

2011 is Painter's 20th Birthday year. This article is one of a series in honor of this significant anniversary. I've known Karen from when I first started using Painter back in the early '90s, first through her excellent User Manuals and then in person at various Fractal Design company events. It's been a great pleasure seeing how Karen has contributed so much to the Painter community over the years while developing as an artist, culminating in her wonderful show in the heart of New York City! ~ Jeremy Sutton

Writing the First Painter Manual

By Karen Sperling

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karensperling.com/

lastreetsbykarensperling.com/



Karen Sperling at the opening night of her art show "Karen Sperling's Magical Mystical Tour Series", Monkdogz Gallery, Chelsea, New York City, 2007

Paintbox

In just about every Artistry Retreat, where I teach photographers how to paint in Corel Painter, the moment arrives when a student has a sudden realization. He or she will look at me and say, "Wait, if you wrote the first Painter manual, who taught YOU how to use Painter?" The answer is, I got some help from the programmers and figured out a lot about the software on my own by painting with it at a time when I didn't consider myself to be an artist.

Before writing the Painter manual, I had been a reporter and an editor for many years for newspapers and magazines. My mother was an artist, and I drew and painted ever since I could remember, and even minored in art in college, so I had art knowledge and painting experience. But the message at my house was clear: art was something my mother did, not me, so I mostly dabbled with art and never finished paintings. Instead, I concentrated on being a writer. Enter Painter.

I got the job to write the first Painter manual because Painter inventors Mark Zimmer and Tom Hedges liked the job I did writing the Shapes manual for ColorStudio, an image-editing program they wrote prior to Painter and before the arrival of Photoshop. Shapes was the name of ColorStudio's vector tools that were later incorporated into Painter, and the writing I did for the Shapes manual was included in the Painter manual. So I've actually been writing about Painter since before it was Painter.

I was hired to write the Shapes manual by ColorStudio's product manager, Betsy January, whom I had met when she and I were volunteers for the Mac Street Journal, published by the New York Mac Users Group (NYMUG).



Karen circa 1988

I joined NYMUG in 1988 when I decided to buy a Mac and become a freelance writer and publisher after several years of staff writing and editing jobs, thinking that volunteering for the computer group might be a good way to network and get clients. What an understatement that turned out to be!

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The first time I met Mark Zimmer was at ColorStudio's publisher Letraset's headquarters in New Jersey. Mark was in town from California and I was invited to talk to him firsthand for information to write the Shapes manual.

ColorStudio may not strike the same chord for you that it would if I said Photoshop, but actually, ColorStudio predated Photoshop and at the time, ColorStudio was very respected at high-end service bureaus for the way it handled color printing. In fact, the ColorStudio printing algorithms were incorporated into the early versions of Painter and, later on, I published my printed Painter how-to magazine, *Artistry*, using Painter for output. At the time, Painter produced much livelier color output than Photoshop.

So being at Letraset and working on a ColorStudio manual back then was a big deal. Letraset even sent a limo to pick me up at my apartment in Manhattan. I arrived at Letraset and was ushered into a conference room where five or six Letraset employees were seated around a conference table and who, like me, were dressed corporately in conservative suits. At the head of the table was a computer hooked up to what looked like a television monitor. This was 1989 and I had never seen such a large monitor. Next to the monitor was a guy who clearly wasn't from the east coast with a ponytail and sandals, Mark Zimmer.

I had notebook and pen ready and Mark started explaining Shapes. I didn't understand him, which could be a problem since I was supposed to be the manual writer. As he continued, I saw the others sitting around the table nodding their heads like they knew exactly what he was talking about. Since these were product development and marketing people, and not other programmers, I had my doubts that they were grasping what he was saying.

Since I had to understand so that I could write the manual, I thought I'd better speak up. After about 10 minutes, I interrupted and said I wasn't understanding and the others laughed and admitted they weren't, either. I was relieved that it wasn't just me. I asked some questions and Mark answered. I didn't completely understand, but took the information with me and after playing around with the software to understand it better, wrote up the steps for the manual.

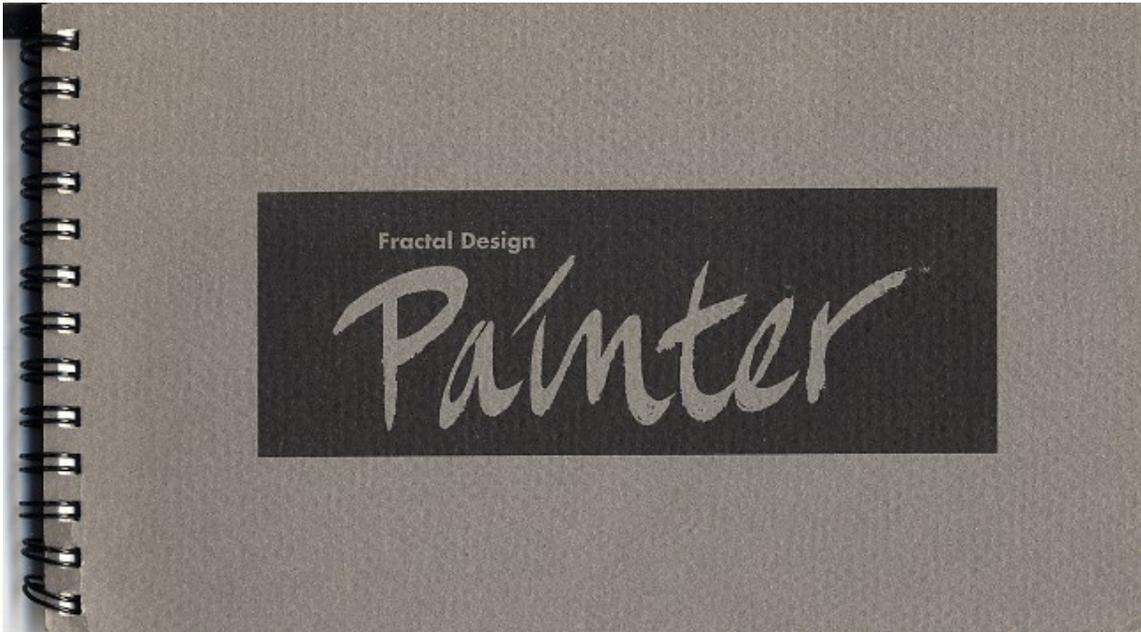
So that's kind of the way it went throughout the writing of the Shapes manual and later, the Painter manuals. Mark in California would explain a feature to me in New York by phone, but like that first meeting, I wouldn't completely understand him. I'd get the general idea of what he was saying, then I'd play around with the software, painting with Painter, till I got what the new feature was doing. During 1990 and part of 1991, leading up to Painter's debut at the August 1991 Boston Macworld, I would receive a fed ex package in New York from California practically daily containing floppy disks with the latest version of Painter and its new features for me to write about for the manual. This was before email, web sites, CDs or external drives.

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It was amazing to see for the very first time Painter's tools like Apply Surface Texture, or Glass Distortion, or the Chalk, or the Felt Tip Pens, and to be paid to figure it all out to be able to write clear explanations about it, which I would write in Word and send on a floppy disk to Steve Manousos at Fractal Design, the company that Mark, Tom, Steve and 2 others formed to publish Painter. Painter was an extraordinary technological achievement, and in those early days, I felt my participation was what it would have been like to be there for the invention of the light bulb or the telephone.



I found writing the Painter manual fascinating and challenging. I liked playing detective, discovering clues to how Painter worked, and then recording the results. In fact, I liked writing about Painter so much that I went on to do it non-stop for the next 20 years, filling the manuals for the first several versions of Painter, four published Painter books, printed magazines, digital tutorials and ezines, in addition to creating DVDs and teaching.

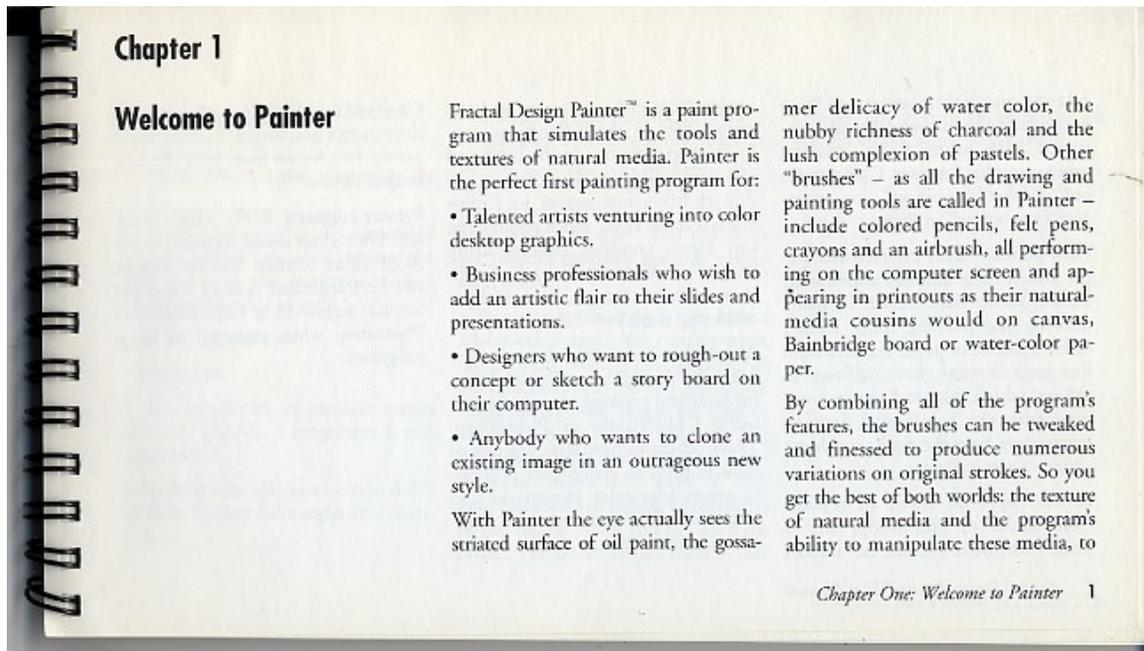
The reason I had trouble understanding Mark was that he was speaking what I'll call algorithm-ese, or computer programming jargon. After awhile, Mark's algorithm-ese began to sound familiar to me, even though I didn't understand it, in the way that one can tell if one is hearing French or Spanish without actually knowing the language.

I'll never forget when Apply Lighting was introduced and Mark told me how it worked. I wasn't hearing the familiar algorithm-ese and I asked him what realm of knowledge we were in, and he said physics, another one of those subjects that this English major somehow missed.

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It turned out that my journalism experience and my art background were a perfect fit for writing the Painter manuals. I was able to interview Mark, combine what I could pick up from our conversations with what I could discover by painting with the software and write it all up in easy-to-understand steps. Painting with Painter changed my life.



Since it was art software, playing around with Painter to see how it worked meant painting day and night, every day, for almost a year, which was the most painting I had ever done up until then.

Painting digitally gave me confidence to paint that I never had and that I was able to carry over to painting with traditional media. And the more I painted, the better I got at it. It was kind of shocking since I had never thought of myself as an artist.

After I wrote the first Painter manual, I was invited to demo Painter at its debut at the August 1991 Boston Macworld.

I had never demo'd software before, but figured I could do it because having written the manual, I knew the software inside and out, or so I thought. I got to the Wacom booth, where Mark was demo'ing Painter, and I was up next. I thought I'd watch him for ideas for when it was my turn. But what was this? He was showing something I had never seen before, but I had just spent every day with Painter for close to a year!



Mark had written Tracing Paper into Painter the night before in his hotel room and I saw it for the first time in that demo the next day. It was just an example of how amazing those days were, to say the least. Software companies today have teams of programmers and development cycles that take years, and here was someone writing a program in his hotel room the night before the software's debut.

I got a lot of great feedback about the Painter 1.0 manual and the guys at Fractal liked it so much that they had me write the manuals for the next several versions. One night that stands out is a few years after Painter's debut, I attended a talk by children's book authors and illustrators Don and Audrey Wood. They discussed the change from creating children's books traditionally to moving over to the computer. They went into detail about using Painter version 1.0 for all their illustrations. Don created storyboards for his talk, illustrating his experiences learning Painter. They were great drawings showing how the Woods worked around the clock to master the transition to digital, and one storyboard that I remember projected on the screen was a drawing of Don Wood with the computer and the 1.0 Painter manual that was in the form of a sketchbook open next to him, and he described his fascination with Painter and how much he loved the manual.

I told the Woods after their talk that I wrote the manual. What they did upon hearing the news really surprised me. They started bowing down to me, literally. That was pretty cool and it was a testament to how Painter touched artists' lives then and continues to do so today, and I was honored to be a part of it from the beginning.

In the 20 years since Painter's debut, many artists and photographers have discovered the joys of using Painter and have created amazing art with it, and I'm happy to have been involved with helping them get the most out of the software.

I'm not surprised to still be writing about how to use Painter 20 years later. I decided in college to be a journalist and using my writing to help people to learn Painter is a logical and fun field for me to be in.

What is surprising is that in the past few years, I have become an artist myself, creating commissioned portraits and abstract paintings that have been exhibited in Los Angeles, New York's prestigious Chelsea art section and during Art Basel Miami Beach, the biggest art event in the U.S. I never thought I'd be an artist, and it's thanks in large part to the time I spent trying to figure out Painter. Come to think of it, it's lucky I couldn't completely understand Mark Zimmer. Maybe if I could, I wouldn't have had so much practice painting, and would never have become an exhibited and commissioned artist.

Funny how things work out.

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