



CAS/TECH REVIEW

By Chris and Kathi Morrison

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Corel's CorelDRAW® Graphics Suite 12

Integrated applications and smart tools all in one box

It's a great time to buy a new computer — you can purchase a decent system for approximately \$500 and a screening system for less than \$1,500. Plus, plan on spending an additional \$500 for a quality software program. Quality graphics software is a must for signmakers, and it seems to demand high prices.

Although you can upgrade most sign packages to accommodate different situations, upgrades can double, and sometimes triple, your software costs. In many cases, you can justify this expense. However, if you can't, you might consider an off-the-shelf solution, which can cost up to \$1,000.

One of the best buys available is CorelDraw's Graphics Suite, which costs less than \$400 (\$179 for an upgrade), and offers full-featured drawing tools, a solid image-editing page, and numerous utilities, fonts and graphics. The latest incarnation, Version 12, comprises an exciting new tool, and several productivity and compatibility improvements.

The suite

For most of the review, we'll focus on CorelDraw, although other Corel programs are available, including Photo-Paint 12, Trace 12 and R.A.V.E. 3.

Because the suite comprises numerous fonts, remembering all the type faces can be difficult. The Bit Stream Font Navigator facilitates your drawing tasks. This tool displays all the fonts loaded on your system, on CDs or in other storage areas. In addition, you can click on a font to preview it, as well as install and/or uninstall fonts directly from this application.

Finally, Corel features a few utilities that focus on printing. A duplexing wizard allows you to

print documents on both sides of the paper even if you don't own a mechanical duplexer. If you want to send work out for typesetting and offset printing, a service-bureau profiler can help you prepare the files prior to submission.

In addition, the suite comprises numerous fonts, clipart images, photographs, symbols and textures. Every application module features an integrated tutor located under the Help menu. Plus, the suite contains a tutorial CD, complete with real-time examples, of all the program's new features. Online help and a 500-page user's guide are also available.

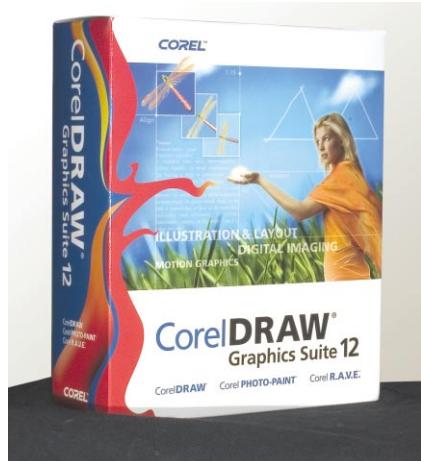
CorelDraw 12

Primarily, CorelDraw is a vector-graphics application that includes powerful text-editing capabilities and the ability to work with bitmapped images within the same drawing.

When you launch CorelDraw 12, a menu asks if you want to create a new drawing, or open an existing one. Selecting the New option presents the display shown in **Fig. 1**. The layout is virtually the same as in CorelDraw 11 — a clean interface that presents significant information in an easy-to-follow manner.

Using the button bar that appears below the menu bar, you can perform several editing features, including cut, copy and paste. The "rocket" icon launches such Corel Graphics Suite applications as Photo-Paint, Trace, and Capture. Furthermore, you can add other icons to this bar for commonly used menu-item functions.

The next row, context-sensitive buttons, will change when a tool or editing function is used. When a new drawing is created, you can change the size and orientation directly from this bar. If we select a drawing tool and draw a rectangle,



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for example, this bar's icons will change accordingly. Furthermore, if you need precise object drawings, you can enter *x* and *y* values. In addition, to precisely rotate an object, you can enter the angle.

Left of the working area is a tool palette, which comprises tools to create and edit a vector drawing — for selection, node-editing, line and freehand drawing, and creating such objects as rectangles and ovals. Most of the tools contain a small, black triangle near the bottom of the icon. If you click and hold down your mouse button on these triangles, fly-out menus offer further selections.

Right of the screen is the color palette; the bottom of the screen displays such information as current object color and line thickness, as well as information about the

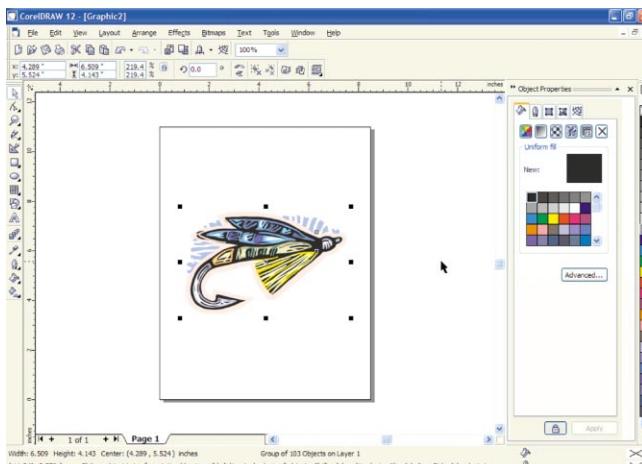


Fig. 1: Notice how well the tools and functions are laid out in CorelDraw 12's workspace.

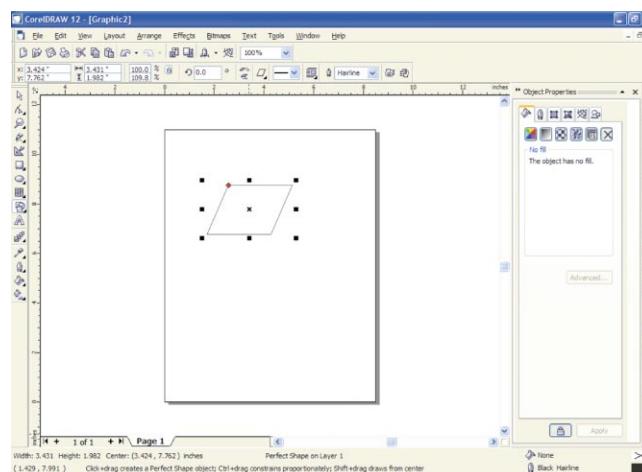


Fig. 3: This parallelogram was created using the Basic Shapes tool. Notice the red node in the corner of the object. Transformations objects work properly, but their basic form won't be distorted.

selected object. In addition, you can select dynamic menus (dockers) to manage objects and symbol libraries, for example. The dockers can be hidden or completely removed.

New intelligent tools

The program features one new tool, and several compatibility and performance enhancements. Primarily designed for use with a graphics drawing tablet, the Smart Drawing Tool recognizes more than 20 shapes. **Fig. 2** depicts a “before” and “after” view. In this case, we sketched a triangle; in the second view, it was automatically converted into a vector object. You can use a mouse, but this makes precision more difficult. If the tool can't determine whether you've drawn an object, it will convert the entry into a Bezier curve or line segments.

The tool will also convert some objects into a Basic Shape, which differs from a standard graphic primitive. A rectangle may only scale on one axis if not selected properly. When selected, the Basic Shape object (**Fig. 3**) will display a red node. Transformations of these objects will work properly, regardless of how they're selected.

In addition, the program contains some really cool productivity features. How many times have you tried to find tangents on circles, or catch the edge of a rectangle when building a shape? We usually need to zoom in as far as possible, and then use cursor keys, or object snap.

CorelDraw 12 (and the suite's other applications) incorporate a new object-snap and feedback method that documents reaching an object's center, edge, tangent,

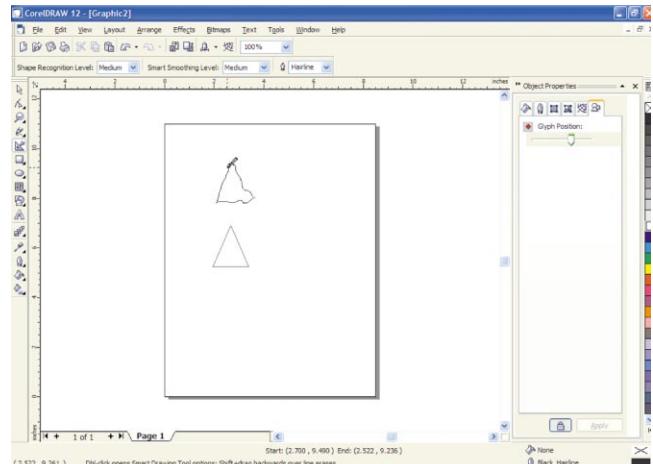


Fig. 2: The Smart Drawing Tool can convert freehand sketches into vector objects. The triangle on top was (poorly) sketched from a tablet; the triangle below has been converted.

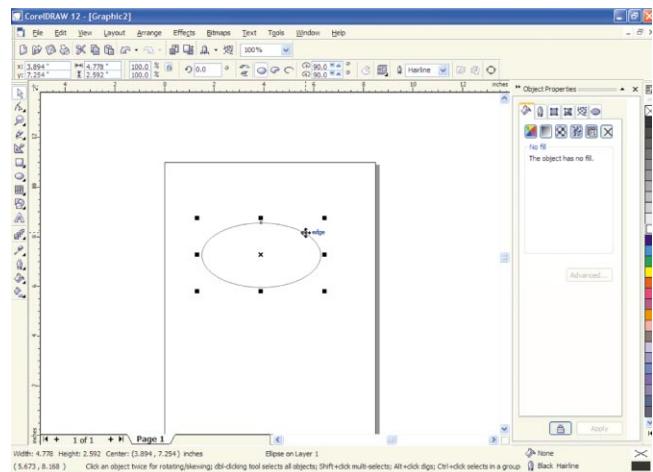


Fig. 4: Here we've passed the selection tool close to the ellipse's edge. Notice a small blue circle and the word “Edge.” You can see exactly where you are while editing or merging objects.

quadrant, etc. When activated in the Snap to Objects Options menu, when passing the cursor over an object, the snap point is displayed. **Fig. 4** depicts an ellipse edge.

Furthermore, the program offers Dynamic Guides. With other drawing packages, precisely positioning objects on the drawing surface is tedious. You can activate a grid, and, in some cases, you can use a guideline that appears on the screen, but doesn't print. These can create screen clutter, and, when offsetting objects at an angle, such features don't work.

Dynamic Guides presents temporary guidelines that appear when needed and then disappear. In addition, the guides work in conjunction with the snap feedback, so you can use an edge, center or node as the guide's starting point.

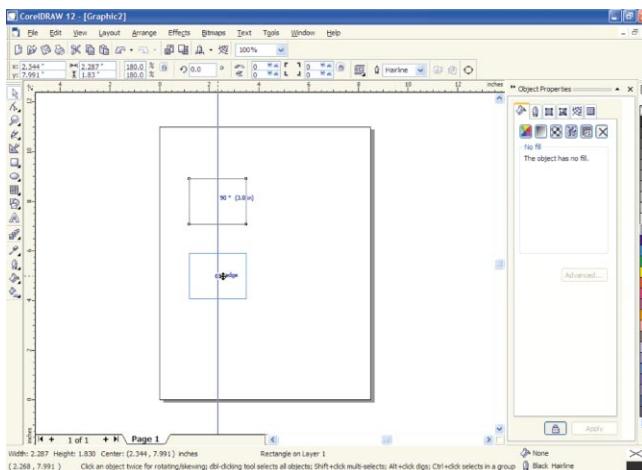


Fig. 5: Dynamic Guidelines presents temporary guidelines that appear when needed, and then disappear. Notice the guide is displayed, while the second rectangle is dragged into position, based on the first rectangle's top edge.

Fig. 5 shows the guide being displayed, while the second rectangle is dragged into position based on the first rectangle's top edge. A distance scale precisely measures the distance from the other object. This feature requires a learning curve, but once you're acclimated, you may never need a grid or guidelines again.

Corel further enhanced the object snap to incorporate the text baseline. Usually, alignment operations rely on the text's bounding box. If you try to align two pieces of text using a horizontal top, the text may not line up properly if caps and descenders are in the text (a lower case "g" or "q," for example). You can now align on the text baseline, and the two text pieces will line up perfectly.

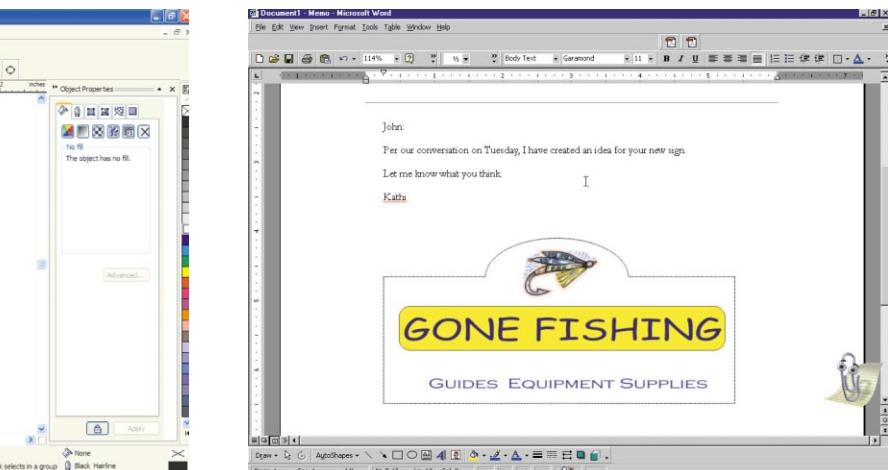


Fig. 6: Pasting graphics into Microsoft Word or PowerPoint can be tedious. However, CorelDraw 12's Export to Office feature facilitates this task. This letter/quote was created in CorelDraw and then exported into a Word document.

CorelDraw has always featured robust set routines for importing and exporting files. Virtually every graphic type, both bitmapped and vector, is supported. CorelDraw also has a built-in PDF converter — you can create your own PDF files without purchasing a separate converter package.

The program's most notable addition is its ability to export Corel drawings into a Microsoft Office-readable format. You can export in either a non-editable display mode, which offers the best-looking graphics, or export them in a format that Word can edit. If you use MS Office for word processing and/or PowerPoint presentation, you can now create complex graphics for presentations and written materials (**Fig. 6**).

Conclusion

In many cases, your existing sign software may not be appropriate for bitmapped images, web graphics, presentations and/or marketing applications. However, purchasing individual packages, or upgrading your sign software, may prove costly.

CorelDraw 12 offers a most affordable and complete solution. The new features incorporate a great drawing tool, and numerous performance and capability enhancements. If you don't own Corel's Graphics Suite, take a look at it. If you own an older version, now's the time to upgrade. ■

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