Software Review: AKVIS Sketch v6.0

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Digital imaging is an amazing field. There are so many possibilities for creative enhancement to photographs, that you could spend a lifetime exploring them, and not really master all of them.

Adobe Photoshop (which I reviewed the CS3 release in these pages last month) has made the job of creating visual works of art so much more easy than it was in the analog darkroom days. And third-party plug-ins for this (and other editing applications) extends the range of possibilities even further.

This time around, I will be looking at Sketch v6.0 from AKVIS, developer of many unique plug-ins (www.akvis.com).

Sketch will allow you to convert any of your photos into a custom pencil sketch. Or, if you prefer, you may also have it rendered as a color pencil sketch, charcoal drawing, or even a watercolor painting. All these effects are produced from an amazingly simple interface, comprised of only a few sliders to set parameters.


Sketch interface (plug-in) with sample original image

As you can see from the above screen capture, there are very few controls involved in Sketch. What there are are arranged onto two separate tabs: Sketch, and Canvas.

The Sketch tab has two main groups of sliders: the EFFECTS sliders, which controls the Watercolor, Charcoal, and Coloration levels, and the STROKES group, where you can set the length, intensity, angle, and other parameters of the strokes associated with the effect you are using., By default, the output of Sketch is black and white. However, if you would like to render the output in color, there is a checkbox to enable Color Strokes.
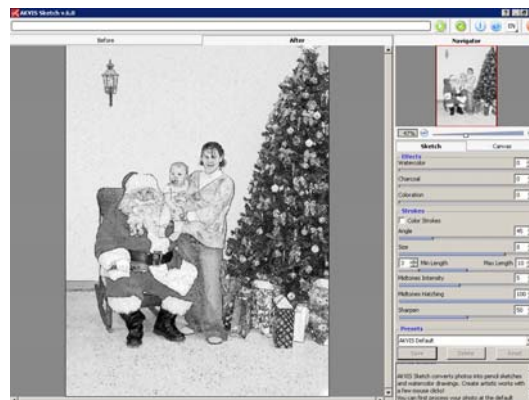
The above capture shows the same image after having Sketch run against it. The default settings provided by AKVIS have been used, and a grayscale pencil sketch has been produced form the color original.

The same image could have been rendered as a watercolor painting, or as a charcoal sketch, by varying the appropriate sliders in the Sketch tab., And if you had checked the Color Strokes checkbox, your output would be rendered in the colors of the original, but looking like a sketch or painting.

Color Strokes or Coloration?

One effect that is hard to describe is that of the coloration slider. While similar in effect to using the Color Strokes checkbox, the effect is somewhat different.

Using the Color Strokes checkbox will give you an effect that appears to be a pencil sketch, with strong washes of color applied over the areas they appear in. The colors are applied at full saturation as determined by the original image, and the overall feeling of the output is a harsh one (in my opinion)… almost as if the artist had no emotional involvement with the subject matter.

On the other hand, the Coloration slider gives a much different result. The closest I can describe it is that it gives the output a 'Norman Rockwell' feeling to the image, one of warmth and peaceful feelings. The colors appear to be screened onto the image, a much smoother transition between them occurring. And as you vary the slider, the effect becomes more or less pronounced.. It is almost too difficult to describe in words...you really need to see the effect to appreciate what it can do to your images. If you are striving for a 'homey' effect for , say, your family Christmas cards, this would be the ideal choice for manipulating the image.

Canvas

The other tab on the interface is labeled Canvas. As its name implies, this deals with simulating the canvas texture of artist media that one would find a painting or sketch done on.

The first item you encounter is a checkbox that says Use Canvas. By default, the canvas texture is disabled; you need to turn it on to have it applied to your image.

Under this is an area titled Texture Properties. Here you can set the primary canvas texture settings.

The main control in this section is the Texture Picker, the large square showing

the selected texture pattern that will be used on your image.
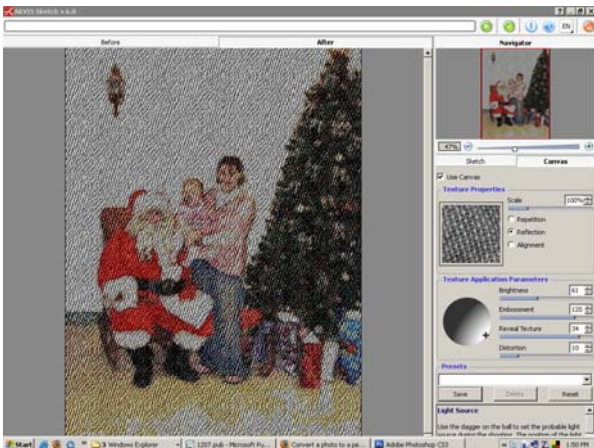
Canvas tab

Along with the selection box is the scale slider and a set of radio buttons that sets the pattern join method.

Under this group is the Texture Application Parameters control group. These sliders and spin dial allow you to set the look of the applied texture, such as lighting angle, the texture intensity (brightness), the amount of embossing, texture distortion, and how intense the texture effect shows through the image itself.

Sketch comes pre-loaded with 149 textures in its library. When you open the library by double-clicking the texture picker, you will find an icon at the upper left corner that will allow you to load your own custom textures into the library. You may find additional textures online, as well as in CD collections commercially available form many sources. However, with the infinitely variable combinations by changing the control settings, it may be a while before you need to add new textures.

One last item to be found at the bottom of both the Canvas and Sketch tabs is a preset box. This allows you to store your custom presets for use in future projects, or to recall when a job needs to be reprinted. Tpe in the name of the preset you wish to save the settings under and click Save. You may also delete a previously saved set of parameters, or reset the filter to default settings.

Requirements

Sketch is available for both Windows and Mac platforms. The minimum system requirements for Windows are :

- Pentium III or equivalent
- 512 MB RAM
- 30 Mb drive space
- 1024x768 monitor resolution

The recommended specs, they are:

- Core Duo or equivalent
- 2 GB RAM
- 2 Gb drive space
- 1280x1024 monitor resolution

Mac users need the following:

- Intel/G2
- OS-X 10.3.9
- 512 MB RAM
- 30 Mb drive space
- 1024x768 monitor resolution

Recommended specs for Mac are:

- Intel/G5
- OS-X 10.5
- 2 GB RAM
- 2 Gb drive space
- 1280x1024 monitor resolution

Supported OS's are:

Windows 2000/XP/Vista/NT/2003

Mac OS-X 10.3.9-10.5

To use Sketch as a plug-in, you need a compatible image editing application, such as Adobe Photoshop or Photoshop Elements, or any editor that supports Photoshop-style plug-ins. A complete application compatibility list is available on the AKVIS website.

Pricing and Availability

AKVIS Sketch v6 is available for immediate download from the company website at www.akvis.com.

Both versions (plug-in and stand-alone) are included in the archive, and you can select which one (or both) you wish to install during setup.

The base proce for Sketch for a typical home user is $72, which allows you to use either the plug-in or stand-alone version. To use BOTH versions at home, the license fee is $89. And, for commercial (business) users, the kicense fee is $139, which licenses both stand-alone and plug-in packages.

A free 10-day trial is available for download, giving you a chance to try it before you buy. If you decide to purchase, your license will be emailed to you upon payment. No physical shipment is made; however, a 'DVD-on-Demand' option is available for an additional $19.95, giving you the software on a physical disc (the DVD also includes trial versions of all AKVIS plug-ins, tutorials, and flash movies).

Overall Impression

I've reviewed several of the AKVIS plug-ins over the years, and have had great success with them. They are small and simple apps, making it easy for the user to accomplish what can be complex tasks quickly and hassle-free. Sketch is another example of this.

I have seen some tutorials in Photoshop-oriented magazines on how to achieve a watercolor painting effect. The tutorials make use of masks and layers, many brush styles, and other advanced editing techniques, some of which the average user may not have mastered well enough to use with confidence. But Sketch allows you to achieve much the same effect and feel as using the advanced tools and built-in filets in Photoshop, but in a much simpler interface and manner.

AKVIS Sketch v6 can be a powerful addition to your image editing arsenal. Why not give the trial version a spin, and see if you don't agree.