

# Alien Skin's Snap Art 2

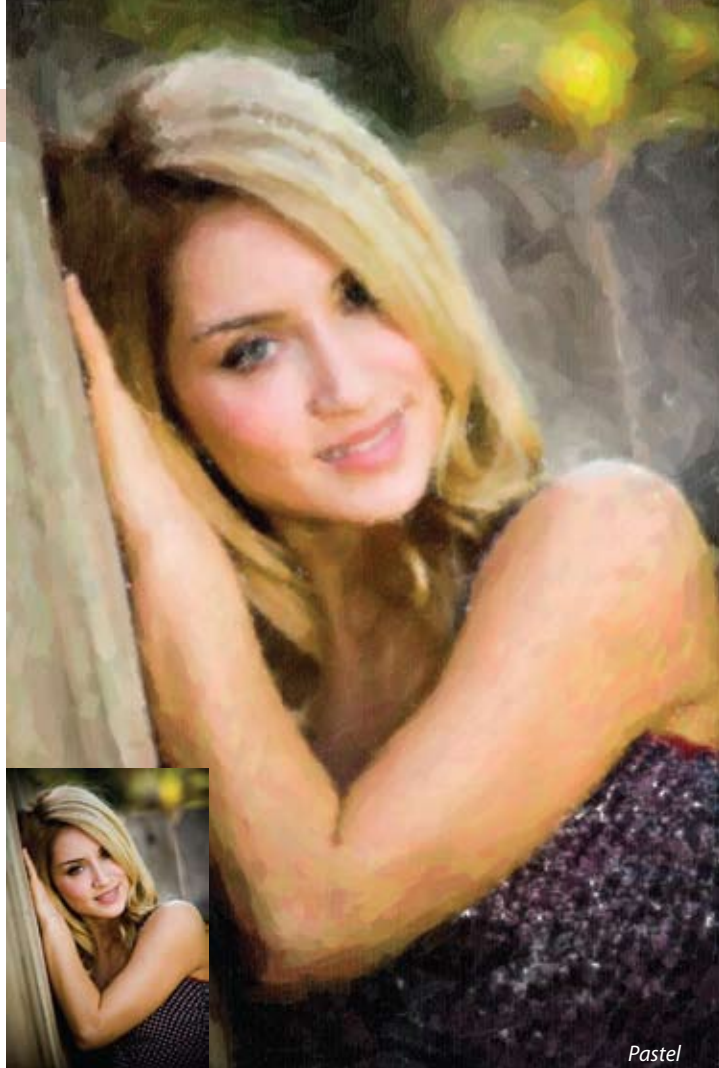
By Larry Brownstein



Many photographers offer their clients something different, something beyond the conventional photograph—a painting based upon the photograph. This is most frequently done with a program that paints digitally on top of the photograph, such as Corel Painter. Some of these programs have cloning capability that makes life easier by changing the color of the brush to match the underlying color of the photograph. Some degree of painting ability is definitely an advantage in using such programs. And so is having a decent amount of time to dedicate to the project. Which leaves the question: Are there any other options for a photographer who wants to offer painterly images but can't devote his life to developing the skill of Rembrandt or Renoir? Yes, there certainly is: Alien Skin Software's Snap Art 2.

As I think this program is great, I'll dispense with my main criticism early on, so we can end on some high notes. This is a plug-in style program and, after installation, I accessed it via Photoshop CS3's Filter menu item: Alien Skin Snap Art 2. When you click there you have 10 sub-menu items, such as: Oil Paint, Watercolor and Pastel. So, you have to commit yourself to exploring that particular type of painting (or drawing as there are such options as Color Pencil and Pencil Sketch). If you begin to suspect that a particular image might be better in a different style you have to quit the Snap Art 2 interface and go back and select the other style. It's not a big deal but I like when a program eliminates any barriers to exploring what is possible. Otherwise, following the path of least resistance, as I am sure most of us do, will lead to less than stellar results.

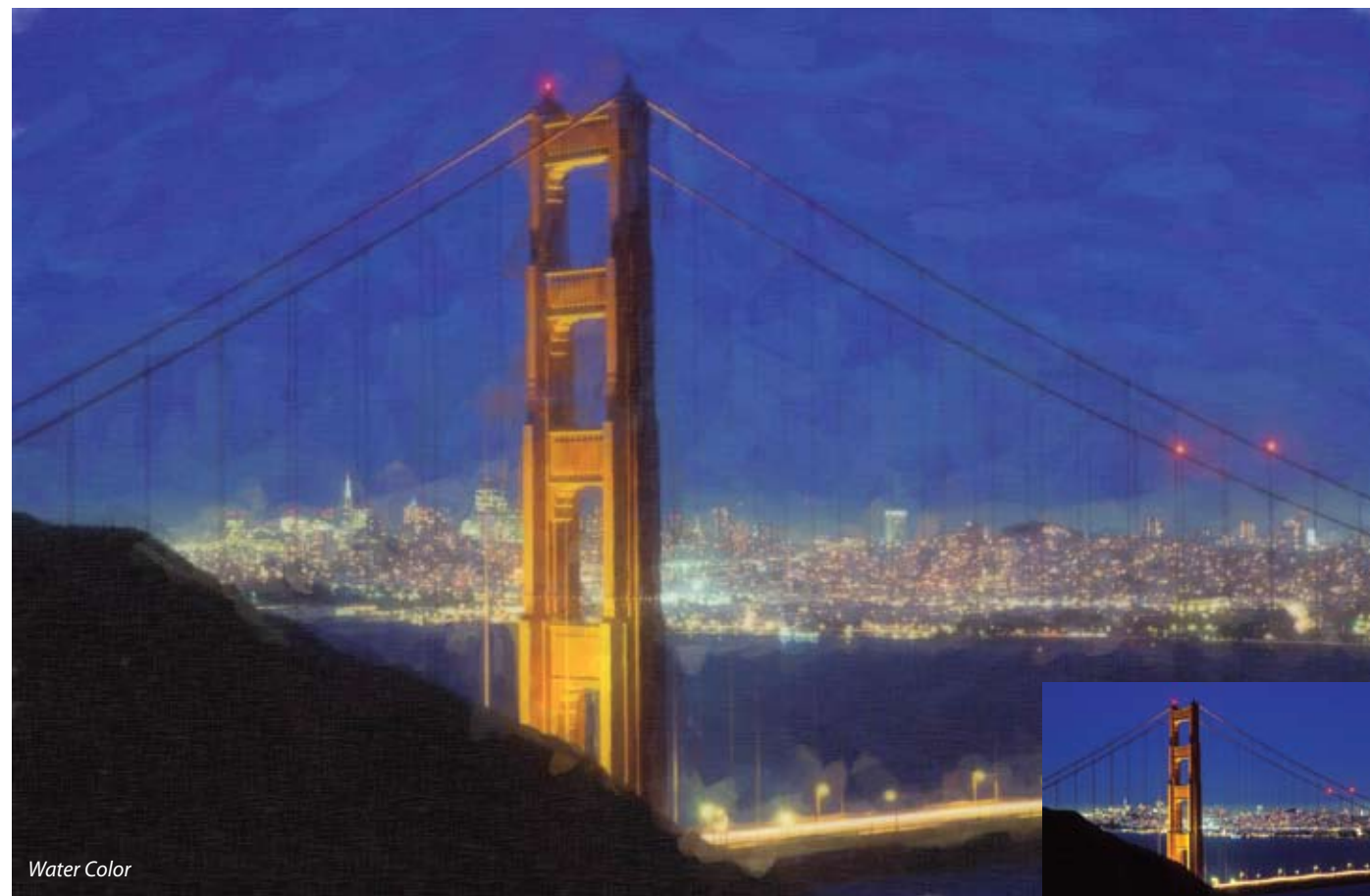
I tried Snap Art 2 on a variety of my photographs—landscapes, portraits, pets and weddings—and I found that in each case I was able to achieve great results in very little time. By "great results" I mean an image that I can easily imagine clients being interested in and that I could proudly present to them. By "very little time"



Pastel



Comics



Water Color



Oil Paint

I mean a minute or two going through a few menus, moving sliders around to get the look that I wanted in the preview and then waiting for the image to render. Certainly, there were times that I didn't like a particular rendered image and would delete it and perhaps pick another painting style and go through the cycle again. On occasion I may have even gone through as many as four cycles until I found a result I was excited about but given that I am still new to using the program, that is not too surprising.

After a little experimenting, I already had a good feeling for which painting styles were best suited to specific images. A good example of this is an image of a Havachon (half Havanese, half Bichon Frisé) dog that I photographed on a white background. I had already discovered through trial and error that the Pencil Sketch style didn't work well on busy images, thus this doggie portrait, being quite the antithesis of busy, seemed like a perfect choice. I also used Snap Art to change the canvas color to give it a feel of a faded old master drawing. I think the result is quite cute and appropriate for the subject matter.

Snap Art 2 provides the option to create the painting on a separate layer, an option I always used. In fact, I found that I sometimes selected the Snap Art 2 layer and changed the opacity to allow some of the underlying photograph to show through. For the Havachon image I dialed the opacity down to around 90%. I also created a Levels Adjustment Layer to darken the blacks, since I discovered Snap Art 2's Brightness slider dragged all the values down including the light values. Even considering the steps done in Photoshop after running the filter, the time



Pencil Sketch

**Update:** As we were going to press, we received an update from Alien Skin Software regarding Snap Art Panels for Photoshop CS4. The idea is to provide an easy interface to get to Snap Art 2 without going through Photoshop's Filter menu. I did not have a chance to use the panels, but it sounds like a good idea to me.—Larry Brownstein

involved was negligible compared to painting the image manually.

For several of the photos I ran through Snap Art 2, I found the Focus Region capability to be extremely useful. You can specify an oval region within which you require more detail than elsewhere. And there is an outer oval, too, which allows you to control how gradual the transition is from high detail to low detail. I used this feature on the faces of two kids at a wedding and again on the face of a shot done for a model's portfolio. If you need to, you can even create multiple Focus Regions. This is the best of both worlds. You can get detail where you want it and a looser feeling where you want it. The Focus Region is such a good idea that I wonder if Alien Skin will take it to the next level in a future release—allow a more free-form selection, such as Photoshop's Lasso.

In all, the program provides 10 “natural media” styles. The Stylize option creates what photographers think of as Posterization, or a clipping of the full range of tonal values to a smaller set. Oil Paint is self-explanatory and provides some of the most believable results. Watercolor provides quite attractive results, even if it isn't that convincing as watercolor (which isn't surprising, as a good watercolorist achieves his results from layering color upon color, an effect that would be challenging to mimic in software). The Impasto provides an impressive simulation of thick three-dimensional paint. The Comics style provides a fun, funky look inspired by the Benday dots used in printing and evokes the art of Roy Lichtenstein. Pastel, Pen and Ink, Color Pencil and Pointillism are the other styles available.

I was surprised at the great results of this program. But perhaps I shouldn't have been so skeptical. After all, IBM's Deep Blue beat chess grandmaster Gary Kasparov in a match over a decade ago. And a decade in the world of computer hardware and software is like a century in any other industry. So why be surprised that software can mimic the brushstrokes of an artist?

And mimicking the brushstrokes of an artist is a good description of what the program does. When I look at the sliders in the palette for the Oil Paint tool, among them are Brush Size and Paint Stroke Length. The larger the Brush Size selected the “looser” the result. A smaller Brush Size will create more detail and look more photorealistic, just as you would expect.

Another slider that I enjoyed experimenting with was the Random Color Variation slider. If you think of a Renoir painting, it is exquisite how he blends so many colors together to create those luscious skin tones. Random Color Variation is the control that allows the program to depart from constraining itself to the

underlying color of the photograph. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get any Renoir-like skin tones but I found it particularly useful when trying to bring some color to seamless backgrounds.

I recently spoke with photographer Maura Dutra, who mentioned that she offers her wedding clients a Director's Cut option. This is a selection of her favorite images that she then takes to the next level with a variety of Photoshop techniques. It seems that the kind of images that Snap Art 2 creates would lend themselves to this kind of an application, not just for a wedding photographer, but also for a portrait photographer.

A Snap Art image also lends itself to printing on canvas, making it look even more like an oil painting, as an example. If you've been tempted to move in this direction but hesitated because of a lack of a stylus tablet or the learning curve involved with painting, Snap Art is a simple alternative that creates wonderful results. Much as the name of the program would suggest, it is a snap to use and it helps you to create some impressive art.

Snap Art 2 retails for \$199 and \$99 for an upgrade. It is available from the company's website: [www.alienskin.com](http://www.alienskin.com). 

---

*Writer/photographer Larry Brownstein is based in Los Angeles, CA. He has authored several photography books, is represented by Getty Images, Alamy and California Stock Photo and has a growing wedding and portrait photography business. His website is [www.larrybrownstein.com](http://www.larrybrownstein.com). His blog is <http://larrybrownstein.bigfolioblog.com/>.*

