

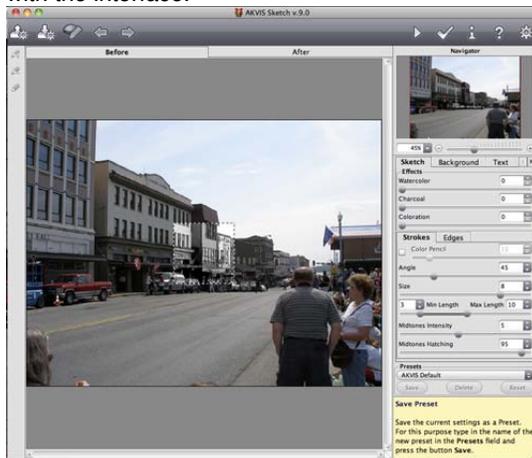
AKVIS Sketch Review

Who hasn't thought about turning a memorable photograph into a classic work of art, like a pencil sketch or a painting? Doing so however requires artistic skills usually beyond the abilities of the average computer user. There's the analog method of using pencils, paint and brushes to re-create the photo on canvas or paper. Then there's the analog method gone digital, using a tablet and image editing or painting software to re-create the photo onscreen, but still requiring artistic skill. Finally there is the digital method using the actions and filters of an image editing program to convert a photo to art. Adobe Photoshop has a number of filters to convert photos into something resembling "art", but the results of using those filters are mixed, often with less than desirable results; the image looking less like a sketch and more like a filtered photo.

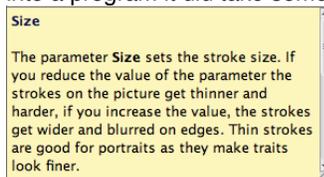
Enter Sketch, v.9.0 from AKVIS (\$72.00, <http://akvis.com/en/index.php>), a remarkable tool in its ability to transform photographs, more realistically, into a variety of hand drawn pencil sketches, from black and white charcoal drawings and colored pencils to pastels and watercolors. After working with this tool for some time I can say the results are darn good. The built-in presets provide a good starting point, but a little tweaking can really bring out Photoshop's inner sketch pad.

Sketch is available as both a Photoshop filter and a stand-alone application for those who don't have Photoshop or other Photoshop filter compatible image editing program. This makes it possible for the more casual digital photographer to make sketches of their images.

Once installed, Sketch is available either from the Applications folder (for the standalone version) or the Filters Menu in Photoshop. The Sketch interface is straight forward and clean (see figure 1), but take some time to familiarize yourself with the interface.



I definitely recommend checking out the help (click on the ? button at the top right of the Sketch Window) to become more familiar with the plug-in's features. Sketch's help feature is designed to get you started, but not provide in depth descriptions of all the functions. Also helpful is the live contextual help at the lower right of the interface providing descriptions of the various functions as the mouse is positioned over them (see figure 2). Since I usually dive head first into a program it did take some futzing around to actually get some results.



The Image Window takes up the lion's share of the interface providing two tabs: Before, displaying the original image, and After, showing the sketch created from the current settings. To the right of the Image Window are the Navigation Window and Settings Panel (see figure 3).



The Navigator Window offers a reduced view of the image being adjusted and controls how the image is displayed in the Image Window (see figure 4) with a zoom slider control and zoom percentage field to adjust the zoom level, and a red frame around the active area displayed in the Image Window. Dragging the red frame changes which part of the image is displayed in the Image Window. All the filter's adjustments are available in the Settings Panel below the Navigator Window.



Finally, the Control Panel across the top offers quick access to various functions (loading and saving presets, accessing preferences and help, and applying the filter after tweaking the settings, see figure 1).

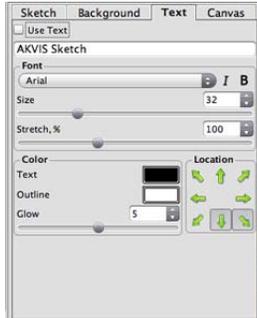
The Settings Panel contains all of Sketch's adjustment tools, organized into four tabs, Sketch, Background, Text and Canvas. Sketch provides the tools that control the conversion from photo to sketch (see figure 5). There are adjustments for effects (watercolor, charcoal, and coloration), strokes and edges. You have complete control over stroke length, size, angle, hatching density and sharpening.



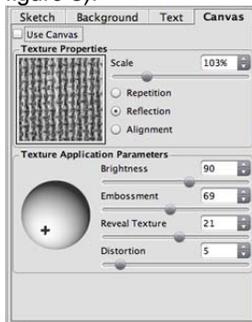
Background provides modes for processing the image with additional background options (see figure 6) Like blurring portions of the image or keeping part of the original image unchanged.



Text has tools to add titles, notes and other messages to the image (see figure 7).

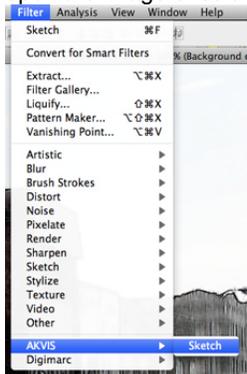


Canvas provides tools for making the image appear to be drawn on various surfaces, like a traditional canvas (see figure 8).



Below these settings is the Presets section where settings that you've made and would like to use again can be saved as presets. and re-used later, or the stock presets created by AKVIS can be loaded. Click on the Presets drop down menu to select an existing preset. To save the current settings a new preset, click in the preset menu area and type a name for the preset, then click on the Save Button.

Converting an image simple. Open the image in Photoshop (or if using the standalone version, launch Sketch and then open the image once the program loads). Select Filter>AKVIS>Sketch (see figure 9) and wait for Sketch to load.



To start using one of the built-in presets click on the Preset Menu and choose a setting. In the Image Window a live preview of a portion of the image will show the sketch effect with the current settings (see figure 10). Make changes by moving a slider for any of the settings parameters, or enter a specific number value in one of the setting fields, and the live preview updates, displaying the changes. To see the entire image as a sketch click the Run Button in the Control Panel (it looks like a VCR play button). That applies the effect to the image and switches the view to the After Tab. Once the sketch is to your liking click the Apply button (Looks like a green check mark) applying the effect to the image. It's now ready for e-mailing or printing for the delight of friends and family.



Check out this sample I created from an image in my collection. Figure 11 is the original image (actually just a portion).



Figure 12 is a charcoal version, figure 13 is a color pencil version,



figure 14 is a closer view of the color pencil sketch,



figure 15 is a watercolor version,



and figure 16 shows a pencil sketch with a canvas effect.



Overall this is a truly amazing filter. With a bit of tweaking some very remarkable results can be gotten, having friends ask you how long it took you to draw that. Performance has been improved from earlier versions and it even works with Snow Leopard. The live preview is a great touch saving time by preventing editors from having to process the image every time a change is made. The live preview can be dragged over any part of the image to see how the filter will look. The biggest problem I had was changing the canvas texture. There is no obvious indication of how to change it. Just clicking on the texture image does nothing, you have to double-click in order to bring up the texture library, and while that is documented in the help, it was not easy to find quickly. An improvement would be to make the texture sample window a menu accessed by clicking on it to choose a new texture. The fact that Sketch is also available as a stand-alone program means that anyone can add this effect to their images not just Photoshop geeks. But if you are a Photoshop geek this filter (available for Photoshop version 6 through CS4) is a must have if you need hand drawn sketches from your images.

AKVIS Sketch 9.0 - Home (plug-in or stand-alone: \$72, Home Deluxe (plug-in and standalone): \$89, Business (plug-in and standalone): \$139

<http://akvis.com/en/index.php>

Rating: Four Stars

Minimum Requirements: Intel/G4, 1 Gb RAM, 100 Mb HDD; 1024x768 screen resolution

Pros: Available as a Photoshop plug-in and standalone program. Live Preview to quickly check effect settings, best in class image-to-sketch conversion.

Cons: Not obvious how to change the Canvas texture.