

Preparing your image for submission using Picasa

Created for the New England Watercolor Society
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This tutorial is intended to assist artists with the preparation of photos of their paintings for digital submission to shows using software that is available for free download. Naturally, software that is free is more limited in the tools that it offers than its more expensive counterparts, but it can do an adequate job... and it's free!

The most important factor in arriving at a satisfactory final image is to start with a decent image. That fact is especially important with the limitations that come with free software.

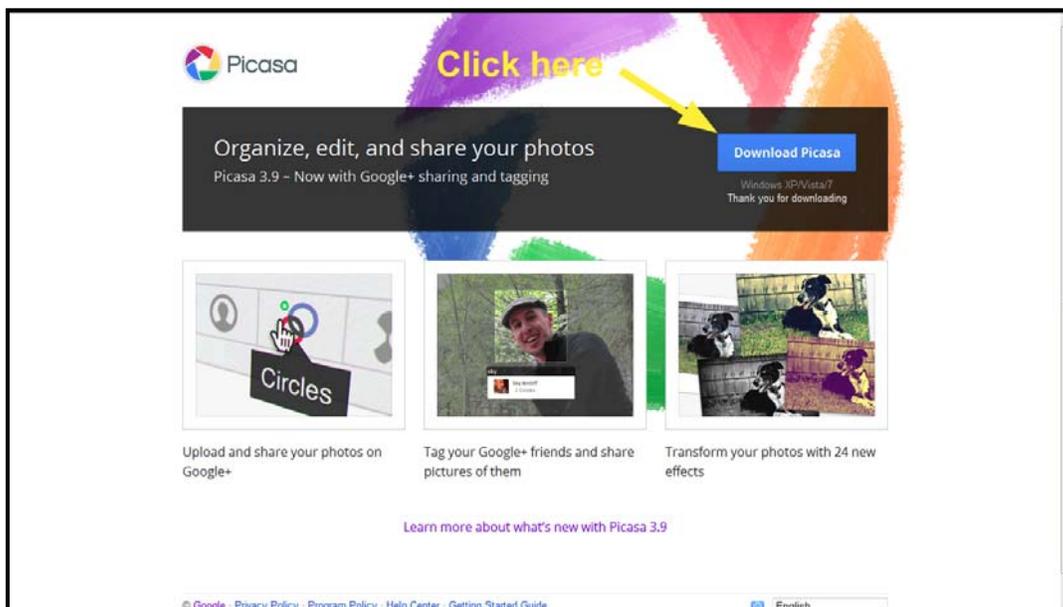
This tutorial is written for computers running Windows software. I'm using Windows 7. The instructions can be adapted to other versions of Windows and to Mac OS, but you will have to make those adaptations on your own.

Step 1 – Download and install Picasa

Picasa is a part of the Google family of software. It's available for download through a lot of different sites, but to be sure you're not downloading some virus along with the software, I recommend getting it directly from Google:

<http://picasa.google.com/>

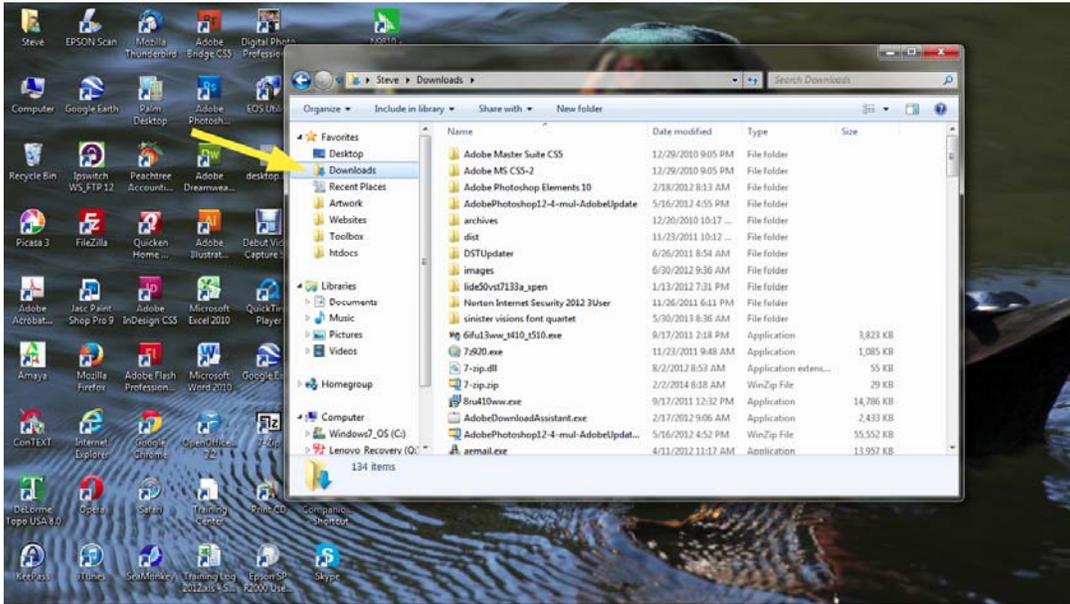
Click on the "Download Picasa" button. As I'm writing this, the webpage looks like the screenshot below. Webpages change though, so you may see something different.



Once you've clicked the download button, the software will be downloaded to your computer. The next challenge is to locate where it's been downloaded to. You may have been asked where to download to. If so, choose a location that's easy to find, like the desktop. If you didn't get asked, you'll probably find

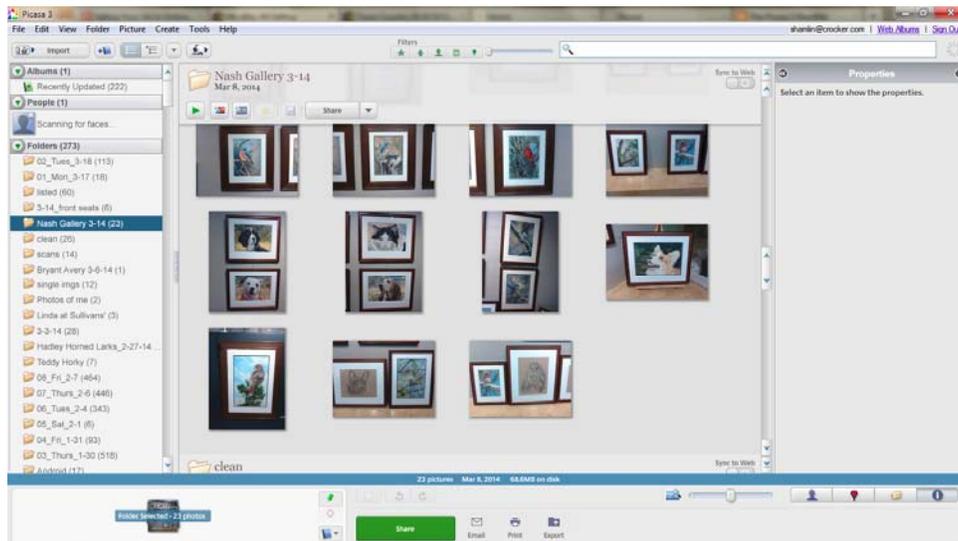
the file in a folder called “Downloads”. In older versions of Windows, you’ll find that in Documents and Settings in your main hard drive (C in most computers). In Windows 7, Downloads is in “Users”, but it’s also conveniently included by default under “Favorites.”

Click on the “Downloads” list item in the sidebar and look for the file you just downloaded. It will have Picasa in the name – because the current version at the time of this writing is 3.9, mine is called “picasa39-setup.exe”.



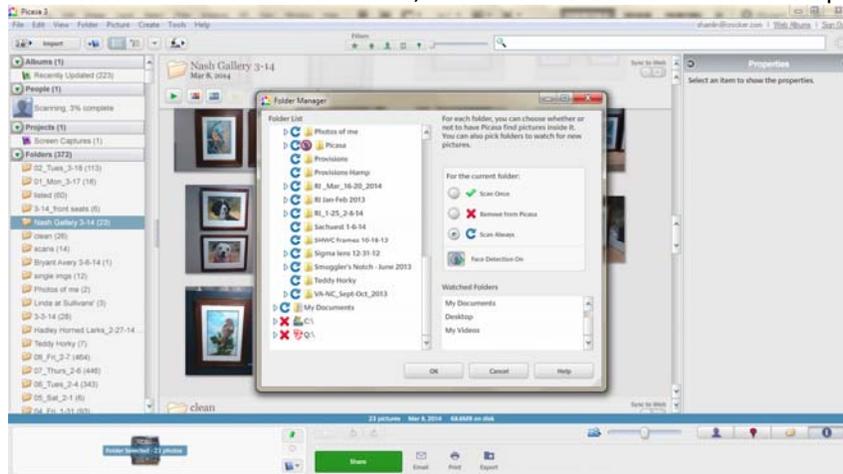
Double-click the file name and choose “Run.” Follow the instructions for installation. Unless there’s a reason to do otherwise, choose the default location and settings. You may want to uncheck the “send anonymous usage stats to Google” box on the “finish” screen.

Once you’ve finished installing, Picasa will begin cataloging all the images on your hard drive. Allow it to finish that process – a good time to get a cup of coffee or a bite to eat. Once it’s finished, you should have a screen that looks like the one below.



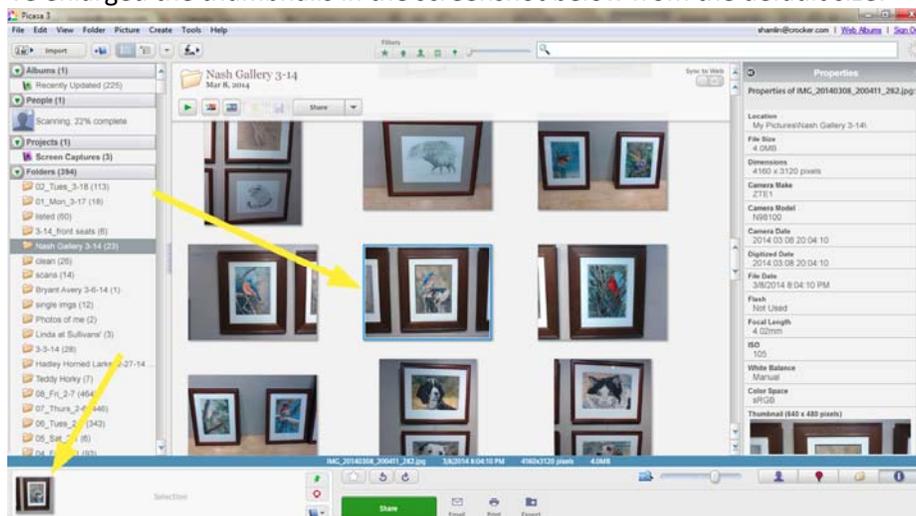
Step 2 – Open your image

Using the Picasa browser, locate your photograph(s). By default, Picasa locates and organizes image files from your libraries (My Pictures and My Documents). If you have your photos in a different location, say in a folder called “Artwork” in your C drive, you can add a folder so it’s included in the catalog of images in Picasa. Under the “File” menu, click “Add Folder to Picasa...” to open this screen:

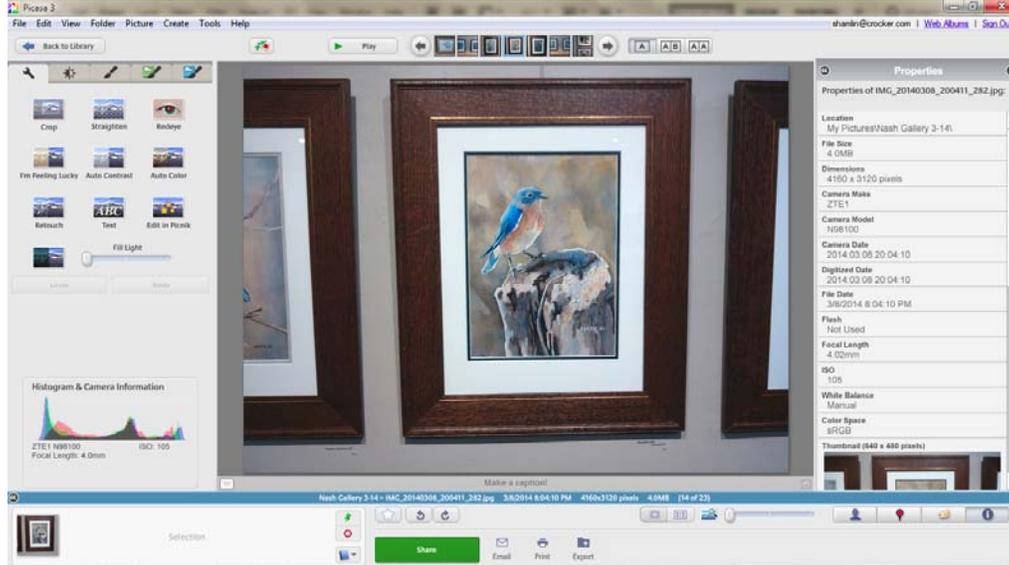


To locate a folder that’s in the C drive, click on the arrowhead next to “C:\”. A list will expand below that heading. Look for the folder that contains the photos you’re looking for (or that contains the subfolder(s) with the photos you’re looking for). Once you’ve located the folder that contains your photos, select either “Scan Once” or “Scan Always” from the list of choices in the upper right pane. Scan Once will add any images currently in that location to Picasa, but if you add images in the future, the new images won’t appear in Picasa. Scan always will track changes you make to the contents of the folder in question in Picasa as long as both remain on your computer.

Once your folder has been cataloged by Picasa, scroll to find it in the left column of the workspace (see the screenshot on the previous page) and click on the folder name to open it into the right pane. Locate the photo you intend to edit for submission and click on it. A blue box appears around the thumbnail signifying that you’ve selected it and a second thumbnail appears in the lower left corner of the workspace. I’ve enlarged the thumbnails in the screenshot below from the default size:



Once you've selected the image you want to work on, click on the "Picture" menu, then click on "View & Edit." The screen changes to look similar to the screenshot below:



I've chosen a photo I took at a recent exhibition for my example. Since I didn't shoot it with the intention of using it for a submission photo, it has some flaws that I won't be able to correct in Picasa, notably the parallax effect caused by having my camera above the art, rather than level and parallel with it. For help with photographing artwork to best effect, please see my suggestions.

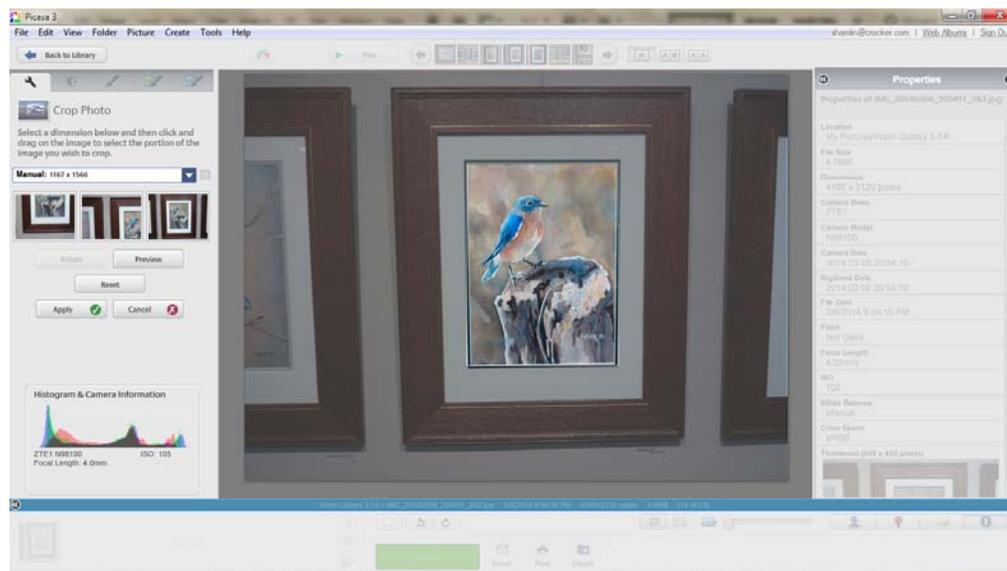
For the purposes of this tutorial, my photograph will work okay, demonstrating both the possible and the impossible.

The first thing I want to do is to crop all the information that isn't relevant. My goal is to eliminate everything but the artwork itself – matting, frame, and surrounding wall. To do that, I'll choose the crop tool (top left tool in the default tools tab in the left-hand pane). Hovering over the tool will bring up a "tool tip" that will confirm that you have the correct tool. In the screenshot below, I've clicked on the tool icon and expanded the menu of choices that the tool makes available.



We'll use the "Manual" option from the menu. Click on the arrow on the right end of the menu box to expand the menu and select "Manual" by clicking on it. Move your cursor to the upper left corner of the artwork (where you want the upper left corner of your cropped image to be) and, holding down the left button on your mouse, drag a box to where you want the lower right corner of your cropped image to be. Even after you release your mouse button, you can make adjustments to the crop area. Picasa helps you by graying out the area that will be cropped.

When you're satisfied that you've separated the art from the parts you want to crop out, click the "Apply" button to commit the crop. If you find it's not cropped enough or you've gone too far, you can undo the crop and try it again by clicking the "Undo Crop" button. Here's my image with the crop selected:

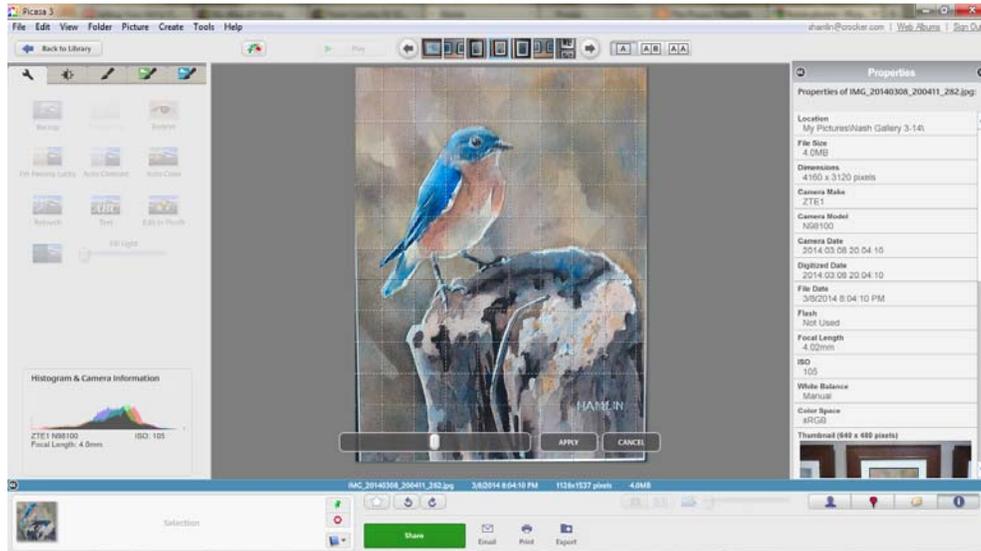


Here's my cropped image:



Step 3 – Straighten the image

My cropped photo shows a little of the mat at the bottom, but none at the top. The “Straighten” tool will help me correct that. To use that, I click on the Straighten tool (top center, just to the right of the Crop tool). Doing that places a grid of dotted lines, a slider and two buttons on top of my cropped image as in the screenshot below:



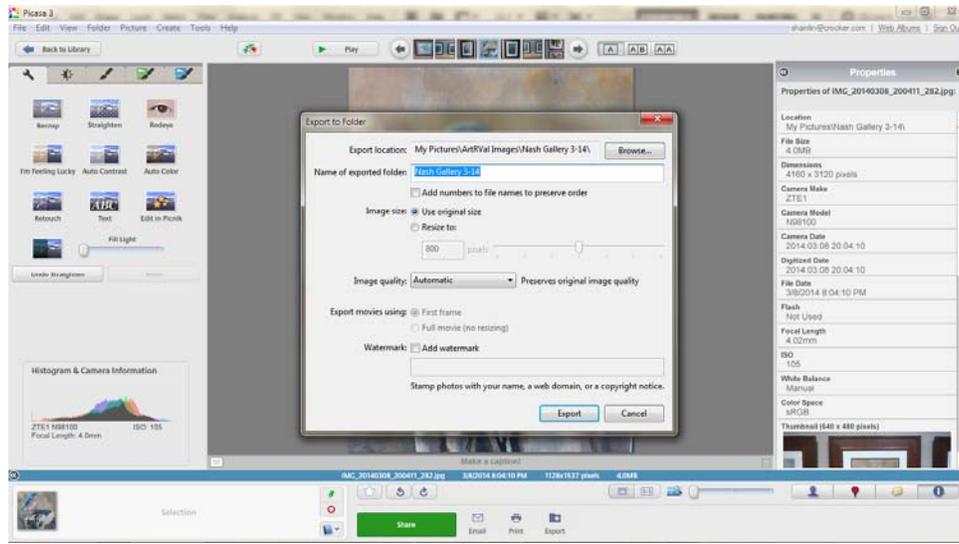
To use the tool, click on the slider handle and drag it to the left or the right. You’ll see the change happen as you drag the slider. For my photo, dragging to the left has the desired effect. Once you’re happy with the result shown by the preview, click the “Apply” button to make the straightening permanent. Like with the crop tool, you can back out of the straightening that you’ve just done by clicking the “Undo Straightening” button in the tools pane. Here’s my photo after straightening:



Step 4 – Resize your image on export

Everything you've done up to now has been temporary. Until you export the image, you haven't saved any of the changes you've made. During the export, you'll have the opportunity to save it in a different place and change the size of the image and compression of the file.

To save the changes you've made, click the File menu and choose "Export Picture to Folder." That will bring up the screen in this screenshot:



The top box (highlighted in my screenshot) allows you to choose a different folder to save the edited image file to. By default, the folder the original file is in is selected. If you type a name into that field, a folder will be created with that name. If you'd like to save the file to an existing folder other than the one that contains the original file, use the "Browse" button above and to the right of that field and navigate to and select the appropriate folder.

Below that field is a checkbox labeled "Add numbers to file names..." You should be able to skip that unless you're saving a bunch of files to the same location with the same name.

Next is a pair of radio buttons. By default, the first is selected ("Use original size"). We'll want to check the second ("Resize to:"). Clicking on that has two effects: it unchecks the original size button and enables the field and slider below it (those are grayed out until we click the button). We can select our size either by entering a value in the box or by moving the slider. Check the prospectus of the show you're submitting to for the appropriate value. If it's 1200 pixels (long dimension), either enter "1200" into the field or move the slider to the 1200 pixel position. The slider only offers a limited number of choices, while the box will accept any value you enter.

The final choice available to us is the image quality. This refers to the compression of the file. The JPEG file format uses "lossy compression," meaning that every time a file is saved some of the original information is discarded resulting in image degradation over succeeding generations. The image quality choice that Picasa offers allows us to preserve as much of the quality of the original image as is appropriate.

There are times when file size trumps image quality, but preparing an image for submission to a show is not usually one of them. If you save the file at the highest quality (Maximum in the Picasa menu) and the file size exceeds the allowable size for upload (you'll get an error message if that happens), redo this process using the next choice down. For most images, the Maximum setting will work and will give you the highest quality image file for the jury to make their selection with.

Once you're satisfied with the selections you've made, click the "Export" button to save the file and you're done.

Beyond the basics - Other tools

Picasa has a bunch of other tools for editing and enhancing images. Most of them are of little use for images intended for submission to art shows and all of them are beyond the scope of this tutorial. Some of the tools intended for correcting exposure and color can be useful. It's worth experimenting with them, especially if the only photo you have is underexposed or was shot with the wrong color balance settings and you don't have the painting available to reshoot.

If you find that the steps outlined here don't result in a photo that will represent your artwork well, you should probably take a new photograph. It's usually easier and more productive to take a new photo than to try to salvage a bad one.