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 Desktop Graphic software 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 good resale value.

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 allows you to use any monitor you want, including 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 Intel Xeon E5 with Turbo Boost 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, graphic applications open in seconds. Video editing applications tend to use a lot of RAM and with the Mac Pro, you can add up to 64GB of RAM. 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. Thunderbolt ports allow you to use one for storage, daisy chaining up to six drives giving you up to 20Gb/s, connect three monitors and still have ports left over. If you need to work in 4K, the Dual AMD FirePro graphics processors gives you the capability to run 8 picture-in-picture streams of 4K video at once.

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 displays pixel-for-pixel accuracy and pixel density for editing design details and nudging each pixel into place. MacBook Pros are capable of running all the major creative 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 not as big as traditional IDE drives, you may need to connect an external drive to one of the two Thunderbolt ports. The MacBook Pros are thin, but despite their size, they can deliver 9 to 10 hours of battery life depending on the whether you choose the 13 or 15-inch size. For designers we suggest the 15-inch model with its 5 million pixels, for people coding, you could get away with the 13 inch with 4 million pixels but the size difference is not that much.

For the MacBook Pros, the trackpad has been designed with a new feature you may have heard about called Force Touch. The addition of a Taptic Engine gives the sense that you are clicking on something, even though nothing moves. The trackpad will provide a tactile feel to what you are doing. It may sound like a gimmick, but for designers this can be a game changer. For instance if you are editing a movie, you are not looking at the user interface; you are looking at the footage. Where this can help is by giving the user a tactile response while scrubbing through the footage to let you know when you are at the beginning or end of a clip. For designers trying to align two parts in a graphics application, you will get a little pulse when things are lined up. This is still pretty new and not every application has this, but it won’t be long before it is incorporated.

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 for 27-inch displays. Load this computer up with 32GB of 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 3TB of data with its Fusion Drive. The Fusion Drive is a combination of SSD storage for speed and a 2TB hard drive for storage. Where this helps is by putting your frequently used apps and documents of the SSD drive for faster access and the more infrequent items on the hard drive. For the fastest speeds, you can load it up with an all-flash option that is 2.5 times faster than the previous version. The iMac also includes four USB 3 ports and two Thunderbolt 2 ports you will have plenty of room to add external drives. Because of the amazing screens and small footprint, iMacs have become the staple in most design firms.

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 with 5.6 million pixels, designers should take it more seriously. The new A9X chip with 64-bit desktop architecture has double the performance of the previous iPad Air 2, combined with the Multi-Touch technology adds a whole new level productivity. 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 with pixel perfect precision and share them with coworkers and clients. It is also sensitive to both tilt and pressure and can be used to create everything from quick wireframes to full-fledged drawings.

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. There are plenty of portfolio apps that 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 also works with many of your favorite applications.