

review by Daria Aikens

.5 Stars - 1 Star Poor, 5 Stars Excellent

**Product:** Creation Station Pro

**Version:** 6" x 9"

**Manufacturer:** Calcomp

**Price:** \$289.95

**Contact Info:** <http://www.calcomp.com/>

**Genre:** Professional graphics tablet

**Requirements:** Power Macintosh with ADB port, System 7.5 or later, CD-ROM drive.

## Back To The Drawing Board

Never before was I so excited to be reviewing a product. After all, the Calcomp Creation Station Pro represented an entirely new way for me to design web graphics and navigate my Macintosh. The professional-level package comes complete with a graphics tablet, two-button digital pressure-sensitive pen, and a five-button digital wireless/batteryless mouse. TabletWorks software allows you to configure the input devices to your personal tastes. Creation Station Pro's graphics tablet comes in three sizes: 6" x 9", 12" x 12", and 12" x 18". Also available is the consumer-level Creation Station, which comes with a 4" x 5" tablet, pen, mouse, and photo-editing software.

The Creation Station Pro boasts the ability to simulate a natural-media drawing environment and to simplify the pixel-selecting process in photo editing. For anyone involved in the daily task of graphics development or design, this product offers salvation from the limitations of a traditional

mouse or trackball.

Installation is very Mac-like. I just plugged it in and installed the TabletWorks control panel. There are no electrical outlets to mess with, since the tablet takes its power from the ADB port. You can continue to use your old input device along with the tablet. Both the pen and mouse are batteryless, operating by magnetic force between the input devices and the tablet. During my evaluation, I used a Kensington Orbit with the 6" x 9" Creation Station Pro. A minor incompatibility between the two was remedied by changing an option in my MouseWorks (Kensington) software.

I feel it is worth noting that the buttons on the digital mouse and pen act unusually. When I first turn my Performa 6400 on, the buttons work fine, but once the computer has been on for several hours, the buttons mysteriously cease to function. I could not find a solution for this in the literature on the Calcomp website, although I think the problem is related to my system going to sleep. Somehow, in some way, the tablet does not wake properly. I experienced this problem on other computers as well.

Also important to many Mac users is desktop space. Since most of us have very little space to spare, the footprint of the graphics tablet has a significant effect upon the entire user experience. The 6" x 9" inch tablet is the perfect size, since it takes up the same space that a notebook would at 12" x 11" (remember, 6" x 9" is only the size of the drawing surface). Luckily, I have just that much room on my computer desk.

The tablet itself feels as though it could survive any normal wear and tear. I found the pen to be quite light, but then I may just be too accustomed to the metal ink pen that I use for paperwork. Calcomp's digital pen is only slightly heavier than your basic Bic pen. The included 5-button mouse fits very well in my hand and has a button on the right hand side where my thumb rests against the side of the mouse. There are two buttons in the usual position on top of the mouse, as well as an oblong, centered button which rocks back and forth, enabling users to scroll through documents.

## TabletWorks Examined

the TabletWorks

I have mixed feelings about  
control panel. On one hand,

the software is chock full of customization options. On the other hand, I feel that one important option was left out. Despite TabletWorks' prowess at having the input devices jump through hoops, I could not determine a way to activate a simple Mac OS 8.x contextual menu (by programming a control-click). That alone means that

the Creation Station Pro could never replace my beloved Orbit. After all, Mac OS 8 has been out long enough that I've come to expect this simple ability.

Okay, so I got my grievances out of the way — now let me tell you what I like about TabletWorks. First off, you can change the orientation of the graphics tablet (landscape and portrait mode, essentially) to accommodate your varying tasks. You can also switch between two methods of moving the pointing devices around the screen. One way is the traditional method, and the second is called WYPIWYG (Where You Point Is Where You Go). This feature is ideal for tracing and drawing when the user wants the pointer on the screen at the exact same location as where the pen contacts the tablet. Pop-up menus and hot keys can be configured for all of the different buttons. Something that I felt was missing was the ability to create application-specific sets of pop-up menus and hot keys.

Both the digital pen and the mouse can fully navigate the Mac OS interface in an extremely efficient manner. In fact, I even prefer to use nothing but the pen for navigation from time to time, provided I don't often have to switch over to the keyboard to type. I really appreciate the integration between the pen and mouse devices and my Internet browsers. The 5-button mouse has a bidirectional rocker that operates in a similar fashion to the Microsoft scrolling mouse. This feature is killer for scrolling at a somewhat reasonable pace through long Web pages. The pen can also be set to scroll through web sites by simply moving the pen up and down the page. Scrolling speed is limited, however, so don't expect to whip through that 306-page manifesto.

## et To The Graphics Performance Already

Say it with me: 512 levels of sensitivity. That's something you just couldn't find in a graphics tablet until recently. Despite the misgivings that I detailed earlier in this review, the Creation Station Pro is a fine piece of hardware, especially when you take into consideration the Creation Station's amazing ability to simulate a natural drawing environment. Say hello to instant, high-quality, original art.

I used three pressure-aware graphics applications to test the boundaries and ease of use for this product. My experiences and artwork in Canvas 5, Illustrator 7.01, and Photoshop 5.0 were all enhanced by the Creation Station Pro. The time saved when carefully selecting objects out of photos in Photoshop using the digital pen just may be enough to pay for for the cost of the tablet within weeks. The tablet has a lift-up translucent flap under which traceable art can be placed. And again, the hit feature when working in a drawing program are the 512 levels of sensitivity. This means that any lines you draw are only as thick as you want them to be. Curves can taper off, and beautiful effects can be added to all of your work. Press harder and the line gets thicker — just like my crayon days.

ince Calcomp advertises the Creation Station Pro's tracing competence, I decided to attempt to trace some hand-drawn art. It took some tweaking of the TabletWorks software before what I was tracing was reproduced at a scale that was similar to the original art. The TabletWorks software has three mapping options that determine how the 6" x 9" inch tablet area corresponds to the real estate on my 15" monitor. These settings affect the way your traced drawings appear on the screen. Using the Creation Station Pro, I was able to use each applications's pen and brush tools as if I had that tool in my own hand. This is a great thing for someone who, like myself, doesn't have much patience to play with the 32,000 features in each different graphics application. The digital pen is extremely quick and responsive in Canvas 5 and Illustrator, but I found myself having to slow down just a bit, waiting for Photoshop to keep up with my activities. And needless to say, any artistic talent whatsoever can only help.

## aria's Final Judgment

If you do any type of graphic design at least once per week, your life will be made much simpler with the Creation Station Pro. Competing tablets exist, but Calcomp's five-button mouse, digital pen, and spacious tablets equal more bang for the buck. Unfortunately, at \$289.95, that's a lot of buck, especially when all of the the input device buttons do not work properly some of the time. What Calcomp does promise and deliver is freedom, which is what every artist needs in order to completely express herself. This reason alone is why the Calcomp Creation Station Pro deserves a 3.5-star rating. The Macintosh was introduced with a revolutionary one-button mouse in 1984. Fifteen years later, it is definitely time to Think Different about input devices. Once you try this tablet, scribbling around in Photoshop and other graphics programs will never be the same again.

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