

U3A Digital Imaging – 20 March 2009

Layer Masks

Working on a single image, you can make all sorts of changes. But if you make a mistake it is very difficult to undo it, without undoing everything else you have done since.

Layers allow you to work on different elements of an image independently. Layers act like acetate sheets stacked on top of each other, so where they are left transparent you can see the layers underneath. Each layer, or sheet, can be moved, brightened, de-saturated etc. quite independently of the rest. You can go back to one layer and change it as often as you like without affecting any of the others.

However, if you erase something from a layer you cannot get it back without, again, undoing everything you have done since.

Layer masks allow you to go one step further. Instead of creating transparent areas in the image itself, you create the effect of transparency by painting the corresponding part of the mask black. Where the mask is black you can see through the layer to the one below. Where it is white you see the layer itself.

So, you can erase something by simply painting black on the mask. But now, if you find you erased too much, you can go back later and 'recover' it by painting the mask white again.

Examples:

If you want to add an element from a different image without using masks, you must make a very accurate selection, then copy and paste it. If you don't like the result you may have wasted a lot of time. With masks you can make a very quick and rough selection and create a mask from that. If you like the result you can now go back and tidy up the mask; if you don't, you've not wasted much time.

You can achieve semi-transparency by painting the mask grey. Very useful if you want to merge one element onto another with no sharp and obvious join between them.

If you must pause working on an image and save it for another day, the history is not saved. Therefore you cannot go back and undo mistakes. However, layers and masks are saved, so many corrections may still be made.

Advanced workers will often use a dozen or more layers, each for a different part of the picture. By adjusting and re-adjusting each and their associated masks they can work to balance and optimise the whole image.

Layer Masks in Photoshop Elements

Layer masks are one of the most important omissions from Photoshop Elements – or so Adobe would have you believe. But there are two ways in which you can use them just as in full Photoshop.

Method 1:

Create a new layer in the normal way.

Now create a levels adjustment layer beneath the layer you want masked. Do this by clicking on the half-black, half-white disc at the top of the layers palette and selecting 'levels'.

Now Alt-click on the line between the two new layers, thus 'grouping' them together. The mask in the adjustment layer will now act as a mask for the image layer above it.

Method 2:

Go to <http://graphicssoft.about.com/od/pselements/qt/layermasktool.htm>

From here you can download a piece of software that implements layer masks in PS Elements (note that there are different versions for different versions of Elements). Once installed, you can add a mask by going to 'Styles and Effects' and selecting 'Layer Mask'.