

ArtStudioPro 2.0 from Twisting Pixels Reviewed by Darrel Priebe

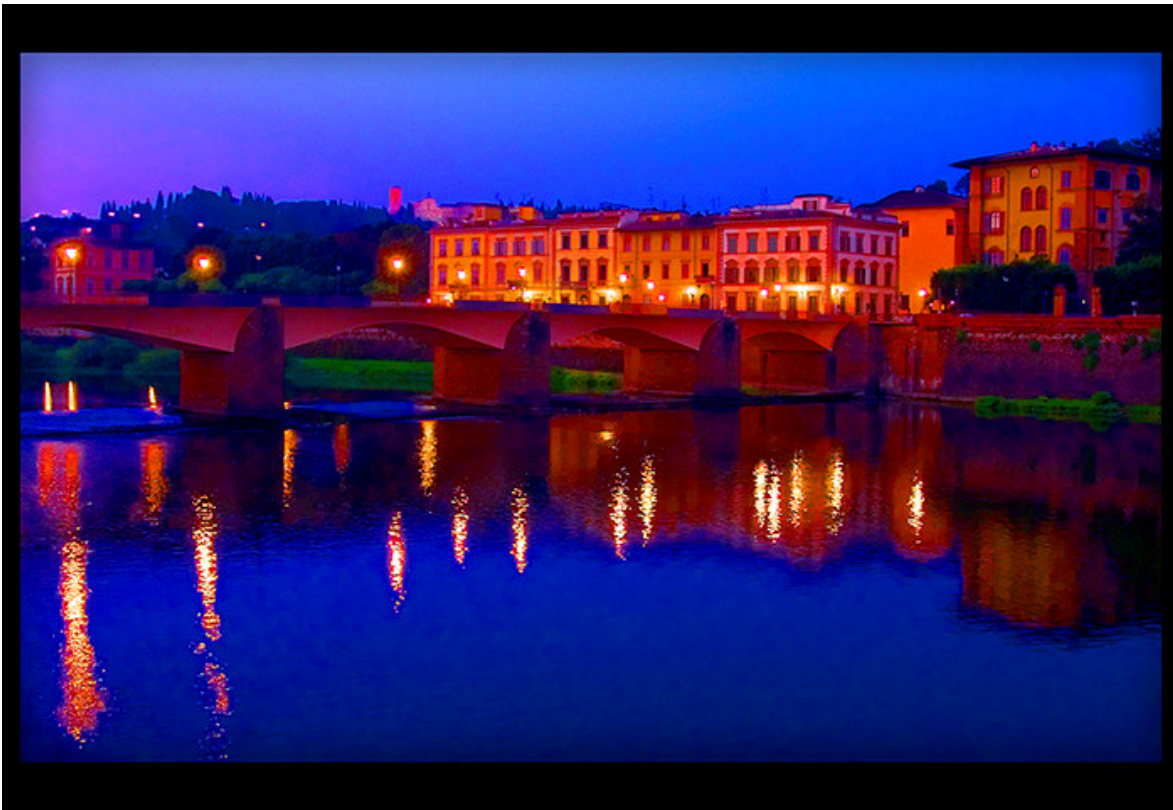
ArtStudioPro 2.0 is an easy-to-use digital art program for both PC and Mac, which brings art treatments like oil and watercolor paintings, and chalk and charcoal drawings to digital photographs. I have always enjoyed the beauty of a well done artistic treatment of a photograph, but I knew that creating one wasn't easy. Art isn't something you can create with the click of a mouse. Is it? I have experimented with various Photoshop filters that offered painting effects like *Watercolor* and *Colored Pencil*. In most cases the results were not worth printing.

A few months ago, I started to review one of the programs that claims to make it easy to do just that – create a painterly work-of-art from a digital photograph, with just the click of a mouse, and no painting skills required. I began a review of *ArtStudioPro v1.3*, but stopped because I wasn't impressed with the program, and there was a newer version of the program due to be released soon. Version 1.3 had its problems. It was very slow to process the pictures and the results were usually not too impressive. There were problems with the software too, like some of the JPG files saved by the program would not open in the computer. Now there is good news. Twisting Pixels has released an updated version of their digital art program, *ArtStudioPro 2*, for creating an artistic painting from a digital photograph. This review includes the new version of Volumes 1 & 2 of Art Studio Pro.

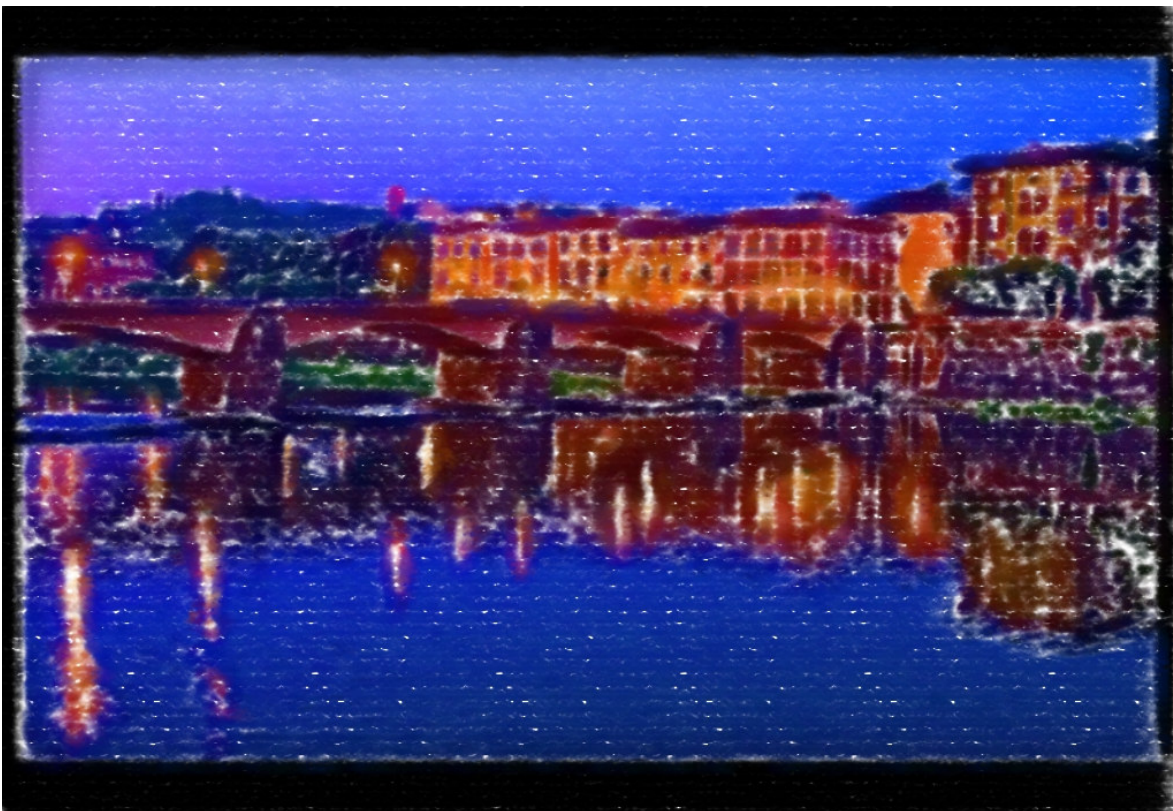
This program runs either as a filter from within Photoshop, Photoshop Elements, Paint Shop Pro or Corel, or as a standalone program. I first tried it as a standalone program, and it seems to work better in that mode. The user interface is clean, artistic and pleasant looking, with four buttons at the top of the page which makes it easy to use.

First, you click *GET PICTURE* to import a picture into the program. Second, you click *CHOOSE PAINT* to bring up a window of different presets and artistic styles. These include a variety of effects like Oil, Watercolor, Crayon, Colored Pencil, Charcoal, Marker, Technical Pen and Paper textures. Pick your style, and the program works its artistic magic. You can then view your art work and *SAVE FILE*, or continue to append other effects to your work by clicking *MIX MEDIA*, for different variations. Saving options include BMG, PNG, PSD, JPG, and TIF - a good variety of choices that will fit most people's needs, although the JPG files are heavily compressed.

How well does it work? I picked a color-rich photograph of the lights on the Arno River in Florence at dawn. This is one of my favorite pictures. I applied the *Oil Pastel Portrait* effect, which took a while to render, and the effect was pleasing, if not spectacular. Rendering and saving it took a while, about a minute, and this was a small file size to start with, 824KB. It ended up 608KB after Art Studio Pro finished rendering it.



River Lights – Original Image. Photograph by Darrel Priebe



River Lights – with Oil Pastel Portrait effect from *ArtStudioPro 2*

Next, I undid the *Oil Pastel Portrait* effect (in the file menu select “Revert”), and then tried the *Watercolor Scene* treatment. This filter rendered much more quickly, in about 10 seconds, and the results were very nice. The rich colors in the original image became deeply moody and very watercolor-painting-like under the artistic hand of *ArtStudioPro 2*.



River Lights – with *Watercolor Scene* filter from *ArtStudioPro 2*

Now I was having fun! Next, I brought my *Dancing Girl* picture into *ArtStudioPro 2*, and gave this image the *Oil Scene* treatment. Time to preview? About 14 seconds, but it was not a pleasing image. The dancer’s face was blurred and lacking important details, and there were some out-of-place bush strokes covering her lower face that came out of nowhere. Oh well, File Menu > Revert to the original and try again!

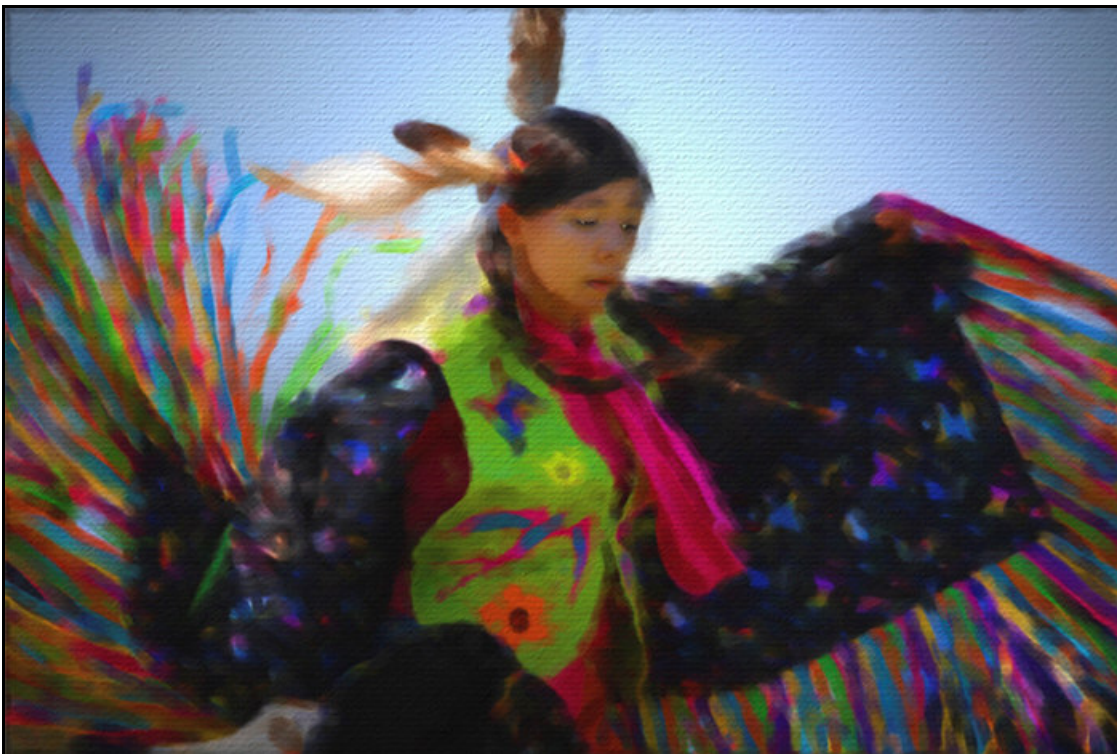
Next, I tried *Watercolor Still*, but the linen canvas style of *Watercolor Still* was too muted for my tastes. It didn’t work for this particular image. Hmmmm, what filter would work for *Dancing Girl*? Any treatment that omits the details or blurs them too much just won’t do this image justice.

I tried *Oil Closeup*, because the program’s sample image showed better detail with this filter. Rendering the preview took about 25 seconds. The treatment was pretty good, but the face was still too blurred for me, so I saved it to a Photoshop .psd file, and opened Photoshop to blend the original picture with the *Oil Closeup* image. I held down the shift key (to align the two images) and click-dragged the original JPG image on top of the *Oil Closeup* image, and then added a black layer mask (Alt-click on the Mask icon) to hide the original image on top. Now I could paint in the details I wanted in the eyes from the original picture. This gave me

the image I was looking for – a watercolor style painting on a linen background, with some detail in the eyes to catch the viewer’s interest.



Dancing Girl - Original Photograph by Darrel Priebe



Dancing Girl – with Oil Closeup ArtStudioPro filter and original image blended in Photoshop

For my next image, *Kyle*, a black and white portrait, I selected the *Charcoal Portrait* preset. The results were mixed – there was a lovely charcoal rendition of the portrait subject, but the background, which had been dark and subdued, now became lighter and distracting, and would need to be modified in Photoshop. But that’s easy to do using the same method I used on *Dancing Girl*.



Kyle – Original picture by Darrel Priebe



With ArtStudioPro’s *Charcoal Portrait* filter

In the standalone version of *ArtStudioPro 2*, the Advanced options tab gives you more control over the options within each filter, like color, outline width, sharpness, softness, etc. These are worth experimenting with to modify the effect of the filter you have chosen.

You can also run *ArtStudioPro 2* from within Photoshop, but there are fewer filters available, and it seemed to render more slowly than in the standalone version. This may be due to the hi-resolution file sizes. From within Photoshop, I selected Filters > Twisting Pixels > *Art StudioPro 2*. I chose a filter called, *Marker with Shades*, a painting effect done with colored markers, and clicked apply. The preview took about a minute to render. Then I clicked apply to accept the results, and waited several minutes. I was ready to give up, figuring the program had locked-up. Just before I was about to force the Art Studio Program to quit, the image was rendered into Photoshop. That was the slowest render I had seen to date for this program, about 10 minutes.

Still working within Photoshop, I selected an evocative landscape scene of sunlit wintry foliage along a lonely country road, with the snow capped Eastern Sierras in the background. I thought perhaps an artistic treatment could enhance this picture, so I tried *Oil Pastel with Detail*. This filter took 45 seconds to render (preview) a very large original image (31 MB). The results were too muted for my tastes, so I tried the *Oil 1* filter and *Oil 3* filters. On both filters, the highlights on the sunlit foliage were lost in the artistic rendition, but the *Marker with Outline* filter produced a lovely water-colored sky.

Hmm, it looks like I will need to use several *ArtStudioPro 2* filters, and then combine them in Photoshop with Layer Masks to select the best parts of each image to make my final picture. Well, this answers the question, can you create art with a single click of the mouse? It will take more than a few clicks, and masks, and brush strokes, at least for some images.



Sierra Lane – Original picture by Darrel Priebe



Sierra Lane – With various filters from ArtStudioPro blended with the original image

Conclusions: Is the cost and time involved using *ArtStudioPro 2* worthwhile? Of course, that depends on how motivated you are to create digital art, and how much free time and money you have. If you want to stretch your photographic vision into the realm of painting and digital art images, then *ArtStudioPro 2* does offer a valuable package of artistic filters that can produce, with the right image, spectacular results. And the cost of the program is reasonable for what it can accomplish. But more often, you will have to utilize your artistic judgment and select and modify the results to produce images that please the eye. Of course, starting with an excellent photograph will definitely enhance your final results in *ArtStudioPro 2*.

Overall, I like this program a lot. It does much more than Photoshop can do in the realm of digital art. For selected images, *ArtStudioPro 2* adds a quality of richness and paint-like imagery to the original picture that is worthy of a large format print. It will remain in my kit of digital darkroom tools that I will use to create images that move beyond the simple photograph, images that I believe could be called art.

Shortcomings: The most significant problem is the very slow speed of rendering the artistic filters. Rendering occurs twice, first when you select the filter, which is actually just a preview, and a second time when you apply the filter. The filters can take several minutes for final rendering, up to 10 minutes, so be prepared to wait. In Photoshop, some of the complex

filters take 5-10 seconds to apply, but they seem instantaneous compared to the filters in *ArtStudioPro 2*.

The program was also slow to respond to basic operations like minimizing to the task bar, and restoring the window to full size. Each simple operation took 5 to 10 seconds. This review was conducted on a very fast Mac Pro with 2 Intel Quad chips, and 4 GB of Ram. How fast or slow *ArtStudioPro 2* runs on a PC is another question. I suspect this program simply doesn't take advantage of multiple Intel processors like Photoshop does.

A free trial version of *ArtStudioPro 2* is available at the Twisting Pixels web site, which places a watermark on the image. You should definitely try this program before you buy, to see if you like the results, and if you can tolerate the slow speed of rendering. If you decide to purchase the program, enter the serial number under the Help menu, and the trial version is converted to a full working version without the watermark.

Cost: Volumes 1 and 2 of *ArtStudioPro 2* cost \$99.95 each, but the bundled version which includes both volumes lists at \$169.95 on their web site. I recommend getting both volumes as the range of filters is much larger than with only one volume. Twisting Pixels also offers a combo pack with all of their programs, including *ArtStudioPro*, *ArtStudioPro 2*, PixelCreation, PixelPaper, PixelPack, and PixelSampler, for \$269.95. The program is sold from their website. I didn't find any discounted sites online that offer *Art StudioPro 2*.

A 70-page digital manual is included with the program and can be found under the Help menu, which offers detailed instructions on how to get the most out of each effect. Tutorials are available on their web site. The manual warns you to install the program into the right folder, based on both your operating system, Windows or Mac, and which version of Photoshop or Photoshop Elements you own, so that the filters show up in your version of Photoshop. I didn't read the manual until later, but had no problems installing the program.

Tech support is offered free via email. Software requirements: If you want to use *ArtStudioPro* from within another program like Photoshop, the requirements for PC and Mac software are as follows: Windows: Adobe Photoshop 7 or later; Adobe Photoshop Elements 2 or later; Macromedia Fireworks MX 2004 or later; Corel Paint Shop Pro 8. For the Mac: Adobe Photoshop 7 or later; Adobe Photoshop Elements 2 or later; Macromedia Fireworks MX 2004 or later.

Minimum System Requirements: (Remember, this is a slow-to-render program that needs a fast system to run it): Windows Systems: 1 GHz Pentium III processor, 256 MB RAM, Windows 2000 or Windows XP. Mac Systems: 500 MHz PowerPC G3 processor, 256 MB RAM, Mac OS X 10.2.6 or later

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