

Corel Ulead PhotoImpact X3

By John C. Lee

Ulead PhotoImpact X3 is the latest release of this sophisticated photo editing and basic web page design program, and the first update since its acquisition by Corel Corporation. The program workspace consists of four preset modes, each of which displays a set of menus and commands needed for the task you select to perform. The ExpressFix mode offers quick one-click adjustments to exposure, color, focus and skin tone. The Full Edit mode allows the user to perform more elaborate editing. The Web mode is for web designers, while the Video & DVD mode is designed for creating DVD menus and labels for video productions. The user has the option to customize the workspace by inserting additional command buttons in the standard toolbar or by removing unwanted buttons from it, and then saving it as a Profile mode of the workspace.

Ulead Systems has introduced in this latest version several new features and some enhancements of the existing composition/editing tools. Among them are the two new cropping tools-Golden Ratio Crop and Rule of Thirds Crop. Golden Ratio Crop also known as "Divine Proportion" overlays lines and curves to help you crop the image more naturally, while the Rule of Thirds Crop tool overlays grid to help you crop the image for better composition. In my opinion, neither of these crop tools is necessary. I can do the same kind of cropping more easily and quickly by just using the Selection and conventional Crop tools. The Cool 360° panorama tool has an added capability of stitching vertical series of photos as well as horizontal series. This is useful when you want to make a seamless panorama of tall buildings or trees.

Ulead PhotoImpact programs have intuitive and easy-to-use Selection and Object tools. You can insert or create single or multiple objects directly on the base image, and perform all the editing of these objects right on the base image without having to work with layers in the Layer Manager panel.

The Object Extraction Wizard is a convenient tool to use for extracting an irregularly shaped object from the base image. You simply brush paint around the boundary of the subject, and extract it as an object. Then you can refine the extracted object using a brush to remove unwanted areas, or to recover parts of the original image. However, the Wizard provides only one brush shape instead of six available in other paintbrush tools. This makes it difficult to obtain a thorough clean up of the object. Irregularly selected or extracted objects sometimes may inadvertently include some unwanted areas along the border of the object. You can use the Defringe tool to remove the edge pixels and blend them into the background. However, I found that in some instances, especially at large values of depth and tolerance settings, the tool infringes into the interior of the object and changes its shape.

In PhotoImpact X3, the White Balance tool has been made simpler and easier to use. You can either set it to Auto or select any of six weather or light conditions to obtain a natural color. Another interesting control is the Noise Reduction mode that automatically cleans up and reduces the digital artifacts and grain often found in images that are shot in low light or at overly high ISO settings. This is especially useful if you shoot a lot of pictures with a low-resolution camera phone.

PhotoImpact X3 supports the processing of RAW image data from popular digital camera formats. The user's manual lists all the camera formats that PhotoImpact X3 supports. You can adjust characteristics of your RAW photos such as white balance, exposure, color and luminance noise. You can also convert images from 24-bit to 48-bit (16-bit per color channel) color depth, and use almost all the editing tools for 48-bit images that are available for 24-bit images.

SmartCurves is a useful tool to extend the dynamic range of an image with missing details in shade or bright areas. The tool is based on the exposure characteristics provided by most of the leading camera manufacturers. You can also generate your own smart curve by using the HDR (High Dynamic Range) wizard. I have found that the tool tends to overcompensate towards the highlight, and I had to reduce the brightness of the image.

PhotoImpact X3 has large collections of gallery images, library images, and objects in EasyPalette, and numerous customizable templates for DVD menus, labels, and Lower third graphics. Any of these can be exported to other video, image authoring and editing programs.

One of the features I like is the web page design capability, especially the wizard for creating web banners, buttons, icons, etc. The banner design menu lets you pick from an assortment of banner templates the color schemes and text to meet your individual needs. PhotoImpact X3 also includes a variety of other tools for designing web pages, including creation of backgrounds, text, html, design elements, etc.

PhotoImpact X3 comes bundled with two bonus programs. Corel MediaOne is a management suite for organizing and cataloging your images as well as for performing some simple photo editing. Corel Painter Essential 3 is a digital arts program for painting realistic artistic effects. PhotoImpact X3 no longer carries the usual companion programs of Photo Explorer, PhotoImpact Album and Ulead GIF Animator. It also comes with a comprehensive printed 193-page (4"x 6" page size) User Guide. But the text size is so small that is not too easy for a person with poor eyesight to read it.

PhotoImpact X3 is an excellent image editing and web design software program. It offers abundant editing tools and a large-collection EasyPalette with virtually thousands of images, templates, photo effects, masks, frames, DVD menus and labels. But I do not believe that there are enough differences between this version and its previous one to warrant an upgrade from PhotoImpact 12, unless you have Windows Vista operating system or are a new user.

The list price of the full version of PhotoImpact X3 is \$69.99, and that of the upgrade from previous versions is \$49.99. The Corel version of Ulead PhotoImpact is not available in North American Retail Outlets, but may be purchased online or directly from Corel.

System Requirements:

- Microsoft® Windows® Vista, Windows® XP with Service Pack 2
- Intel® Pentium® III processor compatible or above
- CD-ROM Drive
- 512 MB RAM (XP), 1 GB RAM (Vista)
- 750 MB available hard drive space for main program and content files
- An additional 320 MB available hard drive space for bonus programs
- True Color or Hi-Color display adapter with 1024x768 resolutions or above

Ulead Systems website is <http://www.ulead.com> and its support URL is <http://www.corel.com>. Corel charges \$15 for telephone support and free for 24/7 e-mail technical support.