

REVIEW

PRINTAO 8 BY LASERSOFT IMAGING

AN EFFECTIVE FACILITATOR FOR MAC-EPSON COLLABORATIONS

BY DAVID TANAKA

Epson often makes the short list when photographers are looking for a high-quality printer. And many photographers use Mac computers. But sometimes people need a little help to most effectively use Mac and Epson together.

This is the singular reason why LaserSoft Imaging developed the printing-solution software PrinTao 8: to help Mac users eliminate the mystery surrounding complicated print driver settings. Its job is to help photographers get consistent, predictable and repeatable results from their printers.

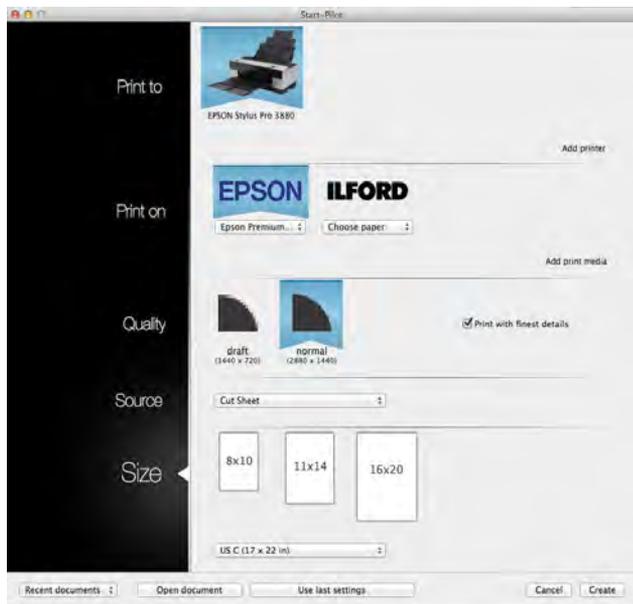
START-PILOT: INTEGRATION MAGIC

After you've installed PrinTao you are first presented with a settings panel

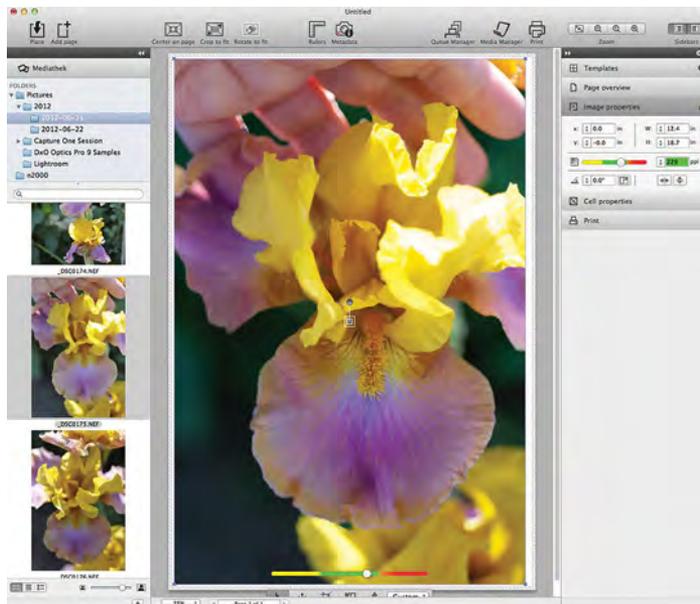
called the Start-Pilot. Here you select your printer model, the kind of paper you will be using, the quality of output you want, the paper source and, finally, the size and type (roll or sheet) of paper you'll be printing on. It's a set-it-and-forget-it procedure. Once you've made those five simple choices, you don't have to think about them again until you want to change something. At that point you call up the Start-Pilot and alter the relevant settings.

PrinTao uses International Color Consortium (ICC) profiles in its colour management. Through a feature called the Media Manager you can access a library of paper profiles from Epson and third-party brands. Profiles you add show up as paper selection choices in the Start-Pilot panel.

Although it's easy to use, there's some powerful integration magic going on in the Start-Pilot. If you think of the usual way you might set up a printing job from an image-editing application, you have to negotiate the image application's print dialogue as well as the operating system's printer settings dialogue and make those



Normally when you want to print a photo, you need to adjust some settings within the application you are using and then make other changes in the printer-management settings in Apple's System Preferences. This can result in common errors such as double profiling. PrinTao's Start-Pilot puts all the relevant settings into one easy-to-adjust panel.



PrinTao's main workspace follows a layout common with other image-editing applications—a main workspace flanked on either side by function panels. On the left, the Mediathek shows image folders and thumbnails. On the right, a nested set of panels controls various aspects of the printing set-up including access to layout templates, a panel to adjust borders and margins, the native DPI of the image to be printed, and paper characteristics.

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selections. Start-Pilot puts the essential settings in one place.

A FAMILIAR INTERFACE

The main user interface is set up in three sections. If you've used an image editor or workflow suite, it will seem familiar. The centre panel is the workspace window where you lay out your image or images. On either side are panels that contain other functions.

On the left is an asset panel called Mediathek, where you can access libraries of other imaging applications like iPhoto, Aperture or Lightroom (yes, that's right, PrinTao will work with your existing image libraries), and a folders section where you can browse folders of images on your hard drive. There's also an information panel that shows the metadata for the image you are working on.

Getting an image to the workspace is a simple drag-and-drop procedure. The right window is filled with layout tools and templates. You have the usual grid templates that automate the task of printing multiple copies of an image at the same size on a single sheet. There are also pack templates for portrait work where you lay out different sizes of the same image on a single page.

When you want to print several different images of different sizes on a single sheet, a "best fit" mode arranges images in a layout that wastes the least amount of the sheet. Similarly, a "best cut" mode places the images so that you can separate them using the fewest cuts.

One of the most common printing questions photographers have is "How big can



I print this image?" PrinTao 8 has a nifty readout called the Resolution Slider. Appearing at the bottom of the print-image layout, it's a multi-hue ribbon that goes from yellow to green to red. If the marker is in the red, it means that the image resolution is too low for the print size you want to make. A marker in the yellow indicates that your image has more resolution than you need. Green marks the "just right" zone. The marker is interactive, so as you move it from left to right, the image shrinks or grows in the layout window.

PrinTao includes several well-known brands of paper in its database, including Epson, Canson, Hahnemühle, Ilford, Red River, Tecco and Tetenal, but it does not include Moab or Inkpress, which are commonly used in Canada. There doesn't seem to be a way for the user to add these. (I use the Epson lustre paper setting for Inkpress lustre paper with good results, so this isn't a deal breaker.) Likewise there doesn't seem to be a way to specify custom paper sizes. This may be a function of my Epson 3880 being a sheet-only printer (with no roll attachment), but I often cut roll paper manually to 17 x 25" to match the 2:3 aspect ratio of SLR sensors. Sticking to mainstream paper sizes like 17 x 22" or 16 x 20" presents no problems.

COST AND VALUE

The Home Studio Edition that works with the 13-inch width Stylus Photo R2880 and R3000 models costs \$99, while the 17-inch edition for Stylus Photo 3880, 4880 and 4900 models is \$299. There are also editions for Epson's larger 24-inch, 44-inch and 64-inch printers (\$399, \$499 and \$699, respectively). All specifications and system requirements are available at printao8.com.

Is it worth the money? That really depends on how you feel about how Mac and Epson work together. If you've laboured through the process and have a printing workflow you're happy with, PrinTao might not be so helpful. If you stick with a couple of paper types at a couple of print sizes, the versatility of templates might not be so useful. On the other hand, if you are constantly switching paper sizes and paper stocks and need variation in printing templates but find yourself frustrated every time you need to change a printing parameter, PrinTao may be your saviour. ■

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON PRINTING QUESTIONS PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE IS "HOW BIG CAN I PRINT THIS IMAGE?" PRINTAO 8 HAS A NIFTY READOUT CALLED THE RESOLUTION SLIDER. APPEARING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PRINT-IMAGE LAYOUT, IT'S A MULTI-HUE RIBBON THAT GOES FROM YELLOW TO GREEN TO RED. IF THE MARKER IS IN THE RED, IT MEANS THAT THE IMAGE RESOLUTION IS TOO LOW FOR THE PRINT SIZE YOU WANT TO MAKE. A MARKER IN THE YELLOW INDICATES THAT YOUR IMAGE HAS MORE RESOLUTION THAN YOU NEED. GREEN MARKS THE "JUST RIGHT" ZONE.