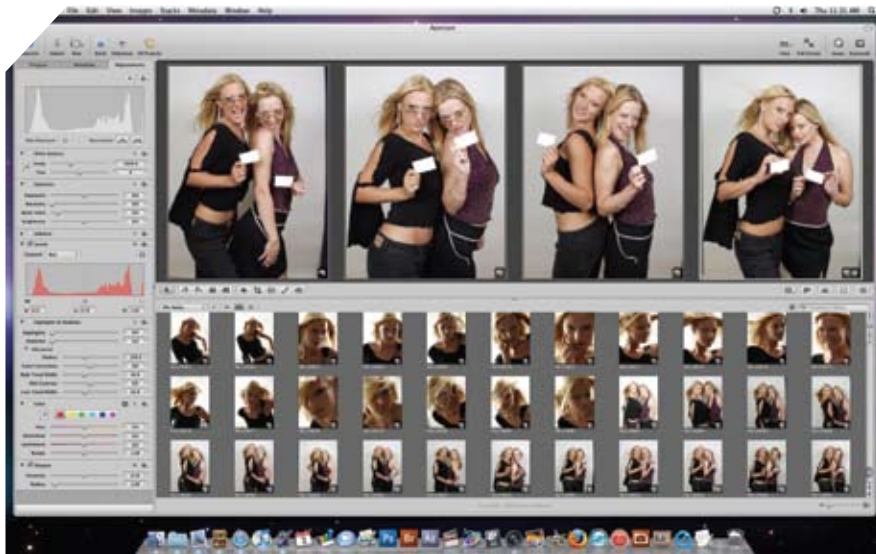




The redesigned interface of Apple Aperture 2 moves just about everything onto one screen. You can surf through thumbnails, adjust settings, and compare several images at once.



Apple Aperture 2

Easy-to-use program includes accelerated performance and more than 100 new features.

BY FRANKLIN MCMAHON

For the Mac platform, Apple has little competition in most areas of its software universe. The company's iWork and iLife packages, Logic Studio, and Final Cut Studio all do a good job of keeping the competition at a distance. However, the area of image management is a different story. Apple's Aperture and Adobe's Photoshop Lightroom have tussled head on for the past couple years, as each company attempts to establish its program as the industry standard. Heading into NAB, Adobe announced a beta for Lightroom 2, a good move that recalls the initial Lightroom 1.0 beta program that first opened the floor for sugges-

tions and feedback. (That beta is now available at labs.adobe.com/technologies/lightroom.)

When I reviewed Aperture 1.0 two years ago (digitalcontentproducer.com/workflow/video_apple_aperture), I was impressed with its speed (although other users have had some issues), its RAW format support, and the way the program lets you create automatic stacks that sort your images based on what time you took the picture—a very promising start for a \$500 professional program. Now there's version 2, which supports faster browsing and offers 100 new features, improved touchup tools, and a new \$199 price point (\$99 for the upgrade). Instead of waiting for the final paragraph, I'll spill the results: Aperture 2 rocks.

A good part of my studio's business involves my work as a professional photographer. I've lost track, but I've easily amassed more than 1 million still images over the past several years. That's a lot to keep track of. In addition, I've done tons of shoots that are part of video and compositing productions—these are pictures that need to be sorted and touched up. Aperture 2 allows you to import all your photos into a dedicated Aperture database, or you can merely point to the files if your images are already on your hard drive.

Either way you bring them in, you can quickly import thousands of images and rapidly scroll through and view thumbnails and full versions. If you have two monitors, Aperture can be set up in numerous ways. For example, dedicate one screen for the interface and thumbnails, and use the second monitor for fullscreen viewing of each image. Aperture has always been fast (especially after the 1.5 update), but now it just plain blazes. I tested on my eight-core Mac Pro with 4GB of RAM, and I hit no slowdowns—no matter how hard I hammered version 2. Aperture now smartly uses the thumbnail embedded with most image files, and everything from importing to browsing to searching in the program happens very quickly.

The interface has been redesigned for version 2 to put pretty much everything you need on one screen. Project settings, metadata info, thumbnails, large preview, and the light table can all be upfront, so you no longer have to switch screens and modes as with previous

versions. Aperture 2 uses the semi-transparent, smoke-black, floating heads-up display (HUD) from other Apple programs. Combined with a fullscreen mode for maximum workspace, this HUD makes working in the program a joy.

I've always loved iPhoto for many uses, and the new version of Aperture plays well with it. You can now open your iPhoto galleries directly within Aperture and drag images into Aperture projects. Plus you can go the other way. Aperture libraries now open in iPhoto, so you can drag pics easily between the two programs' projects and galleries.

Quick-preview mode is a new version of viewing that allows very speedy scanning through libraries. Faster still is the compare mode, in which you drag several images into the main screen to decide which pic is the best.

Searching is as advanced as the program's tagging. You can assign keywords, search via metadata, set ratings, and arrange pictures via the time they were taken. This all makes logging and searching easy and fast. The program now also adds background exporting, so you can export a large number of images out to various file formats while you continue to work with your libraries.

Camera tethering is now included—simply hook up your digital SLR to your Mac via USB or FireWire. Just about every major camera from the past several years is supported. Now when you do your photo shoot, every image pops up on your Mac and is automatically added and archived in your project.

I used this recently during a model shoot. The vibrancy of the outfits was very important, and tracking how the light hit was crucial. Not only was I able to view the dynamic range of the shots instantly on my Mac's screen, I could examine my lighting via the levels in Aperture's HUD and immediately tweak my setup before the next shot.

For one outfit, the red had to pop. After a few shots, I could see onscreen how it looked, and I realized it needed a bit more. So I amped up the color saturation on the camera, took a few test shots, and could see onscreen the newly vibrant results. Not only that, I needed some versions for black-and-white print. I was able to shoot color while tethered, and back at the computer screen, with one click, the pictures were B&W. I received information from

the levels and metadata within Aperture that told me to tweak the camera's ISO and aperture a bit for a slightly crushed black/white point. This helped me produce a more dramatic monochrome image.

Some of Aperture 2's biggest advances are found in its new image-processing tools. Of course, it can't do all that Photoshop can do. But now you have all the cropping, adjusting, and touch-up tools you need without having to step out to a separate image-processing program.

Vibrancy is a new version 2 tool that adds punch to images by adding saturation to colors within in picture that need it, while protecting parts such as skin tones. Recovery is a slider set that reduces blown-out highlights and stops blacks from crushing out all your grayscale dynamic range. Your level controls are still there for white-and-black point, but Recovery now makes it so easy to adjust unbalanced images.

In fact, you can set the program to highlight cold and hot areas (which display as red and blue pixels), step into the exposure mode and move the recovery and black-point slider, and add a dash of vibrancy and a finishing touch of sharpen. That way, in about 20 seconds, you can perform what previously would have taken dramatically longer as you messed around with level and color controls. Making images look professional—quickly—is something version 2 does very, very well.

Also new in version 2 is the ability to add plug-ins to Aperture. Apple just released the Aperture SDK and already several companies are developing plug-ins—including Tiffen, dvGarage, Nik Software, and Image Trends. You can check out some of the new plug-ins via a link on the Resources page of the Aperture section of *apple.com*. Plug-in development for other Apple programs such as Motion has been slow but steady. Aperture, on the other hand, could create a wave, because there are so many image tools that users want. In addition, during the course of this review, Apple released Aperture 2.1, a patch that further improves performance. The dedication is clearly there.

Aperture 2 is a fantastic program, but is it a good fit, or even necessary, for media artists who do video and film production? Absolutely. Chances are very good that you have stacks of CDs holding thousands of images. Why not move them all to a hard drive so you can quickly search and sort them? Treat your images the same way you archive and bin-sort your video clips. Plus, Aperture can handle any image file,

▶ **bottomline**

Company: Apple

www.apple.com

Product: Aperture 2

Assets: Lightning-fast importing, browsing, and searching, competitive, affordable price, camera tethering, new image-processing tools, quick-preview mode, ability to add plug-ins.

Caveats: Can't do all that Adobe Photoshop can do.

Demographic: Professional video/film producers with lots of images to store and sort.

PRICE: \$199; \$99 (UPGRADE)

so you can use it to import all your design elements and logos.

Aperture will probably be most useful for touchups. You might have struggled with Photoshop as you tried to make pictures really pop; Aperture can make it happen in a fraction of the time. It might feel natural to use it as a stock photo-tweaking tool for video/film projects before dragging the images into Adobe After Effects or Apple Motion.

Aperture also has great client display options. You can export a gallery of images to a full website or an animated scrolling web gallery. Tight integration with Mac is built in, of course, but you can also use your own server. Select a bunch of images and click on a button, and Aperture creates and uploads a polished and professional web gallery—right to your Mac account, all in the background while you continue to work. Apple has a demo of Aperture 2 on its website, so you can take it for a test drive.

At the new price point, with all the new and improved features and with dramatic advances in speed and usability, Aperture 2 is a fantastic tool that just keeps getting better. It's a must-have for photographers on the Mac platform, of course, but digital content producers will also find much to love in this new version. 