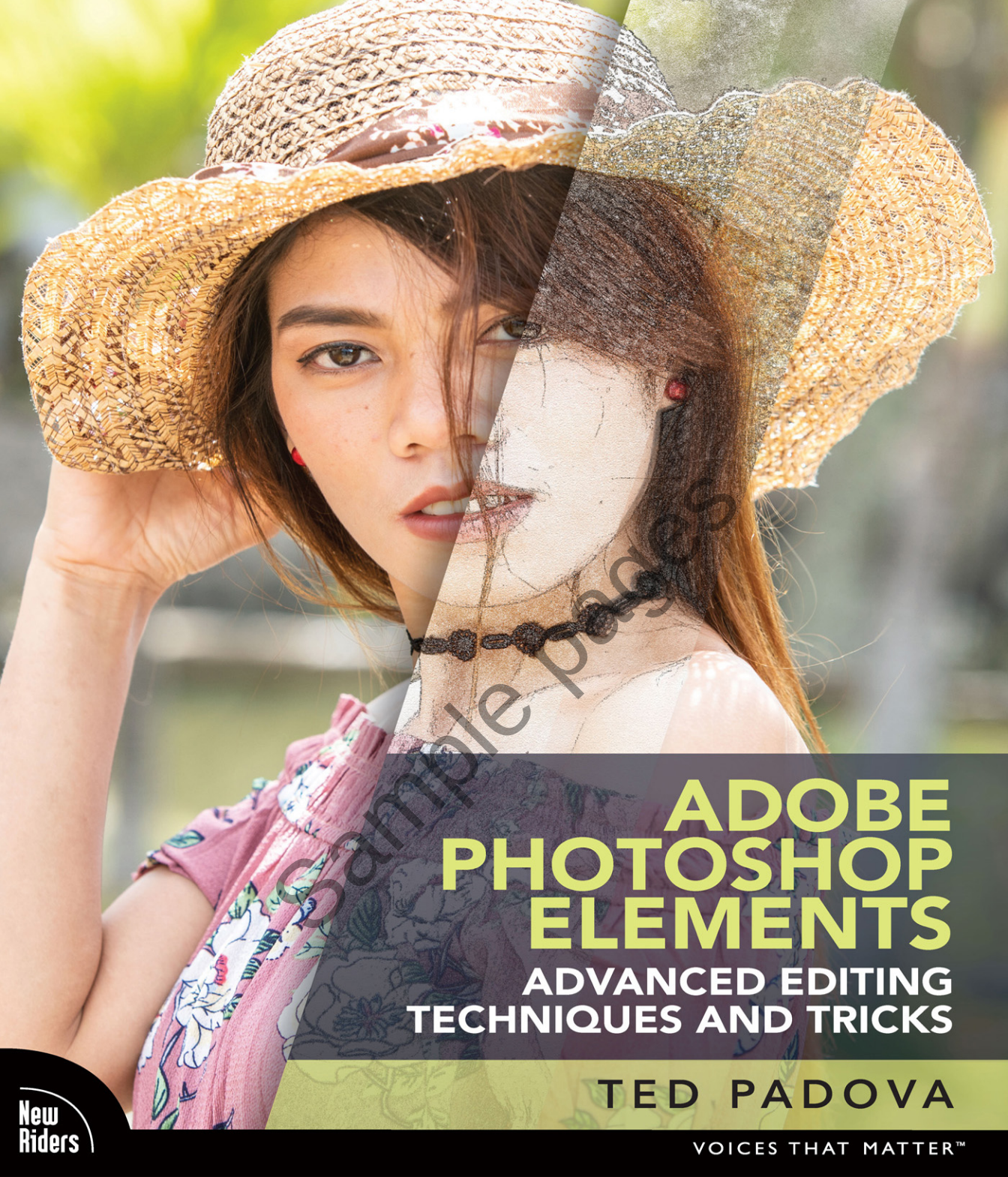

ADOBE PHOTOSHOP ELEMENTS

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CHAPTER 8

COMPOSITING IMAGES

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Chapter Goals

The ability to composite images is perhaps one of the techniques that best illustrates the power of a photo editor. Image compositing is taking two or more images, or taking different areas in a single image, and bringing them together in another photo for either realistic final results or artistic expression. For example, poor uncle Ezekiel couldn't make it last Christmas, but you want him in the family photo, so you take one photo of him and add it to your group photo.

There's much to consider when compositing images or applying edits to different parts of a single image: lighting, perspective, and the right composition to make it appear realistic. It's important to become familiar with certain rules to follow for compositing images so the final result looks realistic. You need to be certain subjects don't float on backgrounds, the luminosity and brightness closely resemble all components, that the colors match, and hue/saturation levels are similar.

This chapter covers the many considerations you need to make when compositing images. You find out how to do the following:

- Become familiar with essentials for compositing images
- Understand perspective
- Use Photomerge
- Match color
- Add shadows
- Add photos to high grass

Knowing Compositing Essentials

There are some important essentials you should know when compositing images. As you examine photos, you should carefully look at the images you want to bring together. In some cases, it may be next to impossible to bring images together. In other cases, you might want to choose one image over another because your steps to composite with one image might be easier than with another image.

Here are some of the most important essentials for compositing images:

- **Perspective:** Perhaps the single most important essential for image compositing is matching perspective between images. You need to become familiar with perspective rules and know something about horizon lines and vanishing points. When you have a mismatch in a composite image, the viewer immediately can see that the final image is a fake. People floating in air, proportion distortions, and unrealistic rotations are immediately viewed as fake by anyone seeing your final photos.

  Figure 8.1 shows an exaggerated example, but it gives you the idea of issues in perspective. The image on the left shows the subject floating in air and obviously not properly placed in this composite. The problem is the horizon line for the background is where the water meets the sky. In the subject image on the right of Figure 8.1, the horizon line is at the top of the subject's head, and the composite looks more realistic.

- **Resolution:** The resolutions of two or more images don't have to be exact, but they should not be extremely different, such as 72 ppi for one image and 300 ppi for the other. When compositing images, choose Image > Resize > Image Size. Set identical resolutions for both images. If you need some scaling, you can scale images on the composite layers. Be careful to not upsize a photo. Increasing resolution can severely degrade your images.

- **Brightness and contrast:** Adjust brightness and contrast after bringing one image into another. You can use a Levels Adjustment Layer and clip the Adjustment Layer to the layer where you adjust brightness and contrast. You should try to get a close match for brightness and contrast between images in the composite.

Sample pages

FIGURE 8.1 Horizon lines don't match in the left image; the right image is a closer match of horizon lines.

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NOTE: The amount of noise introduced in photos at higher ISO numbers varies greatly between different cameras. Older DSLR (Digital Single Reflex) cameras introduced a lot of noise at ISO levels of 1,600 to 3,200. Some of the new mirrorless cameras can have much less noise apparent in photos taken at ISO levels of 6,000 to 8,500. To know more about the tolerance of noise in photos compared to ISO settings, take a lot of test shots and know your camera before attempting to composite images. View your images at 100% and look through areas where you see a lot of solid color. That's usually an area where you can find noise if it exists.

- **Film grain and noise:** The thing to look out for when you try to composite two or more images is where there's a lot of disparity in the noise level between the images. If you shoot one image at 100 ISO and another at 12,000 ISO, you'll see quite a bit of disparity between the noise levels. In some cases, you might be able to use a background with high noise levels and blur the background to create a little more depth of field. But when using two or more foreground subjects and one has a high noise level whereas the other photo is absent of noise, the difference can be easily detected.

- **Scale:** Scale images appropriately for the perspective. Unfortunately, the Elements Photo Editor does not provide an option to create a Smart Object. If you have the Elements+ plug-in, you can create Smart Objects. A Smart Object enables you to edit a layer nondestructively.
- Nondestructive editing is particularly important when you scale a layer. While compositing, you find yourself moving, scaling, and observing results frequently. You try to finesse adjustments to try to get the best possible results that appear realistic.

For more information on simplifying layers, see Chapter 4, "Working with Layers."

- If you scale a layer in the Photo Editor many times, the image will show obvious deterioration. One way to get around the problem is to use File > Place and place a photo on a layer in the Photo Editor. When using the Place command, the content comes in as a Smart Object. You can then scale and move the object many times without data loss. You need to convert the Smart Object to a simple layer using the Simplify Layer command in the Layer panel menu before you can apply other edits to the layer. However, use the File > Place command and address scaling as one of your first edits when compositing images in Photoshop Elements. For more on placing files in the Photo Editor, see the section later in this chapter "Placing Images."
- **Placement:** Scaling and matching perspective are very important when compositing images. Equally important is where you place an image in the composite. You have to continually be aware of the perspective and scaling as you move an image around the canvas.
- **Masking:** When you create selections and add Layer Masks, the selections and ultimately the masks should be precise. If you have images with shadows, it's often a good idea to include a part or all of a shadow in the mask. When you drop the image into a composite, you can edit the shadow to make a good fit.
- **Lighting:** When you bring two or more images together in a composite, carefully observe the lighting and, in particular, the direction of the lighting. You want to avoid having two images with lighting coming from different directions. In Figure 8.2, you can see the obvious difference in lighting between the foreground subject and the background. The background photo was taken in harsh sunlight. The foreground subject was taken with much softer light.
- **Color balance:** One of the last edits you make when compositing images is to balance color. Try to get the luminosity, saturation, and color balance matching in all images in the composite.

For more on clipping groups, see Chapter 5, "Masking Photos."

Sample pages

FIGURE 8.2 Shadow on the subject is much less than the background elements.

- **Blending:** Be careful when using blending modes. The Darken group darkens all layers below the Darken layer. Likewise, the Lighten group lightens all layers below the Lighten layer. Areas that are darker make the background darker. When you want to use a blending mode to change values on one layer, be certain to create a clipping group. The same holds true for all Adjustment Layers.

Sample page

Understanding Perspective

Perhaps the most important consideration to make when compositing images is to have your photos in proper perspective. You might be able to get away with oversights in brightness, lighting, color, saturation, and so on. However, when you're off with perspective, people squirm a little. They look at your photo, and although they might not be able to say what's wrong with it, they just know things aren't right.

There are many different types of perspective. You can have one-point angular perspective, two-point oblique perspective, and perspectives with three, four, five, and even six vanishing points. Once you get to three-point perspectives, things become a little confusing. For all intents and purposes, knowing all about one- and two-point perspectives is a good start and will handle most of your compositing needs.

Identifying the Horizon Line

One of the first things you want to do when editing photos is to look at the horizon line to determine if a photo needs some straightening with the Straighten tool. When you look for images you want to combine in a composite, first identify the horizon line. If the horizon line is high, it means the camera was on a low plane when the shot was taken. Conversely, if the horizon line is low, it means the camera was on a higher plane when the shot was taken.

Position of the horizon line has great impact on your ability to composite photos. If you need to position a subject very high or very low to maintain perspective, you may not be able to use photos you want to use in a composite.

It's very easy to find the horizon line when you see the sky meeting the land (or water) in a photo. In other photos, you may need to search for the vanishing point to find the horizon line (see Figure 8.3).

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FIGURE 8.3 When you identify the vanishing point, it's easy to find the horizon line.

Visualizing Vanishing Points

Objects are shaped along a line in a photo toward the vanishing point. Where the opposing lines converge, you find the vanishing point (see Figure 8.4). At the vanishing point, you also find the horizon line.

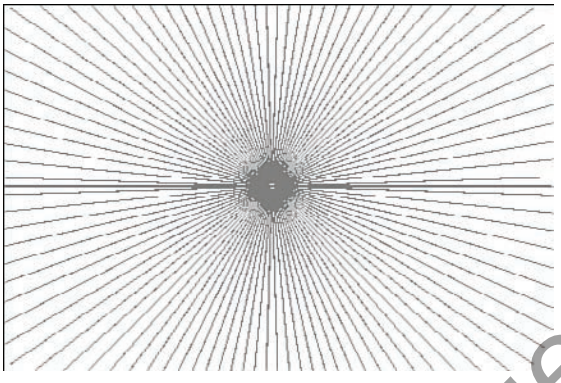

FIGURE 8.4 A one-point vanishing point.

If you're standing in front of the horizon line and look ahead, a one-point vanishing point would be somewhere along the horizon line. If you look straight ahead at the vanishing point, you might see objects and buildings falling along lines similar to what you see in Figure 8.5.

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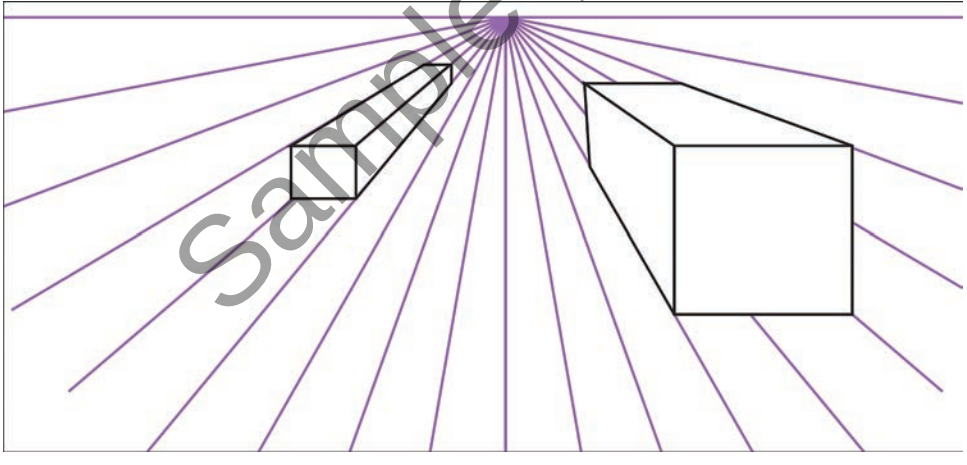

FIGURE 8.5 Parallel lines from objects converging at a vanishing point.

You can have more than one vanishing point in an image. A two-point vanishing point grid is shown in Figure 8.6. The parallel lines on two sides of an object converge at two different vanishing points.

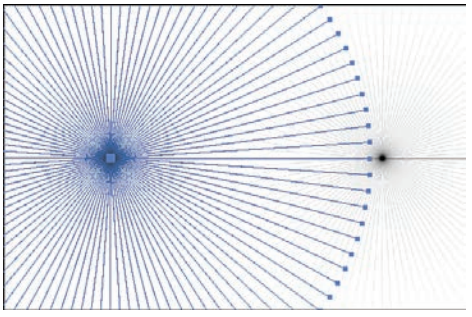

FIGURE 8.6 A two-point vanishing point grid.

Like one-point vanishing points, two-point vanishing points have parallel lines from two directions converging at the vanishing points. As shown in Figure 8.7, the objects have two sides with lines converging at two vanishing points.

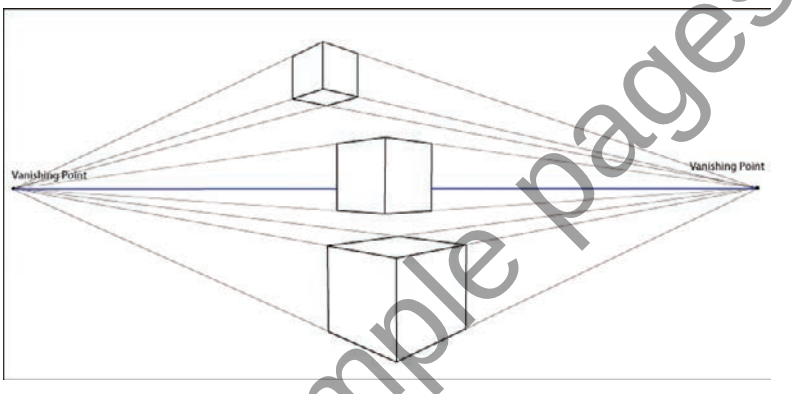

FIGURE 8.7 Objects with lines converging to form two vanishing points.

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When compositing images, you want to know where the horizon line is in your images. When you have difficulty finding a horizon line, try to draw lines that converge to locate the horizon line.

Using Perspective When Compositing Images

When you have two images that you want to bring together on a single canvas, you start by creating a selection and Layer Mask on one or both images, depending on the content and what you want in your final photo. This example uses a Layer Mask on one image and brings it into the second image.

Finding the Horizon Lines

After you create a Layer Mask, find the horizon lines in both images. I'm starting with my photo with the mask. If you have a Layer Mask, press Shift and click on the mask to hide it. If the horizon line is easy to see, as shown in Figure 8.8, draw a line where you see the horizon line.

FIGURE 8.8 Locate the horizon line in the first image.

When you use the line tool, a new layer is automatically created. You can later dismiss the layer when adding the photo to another photo. Save this photo by choosing File > Save As and save the photo as a .psd file including layers and a new name before moving on.

Open the second image. In my example, Figure 8.10 is the target image where I'm creating the composite. Locate the horizon line in this image. In my example photo, the horizon line is not as easy to detect. I draw two lines along the base of the trees on either side of the photo. Where the lines converge is fairly close to the horizon line, as you can see in Figure 8.9. Each line creates a new layer. When you're sure the lines are as you want them, hide all other layers and choose Merge Visible from the Layer panel menu. Only the line layers are merged. Show all layers and save the file as a .psd including layers.

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FIGURE 8.9 Locate the horizon line by drawing lines that converge at the horizon.

Placing Images

Next, you want to create a Smart Object from the file you're importing into the final composite image.

Return to the first photo and hide all layers but the layer with the mask. Return to the composite target image and choose File > Place. When you place a photo in the Photo Editor, the file comes in as a Smart Object, which means you can scale the photo any number of times without destroying data.

As you can see in Figure 8.10, the placed photo comes in at the center of the image. Notice the horizon line for this photo is above the subject's head. Click the green check mark to commit the placement of the image. Notice that placing photos with Layer Masks retains the masked area. The placed image does not have a mask. The masked-out areas are deleted when you place the file.

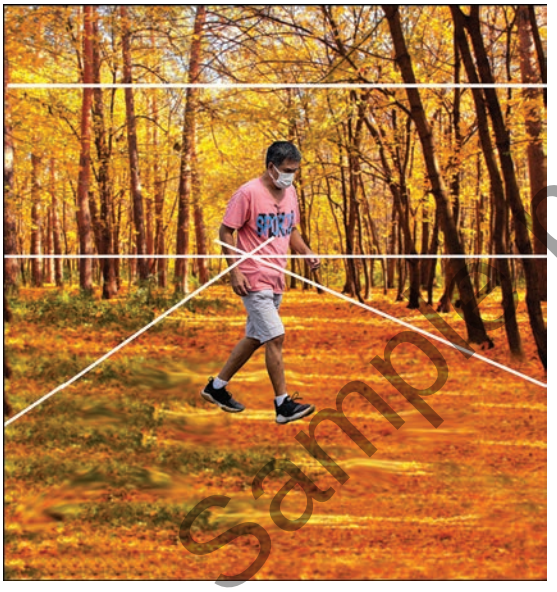

FIGURE 8.10 A file placed in the target composite image.

Sample pages

Scaling Images

The next task is to scale and place the image in position. You can't use filters in the Filter menu or menu commands in the Enhance menu on a Smart Object. Therefore, you need to spend time deciding precisely what scaling you want for the photo. After scaling an image, you need to rasterize the layer by choosing Simplify Layer in the Layers panel menu.

In my example, I know the horizon line for the placed image is slightly above the subject's head. The horizon line is identified in the target image; therefore, I first need to move the placed image's horizon line so it matches with the target image's horizon line. When the placement looks good, press Ctrl/⌘

+ T to scale the image. Press Alt/Option + Shift and drag a corner handle to size the photo. When you use Alt/Option, the photo scales up or down while maintaining the placement on the horizon line. Pressing the Shift key constrains the sizing proportionately. In Figure 8.11, you can see the final scaling of the photo I placed in my target composite image. Compare Figure 8.10 with Figure 8.11. The subject looks more natural in respect to walking on the ground rather than floating above the ground.

TIP: If you want to scale the placed photo, you can maintain the position on the horizon line as you scale up or down. First, press Alt/Option and click the tiny icon in the center of the image. This is an anchor point. Move the anchor point to where the horizon line intersects with the photo. Press the Alt/Option key and scale the image by dragging a corner handle. The image is scaled from the anchor point, thereby maintaining the same position on the horizon line.

FIGURE 8.11 Drag a handle to scale a photo while maintaining the placement.

At this point, you can hide the lines layer and begin to work on brightness/contrast and color matching. You also could look at creating a little shadow at the subject's feet and even a shadow for the figure, but I don't go into that detail here.

Using Photomerge Guided Edits

In the Guided Edits panel, there are six separate guided edits you can choose from for compositing images. That should give you an idea for how important photo compositing is.

The Guided Edits for Photomerge can provide for some quick photo compositing. In some cases, the final edits are very satisfactory. In other cases, you might want to also do some manual edits when merging photos. However, sometimes you may want to avoid a Guided Edit altogether and perform all steps manually. It all depends on the images you use and the results you want.

Using Photomerge Compose

The first Guided Edit is the Photomerge Compose item. This Guided Edit walks you through steps to bring objects from one photo into another photo. Open two files in the Photo Editor. In the Photo Bin, you should see only two photos.

Open the Guided Edit panel and click the Photomerge tab. Click the first item where you see Photomerge Compose. The first screen that opens asks you to drag and drop the file from which you intend to extract a subject or object.

Unfortunately, selections in the Guided Edit are very crude. You can muddle through the options for selecting and extracting a subject, but in the Photo Editor, you have so many more refined tools and methods for creating selections and extracting subjects. All in all, you're better off following manual methods than using this Guided Edit for compositing images.

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Using Photomerge Exposure

You can use Photomerge Exposure in two ways. First, you can bring two totally different photos together in a composite and match exposures. The second option enables you to merge two or more identical photos. This feature is similar to merging HDR photos in Photoshop.

High Dynamic Range Photos

An HDR photo is a High Dynamic Range image. Many high-end cameras have an HDR setting that involves a rapid firing of three or more images shot at different f-stops. If your camera doesn't have an HDR option in the menu, you may have choices for bracketing photos.

HDR images are comprised of at least one photo for the highlights, one for the shadows, and one for the midtones. This essentially increases the dynamic range and enables you to capture highlight and shadow data that otherwise would not be captured in a single photo. If you have three photos taken at different f-stops, you need to merge the photos into a single image. Unfortunately, Photoshop Elements doesn't include a merge HDR option.

Merging Different Photos

Let's first take a look at merging two completely different photos. As a general rule, I wouldn't recommend using the Guided Edit for this kind of merge. You can match exposures much better manually than when using the Guided Edit.

You have an option for choosing Automatic or Manual. If you have two completely different photos, the Automatic setting lays one photo on top of the other and creates a double exposure look.

If you choose Manual, you can cut out one photo and merge it with the target document. In the Photomerge Exposure panel, click Manual at the top of the panel. Click the Pencil tool and draw around the object you want to add to another photo. You don't have to paint inside the object. Just draw an outline around it.

Painting the image for the cutout is very crude. You can do so much better with selection tools in the Photo Editor. For compositing images where you take a cutout from one image and add it to another, it's best to avoid this Guided Edit for compositing.

You may, however, find a different benefit for using this Guided Edit. Let's say you have two very different photos. You don't want to superimpose them; you just want to match the brightness in one image with another image. As a workaround, you could offset the photos so they don't overlap.

As an example, take a look at Figure 8.12. This photo has a reasonably good exposure, and the brightness values appear quite nice. Now look at Figure 8.13. This photo is a little dark, and the overall exposure isn't quite as good as the photo in Figure 8.12.

FIGURE 8.12 Photo with a reasonably good exposure.

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FIGURE 8.13 Photo that's a bit underexposed.

If I take both these photos and bring them into the Photomerge Exposure edit, the final result is two photos superimposed. But I don't want to merge the photos; I simply want to match the exposure,

To set up the files, first size them to the same resolution and physical size by using the Image > Resize > Image menu command. After you size the photos to the same size, resize the canvas area. On one photo, you want to add more canvas (double the width of the photo) to the right. On the other photo, you want to add the same amount of canvas area to the left. After I've added more canvas area to the photos, they look like Figure 8.14.

As you might suspect, after using the Guided Edit, when the photos are merged, they won't superimpose one on top of the other. Each photo merges with the empty space added by resizing the canvas.

With the two photos open in the Photo Editor, click the Guided tab to open the Guided Edits. Click the Photomerge tab and click Photomerge Exposure. As you can see in Figure 8.15, the photos appear adjacent to each other. Use the tools in the Photomerge Exposure panel to refine the brightness. When you are finished editing, click Next and click Expert to open the merged photos in the Photo Editor. At this point, if you want the photos saved separately, duplicate the image and crop each one to retain the image you want to save.

As you can see in Figure 8.16, the photo on the right more closely matches the overall brightness of the photo on the left. At this point, you might add some refinement by adding a Levels Adjustment layer to refine the brightness.

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FIGURE 8.14 More canvas area added to the two photos.

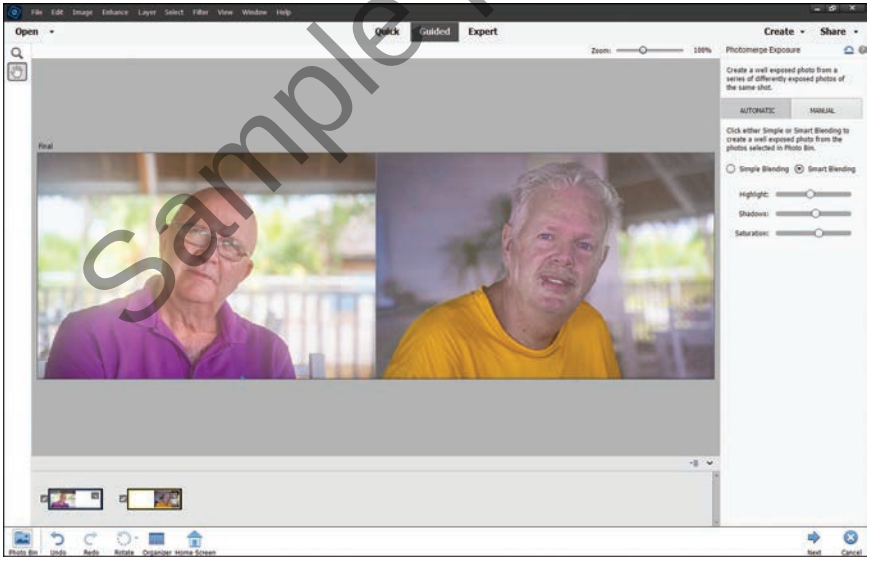

FIGURE 8.15 Photos appearing adjacent to each other in the Guided Edit Exposure panel.

If you need a quick fix for matching exposure between documents, this Guided Edit may be helpful.

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Merging Photos for an HDR Effect

Remember, an HDR photo is one derived from three or more exposures of the same scene. You use your camera to shoot a scene underexposed, overexposed, and normal exposure. The photos can then be merged using the Photomerge Exposure Guided Edit. For this kind of edit, you don't have a manual method to achieve the same result. If you shoot three exposures of the same scene, you must use this Guided Edit to merge the photos when using the Photo Editor.

Figure 8.16 shows the three photos I use in this example. You can use five or seven photos. Whatever bracketing your camera accommodates is what you can use to merge the photos. Typically, three photos work quite well for most images.

In Figure 8.16, the photo on the left was shot with an average exposure. The middle photo was an overexposed photo capturing as much detail as possible in the highlights. The photo on the right was underexposed to capture as much detail as possible in the shadows.

FIGURE 8.16 Three photos shot for creating an HDR image.

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With the three photos open in the Photo Editor, click the Guided Edit tab. Click Photomerge Exposure.

When you click Photomerge Exposure, the Guided Edit merges the three photos. The default option is Automatic, and this option is typically your best choice for merging photos for an HDR effect.

The Guided Edit panel, shown in Figure 8.17, provides some options for tweaking the composite image. When merging photos for an HDR effect, it's best to avoid using any settings in the Guided Edit panel. Click Next (see Figure 8.17). On the next screen, click Expert to return to the Expert editing mode.

You may want to tweak the overall exposure using a Levels Adjustment Layer and add some sharpening.

Figure 8.18 shows the photo shot with an average exposure. Figure 8.19 shows the same photo shot as an HDR and merged using the Photomerge Exposure Guided Edit. Notice the clouds have more detail in the HDR photo, and you also find much more detail in the shadows in the HDR photo.

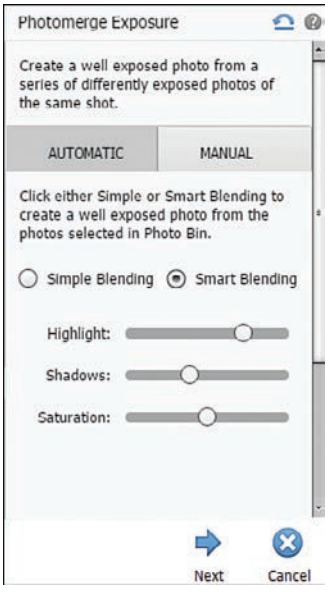

FIGURE 8.17 The Photomerge Exposure panel.

FIGURE 8.18 The merged HDR files.

FIGURE 8.19 The final HDR image after editing the merged files in the Camera Raw Editor.

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Using Photomerge Faces

This Guided Edit is just a fun type of edit you use to distort faces and create some goofy photos as pranks. You can play with it if interested. For the purposes of this book, we'll look at some more serious kinds of edits that can help professionals and serious amateurs.

Photomerging a Group Shot

When taking group shots, you often find one person smiling in one photo and the same person frowning in another photo, one person looking away from the others, or one individual who has their eyes open in one photo and closed in another photo. An easy fix to these kinds of problems is to use the Photomerge Group Shot Guided Edit. It's not perfect and sometimes doesn't work well, but in some cases, you may find it useful.

Figure 8.20 shows a nice photo of a group of people. However, the man on the left is not looking at the individual who is talking.

FIGURE 8.20 Group photo with one individual who's not looking at the speaker.

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If you have a second photo showing the individual looking in a different direction more consistent with the other subjects, you can merge the files. Use the second image as your final photo. Move the subject with the face forward from another photo to the final.

Open both images in the Photo Editor. Click the Guided Edit tab and click on the Photomerge Group Shot Guided Edit thumbnail. Drag the final image to the right placeholder. Select in the Photo Bin the image with the correct posture. Use the Pencil tool to draw around the subject in the left image in the Photo Bin. You can change the size of the pencil, and you can erase any unwanted selection. After you draw with the Pencil tool, you see a dynamic preview of the results, as shown in Figure 8.21.

Click Next and either save the photo or open it in Expert mode. In Figure 8.21, you can see the results of merging the photos. However, before I end this editing session, there's one more problem with the photo on the right. I need to do something about that sky. As you can see in the original image in Figure 8.20, the highlights in the sky are blown out.

FIGURE 8.21 Draw around the correct pose (left) to replace it in the final image (right).

Editing Skies

Quite often you can find photos that look good with foregrounds, but there are problems with the highlights, particularly with skies. You can see that the photo in Figure 8.20 has no detail in the sky. I need to add some color in the sky and perhaps add some clouds. Making these edits is quite simple.

You can edit a sky in a few different ways. You can copy a photo with a sky that will work well with your target image, or you can add a filter to create artificial skies.

Create a selection of the sky and press Ctrl/⌘ + J to create a new layer of just the selected area. Once you have a selection, you can copy a sky from another photo and choose Edit > Place into Selection.

If using a filter, click the foreground color swatch to open the Color Picker and choose a blue tone. Make sure you don't choose a highly saturated color. Click OK to return to the Document Window.

Choose Filter > Render > Clouds. Look over the results. Quite often, you may find the saturation of the sky color is too strong. If you create a layer, you can easily fix the problem of the oversaturated sky by moving the Opacity slider in the Layers panel to reduce the opacity in the layer.

The advantage you have with copying and pasting a sky photo is that you can easily see a preview of the sky. With a filter, you need to experiment and try different iterations of the clouds image.

In Figure 8.22, I copied a sky and pasted it into the target document.

TIP: If you use the Render > Clouds filter and you don't like the result, choose the filter again. Keep choosing the same filter to see different patterns. You can keep using the same filter, and each time the pattern changes. Choose the one that looks good to you.

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FIGURE 8.22 The final image after edits to the sky.

Photomerging a Panorama

This Guided Edit is used to stitch photos together from multiple photos to create a panorama photo. Before using the Guided Edit, you should make adjustments to the photos you'll be using to make preliminary adjustments for brightness, contrast, and color. You can add additional edits on the merged photo after composing in the Photomerge Guided Edit.

Editing Panorama Images

If you shoot Raw images, open all photos to be merged in the Raw Editor and synchronize edits. Make adjustments for Exposure, Contrast, Highlights, Shadows, Vibrance, and Saturation. Open the photos in Expert mode in the Photo Editor and choose Image > Mode > 8 Bits/Channel to reduce bit depth for each photo. Save the files; then open the Guided Edits and use the Photomerge Panorama option.

Shooting Panorama Images

If you want to take panorama images, you should always use a tripod and set your camera in portrait mode. You want to capture as much height in the image as possible. The panorama image will ultimately be very wide, so height is very important.

When shooting the frames, leave about ½-inch overlap between frames. If you're shooting several panoramas, take a picture of your hand before the first image and take another photo of your hand after the last image. If you keep shooting, turn your hand around and take a picture of the back before and after. By the time you get to post processing, it will be easy to sort the photos and know what photos belong to what panorama.

Sample pages