The [Apple/Mac] Buying Guide for Designers

or

The Designer’s Guide to Buying Macs

The term designer covers many different fields--graphic, web, motion or 3D designer--and whether you are buying your first computer or just upgrading, choosing the right tool can sometimes be difficult. Designers have widely varying needs and while you may love all things Apple, some machines/versions are better for design than others. From “do I need a retina screen,” to “how much RAM will cut it,” to “what kind of software will get the job done,” searching for that perfect computer can bring up lots of questions.

Why Macs?

One of the reasons designers prefer Macs is because of Apple’s graphic design history. Apple created the desktop publishing market back in 1985 with the original Apple Macintosh computer. Back then, the reason for choosing a Mac was because of the software and fonts available, as well as the user-friendly graphics interface. Combined with software like QuarkXpress and the first LaserWriter printer, it became the dominant platform for graphics professionals. Apple also has traditionally given discounts to the educational communities--a decision that has helped build lifelong users and avid fans.

While PCs have caught up in regards to their graphic abilities, there are still many reasons for designers to love the Mac operating system: comprehensive software support, instant ease of use right out of the box, highly detailed screens and the ability to run virtual software to emulate Windows and Linux systems to help with developing web sites.

Power Users

Let’s start with the Mac Pro, a very powerful computer. If you work with motion, photos or are a graphic designer where color accuracy is important to you then the Mac Pro is for you. The advantage of the Mac Pro is that you can use any monitor you want. Whereas monitors for other Apple computers are glossy, the Mac Pro features a design-friendly, matte screen that offers greater color accuracy. Also, since graphic designers tend to work with larger files with most images being 300ppi for press quality, a faster processor like the Mac Pro’s becomes important.

The Mac Pro is also an ideal choice for motion designers. With its fast processor, large hard drive and ability to handle multiple screens, this MAC is the most flexible and customizable option for anyone who relies on video editing applications. Thanks to the Mac Pro’s faster processor, increased RAM and SSD drive, applications like After Effects open in seconds. One thing to consider before you buy: the size of the Mac Pro’s SSD drive is smaller than a traditional hard drive, so you may need to augment your storage with an external drive. Luckily, the Mac Pro has six Thunderbolt 2 ports and four USB 3.0 ports, which should be more than enough for your storage needs.

Portability and Speed

If you are a designer on the go, but still need a fast computer, then the MacBook Pro is for you. Web and graphic designers will appreciate the retina display’s ability to dive deep into design details and nudge each pixel one at a time. MacBook Pros are capable of running all the Adobe Creative Cloud applications, as well as the major video editing applications. The light weight of the laptop (less than 5 pounds) allows you to carry it easily from on-location meetings to presentations wherever necessary. You can do high-quality work on the go, but, since the SSD hard drives are small, you may need an external drive.

Studio Work

You fell in love with the Retina screen, but you don’t necessarily need to travel with your computer. In the past, the conventional wisdom was that if you were a serious graphics professional, you would only buy the latest Mac tower. Those days have passed and all you want is a simple, all-in-one solution that is reasonably priced but still capable of doing everything you need it to do. Sounds like you might want to check out the iMac with the high-resolution Retina 5K screen. Load this computer up with sufficient RAM and an SSD drive, and there isn’t much you *can’t* do. The glorious 27-inch screen is large enough for any designer and at just 5mm at its edge, the iMac has a pretty small footprint. The iMac works well for all types of designers, and the screen resolution and fast processor makes it an all-around good computer. Not only are the images clear and vivid, with 25 percent more available color, but also the text is so sharp you’ll think you are reading a printed page. If storage is a concern, the iMac can hold up to 3 TB of data with its fusion drive, with plenty of ports for external storage.

iPads

Originally, the iPad was more a tool then a full-fledged computer, but with the introduction of the iPad Pro, with its 12.9-inch screen and Retina display, designers should take it more seriously. A new addition to the iPad is the “Pencil”: Apple’s version of a stylus, which makes it even easier to get your ideas down and share them with coworkers and clients. Using applications like Sketch, Paper and Autodesk Sketchbook, you can create everything from quick wireframes to full-fledged drawings. With the Astropad Graphics Tablet app, you can turn your iPad into a graphics tablet or just use it as a second monitor with the Duet Display app.

Layouts that work with Adobe CC can be created using the Adobe Comp CC App. You can gain access to your Creative Cloud Libraries and collaborate across multiple devices with Adobe Creative Sync. This allows you to start on your iPad and finish on your desktop. Once you finish your designs you can bring them to life with the Invision app. Invision helps designers create interactive wireframes that communicate your ideas quickly and flawlessly, creating dynamic presentations without coding. Ok, maybe you are itching to touch code; try the Codea Scratchpad app to create games, edit code and bring any ideas you may have to sharp, glowing life.

The iPad is also a great way to showcase your work to clients or during job interviews. It’s easier to pass around than a laptop, so you have the option of letting your audience steer. Apps like Portfolio for iPad or Minimal Folio can transform your iPad into a branded portfolio that will definitely impress just about anyone.

Accessories for Designers

An accessory that is often considered a must-have for designers of all types is a Wacom tablet. Wacom tablets come in all different sizes and price points: from the high-end larger Wacom Intuos Pro Professional Pen & Touch Tablet to the smaller, more specific Intuos Draw, Art, Photo and Comic Tablets. If you already have an iPad and want to use it for sketching and drawing, then try the Bamboo Fineline 2. The advanced tip gives you precise control and pressure sensitivity to draw smoother and quieter for that natural pen-and-paper feel.

If you want to go a more traditional route, try the Bamboo Spark. Start writing with the stylus using your own paper and the smart folio will record each line and convert it digitally in an instant. You will be able to access the notes digitally through the Bamboo Spark app.

For ultimate control, Wacom makes the Cintiq tablet that comes in 13-, 22- and 27-inch size. Its touch screens are pressure sensitive to allow you to edit images directly using the Pro Pen. You can also touch to pan, zoom, rotate or activate on-screen controls. The Cintiq works with many of your favorite applications, from Adobe Photoshop® to Autodesk® Maya® or Corel® Painter®.

A new, innovative type of controller is Palette. Set to be released in November 2015, Palette offers customizable modules that you can snap together to perform specific tasks. For instance, physical sliders can be used to control virtual ones like Brightness or contrast in Adobe® Photoshop®. Palette also makes knobs to control things like Opacity and buttons to Undo or Redo. Perfect for people who have a tablet in one hand and the controls for most of their processes in another, Palette can help streamline your workflow and boost your creative output.