screenshots in this group test, we've used a mixture of sample files, digital photographs and scans. We deliberately didn't use high-end equipment – the scanner is an Epson GT-5000 and the camera a PhotoPC 500 of the same make, both aimed at the home user rather than the pro. Though digital cameras are fun and give instant results, scanners give much better image quality at lower initial cost.



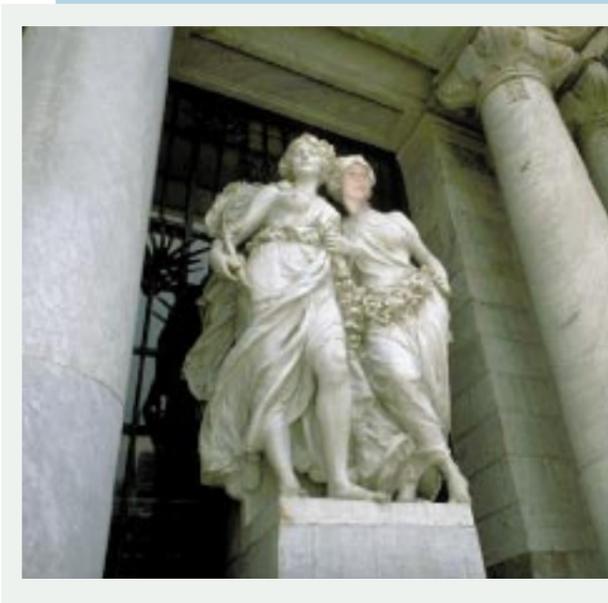
1 In this simple example we took Paint Shop Pro, a sample file of a piece of statuary in Paris, and a deliberately amateurish home shot taken on a digital camera. The statues were a 256-colour TIFF, the girl a 24-million-colour JPG. These won't mix so we first went to Paint Shop's colour menu and increased the colour depth of the statues to match. We then saved the file as a .JPG.

2 Next we zoomed into the heads of the statues and drew a freehand selection with the lasso tool. This needs a fairly steady hand in Paint Shop, but you can add or subtract bits by holding down the Shift or Control key. To make the final join smoother, we then 'feath-

ered' the selection with a value of five pixels.

3 We then went to the other photo and drew a simple ellipse selection around the girl's head and copied it to the clipboard. Returning to the first image we pasted it into the selection on the statue. This took a little trial and error as, unlike some applications, Paint Shop won't let you move or resize the pasted cut-out, so remember the 'Undo' command is a friend.

4 Finally, with the selection still active, we went back to the colour menu and decreased the saturation to 50 percent, making the new face greyer so it blended in better while still being 'alive'.



selected folder on the right. Next comes Album, which lets you organise thumbnail views of images and add descriptions, keywords and other information.

Finally, there is PhotolImpact itself and the Quick Access tool whose sole purpose is to sit on the Windows Taskbar to launch the other half-dozen applications. This all seems to be a little uncoordinated – it would make better sense to integrate the Explorer with the File/Open dialog of the main program. On the other hand, however, you can switch between modules, and a right-click on a thumbnail in the Explorer gives you the option of sending it to the viewer, PhotolImpact or another editor. Added to this you are provided with a set of Web graphic add-ons as well as 300Mb of sample images and textures.

All of which leaves us very little room to concentrate on PhotoImpact itself, which is singularly well equipped, both for beginners and power users. The former can choose a simpler interface, with an 'Easy Palette' which provides visual clues to the various filters and commands, and enables scans to be auto-processed in order to correct common faults. The latter have an impressive range of filters, floating layers and fine-tuneable retouching tools.

Documentation is plentiful with a printed manual full of step-by-step lessons, and an original on-line tutorial that takes you through making a calendar, with each month introducing new techniques. A separate tutorial teaches all you should know about scanning.

A big bundle with a strong core product, but could be better integrated.



Family favourites – Microsoft's elegant but slow contender on the home front, Picture It. (See review on opposite page.)

£172.72 (inc VAT)
BIT UK: 01420 83811

PhotolImpact 3

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Adobe PhotoDeluxe 1.0

Having lorded it at the high end for a long time, Adobe has at last realised that there's a huge market for less ambitious users. The first surprise is this is nothing like Photoshop. Instead you start with the options of guided activities or working alone. Choose the former, and you have tasks ranging from the very sensible, such as cropping a picture or removing red eye, to

In dog we trust – forging ahead in PhotoDeluxe.

the gloriously silly, such as putting a dog's head on a person.

All the guided activities are arranged as tutorials – you progress through a series of tabbed stages, with plenty of prompts and advice. Unlike most tutorials, however, you get to choose your image. You can, if you want, use one of the suggested samples but you don't have to, and can choose instead between images on file, from a scanner, camera or other source. You also get templates to incorporate your own photos into cards, calendars and so on.

When you decide to go it alone, then the interface changes a little. There are still – hooray – only three menus, but the tabs above your image switch to showing different tasks. If you click the 'Quality tab' you'll get options to change brightness and contrast, correct colour and remove scratches. If you click the 'Tools' tab you'll find the paint brushes, text and line tools. It's all designed to have the minimum of confusing clutter on the screen. Although the tools are fairly primitive, there are some sophisticated features, such as object layering and Plug-In support. Above all, it's very easy to use – and the only reason the manual is over 300 pages long is that it contains seven language versions.

Great fun, very easy, with some surprisingly smart features.

£49.95 (inc VAT)
Adobe: 0181 606 4000

Adobe PhotoDeluxe 1.0

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Microsoft Picture It

Microsoft is not generally known for graphics applications, but the past year has seen a great leap forward, with snazzy drawing tools incorporated into its Office product, a Web design package, and now Picture It.

Also aimed at the home market, it's remarkably similar to PhotoDeluxe in its step-by-step approach. First you catch your picture, either from file, scanner, camera, PhotoCD or elsewhere. You then have a list of tasks down the left of the screen for processing the image, adding effects, framing it or incorporating it into a template and finally printing or saving it. At the bottom of the screen is a 'film strip' of all the images currently open, and to the right is the 'stack', showing all the elements of a composite picture – photos, text, templates and cutouts. When you choose a task, the task list changes to a suitable dialog box or Wizard. There is no auto-enhance, no painting tools or shadow effects, but there is a 'smart' autotracer for creating cut-outs.

Although it's more slickly presented than PhotoDeluxe, with a sumptuously decorated interface and all sorts of clever sound effects, it is also considerably slower, and we spent a lot of time staring at the long blue progress bar. There are a lot more templates and decorations for creating greetings cards, calendars and so on, but less in the way of special effects, other than straight image processing and masking tasks. It's all very simple to use, and well documented – a bonus is a series of illustrated tips on how to take good photographs. **Picture It is slick, friendly and fun, but slow.**

£49.99 (inc VAT)
Microsoft: 0345 002000

Microsoft Picture It

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

LivePix 1.1

Another product aimed squarely at the home user, LivePix kicks off with a guided tour that tells you all you need to know. This has a gushing American voiceover, the best feature of which is that you only have to listen to it once. Start LivePix itself, and things get better. The workspace is arranged in galleries. One series of galleries holds projects, such as calendars, greetings cards or Web pages, while the other holds photos – the 240 samples from the CD-ROM, plus whatever you add from your hard disk, scanner or other digital source. Choose a project or a photo and the gallery shifts over to make way for the 'canvas', the workspace where you doctor or arrange images into a project.

For instant gratification, the easiest way to start is to select a project, and substitute your own photos for those already included in the projects. Have your child, for instance, popping out of a birthday cake for a party invitation, or carve your own head up on Mount Rushmore with Lincoln, Jefferson and Washington. Dig deeper and you'll find some interesting tools, including a smart autotracer feature for creating cut-outs, an instant 'dropped shadow' effect and a distorting effect like a simpler version of Power Goo (see box on page 75).



There's a lot below the surface of iPhoto Express.

There's also a special tool for removing red-eye from a photo, but few special filters or brushes. Nor can you auto-enhance scanned photos – you have to adjust colour, contrast and brightness manually. **Simple to use and with lots of fun ideas.**

£50 (inc VAT)
Broderbund: 01429 890873

LivePix 1.1

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

iPhoto Express

The fourth of the family fun packages comes from Ulead, creator of PhotolImpact. Like its big brother, it comes with a huge selection of sample images and a similar graphic Explorer for previewing these and your own files. Down the side of the screen are buttons for loading images, adjusting, enhancing and outputting them, while the set of buttons across the top of the screen changes to suit the current task. Once again, you can open a template (a Quick Task), swap your own photos for the samples with a few mouse clicks, and create the usual calendars, cards and posters as well as slide shows and screen savers.

If you scan in your own pictures, you get the option to automatically straighten the image, remove moiré pattern, and add a frame or shadow. Once you've caught your image, there are options to automatically enhance the focus, remove red-eye and manually adjust the lighting and colour, with real-time previews for instant feedback. Dig a little deeper, and you'll find a whole set of painting and retouching tools, similar to those in PhotolImpact, and an impressive set of special effects. A welcome touch is that you can see all the effects in a palette using the current image as a thumbnail. Even better, you can experiment freely as there is a multiple undo feature. On the ▶

LivePix – who's that up there with our reviewer Tim Nott?





Image-editing software packages compared

Product	Min RAM/ Processor	Floating layers	Plug-in support	Image browser	On-line tutorials	Natural media	Pressure- sensitive	Scripting
Photoshop 4.0	16Mb/486	●	●	○	●	○	●	●
PhotoPaint 7	16Mb/Pentium	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
X-Res 3	16Mb/486	●	●	○	○	●	●	○
Picture Publisher 7	8Mb/486	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Paint Shop Pro 4.12	8Mb/486	○	●	●	●	○	○	○
PhotoFinish 4	8Mb/486	○	●	●	○	●	○	○
PhotoImpact 3	8Mb/486	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
PhotoDeluxe 1.0	8Mb/486	●	●	○	●	○	○	○
Picture It	8Mb/486	●	○	●	●	○	○	○
LivePix 1.1	8Mb/486	●	○	●	●	○	○	○
iPhoto Express	8Mb/486	○	●	●	●	○	○	○

● = Yes ○ = No

Arty alternatives



Top: Sheer artistry – Painter and what can be done with it. Above: Dabbling in drawers – teach yourself digital painting.

Nearly all image processors offer a greater or lesser range of brushes for freehand creativity. Some offer 'natural' media such as effects that really look and behave like charcoal, oil paint or water colour – scraping, oozing and flowing in the appropriate life-like manner on textured surfaces such as canvas or wood.

The pioneer of all this arty artifice was Fractal Design whose highly original and quirky Painter appeared six years ago. Since then all sorts of weird and wonderful effects have been added – also largely copied elsewhere – such as the 'Image Hose' that sprays the screen with tiny assorted pictures, and the Mosaic effect that, in skilful hands, can turn an existing photo into an authentic looking Roman-style mosaic. At the time of writing, version five was about to be launched, with 300 brushes that can paint with fire and neon, liquid metal effects and the wonderful-sounding Dynamic Plug-in Floaters.

If all this seems too overwhelming, then Painter's little sibling, appropriately named Dabbler, contains a more limited selection of tools and effects. This takes the painterly metaphor even further – tools and commands are housed in an interface of sliding wooden drawers, and artwork is kept in a virtual sketchbook. There's a 'tracing paper' feature to copy or clone existing images in a different style, you can create animations and there's a set of learn-to-draw tutorials.

Painting with a mouse is rather like painting with a brick – for anything except the simplest work, you need a pressure-sensitive stylus and tablet. Wannabe artists should note that Dabbler is available bundled with a Wacom Artpad for £129.25. Painter 5 costs £351.25 (both prices inc VAT) and both products are distributed by Computers Unlimited (0181 200 8282).

minus side, you can only keep text and pasted selections as independent objects when using the supplied templates – with your own pictures they are pasted in permanently, and there seems no way of creating your own templates.

Easy on the surface, but with power on tap for those prepared to dig further.

○ £49 (inc VAT)

○ BIT UK: 01420 83811

iPhoto Express

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Documentation	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



In the middle ground, for a serious heavyweight that doesn't cost the earth, Micrografx Picture Publisher, with its wonderful selective undo feature that means never having to say 'Oh **!', takes the honours, and our Best Buy award.**



There's no doubt that Adobe Photoshop is still the number one professional choice, despite its lack of simple comforts such as a save button or a browser. So, if you were plunging in at the deep end, this would be our recommended choice. If all you want to do is have fun with your holiday snaps – perhaps make cards and newsletters and so on, then you're spoilt for choice, but after some deliberation we decided PhotoDeluxe wins a recommendation by a whisker.

Tim Nott