

Extracting a Portion of a Photo for Pasting onto a Different Background

by D. L. Ashliman

A ferry-boat passenger in the Orkney Islands.	The same person, now extracted for use with another image.
	
	
The extracted image, now pasted into an iconic London scene.	

The following instructions apply specifically to Photoshop Elements, version 11. Other versions (including Photoshop CS-5) are similar, although some tools may require different pathways.

Layer Mask Method

In the “Expert” mode of Photoshop Elements open the photo containing the image that you wish to extract.

Under the Layer menu choose Duplicate Layer....

Accept the name “Background copy” and press OK.

On the right side of your screen you will see thumbnails for each layer.

Activate the bottom layer by clicking once on its thumbnail.

Under the Layer menu choose New Fill Layer > Solid Color > OK.

From the color picker choose a color that contrasts sharply from the image you wish to extract. Simplify this process by checking the Only Web Colors box. Click once on your chosen color and press OK.

You should now have three thumbnails at the right of your screen: A solid-colored layer sandwiched between the Background and the Background copy.

The solid-colored layer has an attached layer mask, which we will not be using. If you wish, you can remove this mask by right-clicking on the mask and selecting Delete Layer Mask.

Activate the topmost layer.

Create a layer mask for the top layer. With the top layer activated, click once on the layer mask icon at the top of the Layers panel. It is a shaded rectangle with a white circle inside. A white rectangle will appear beside the thumbnail image of your top layer. This is the layer mask that we will be using.

How the layer mask functions:

By painting black over the mask you erase an area of the layer that it is attached to.

By painting white over a blackened portion of the mask, you restore the erased area.

To use the layer mask:

Be sure that the mask (not the main image) is activated. Click once on its icon.

Note the color swatches at the bottom left side of your screen. Whatever color they were at the beginning of your session, the top swatch is now black, and the bottom swatch is now white.

Select the Brush Tool (its icon looks like a water-color brush). At the bottom of your screen you can change the hardness and size of your brush. Begin with a very large hard brush (perhaps 500 pixels wide).

Paint across the portions of your main image that you wish to erase. This will expose the contrasting color beneath this layer.

Note that your black paint strokes appear on the mask's icon at the right of your screen.

You can use a selection tool to isolate part of the image before applying the brush strokes. If you do this, only the selected portion of your photo will be effected by the brush strokes. Be sure to choose “Deselect” from the Select menu before continuing.

To erase the portions of your image close to the subject that you wish to keep, choose a much smaller brush size.

If you erase part of your main subject by mistake you can easily undo the damage by following these steps:

Change the brush color from black to white by clicking on the two-headed arrow above the color swatches at the bottom left of your screen. The active color is now white. Paint over the portion of your main photo that you wish to restore.

Change the active color back to black to continue removing unwanted portions of your top layer.

If you wish to further edit your main image, be sure that its thumbnail is activated and not the mask. Click once on the thumbnail that you wish to activate.

To save your image with its layer mask (and thus allow further modifications to your erasure procedure), under the File menu choose Save As... Select a new name, possibly “Original Name with Mask.” Be sure to retain the Photoshop (*.PSD; *.PDD) format, with the Layers box checked.

Advantage of saving your photo with layers in the PSD format: You can return to this “package” at any time and renew your editing process, thus correcting any mistakes that you may have made.

Disadvantage of saving your photo with layers in the PSD format: The new file will be at least ten times larger than the original.

To save only the extracted portion of your layered project:

Simplify the top layer: Right-click on the top layer’s main thumbnail and select Simplify Layer. This will remove the attached layer mask.

Delete the two bottom layers by right-clicking on their thumbnails and selecting Delete Layer.

You should now have only a single layer: your extracted image with a checkerboard (transparent) background.

Save your extracted image. Under the file menu choose Save As.... Select a new name, possibly “Original Name Extracted” Be sure to retain the format Photoshop (*.PSD;*PDD).

In a later project you can paste this extracted image over any background of your choice.

Pasting the extracted (.PSD) image over a new background.

Open both photos in the Photoshop Elements Editor (Expert Mode).

Under the Window menu activate the photo with the extracted image and checkerboard (transparent) background.

Under the Select menu choose All. Or, you can use the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+A.

Under the Edit menu choose Copy. Or, you can use the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+C.

Under the Window menu activate the photo with the new background.

Paste the extracted image onto the new background (Ctrl+V). This creates a new layer.

You may wish to reposition or resize your extracted image over its new background.

Activate the layer that you wish to move.

Choose the Move Tool. It is located at the top of your tool panel, and its icon is crossed double-headed arrows with an additional arrow pointing upward. Drag your extracted image to its new position.

You can resize the image with the same tool by using the handles at the four corners.

You can change its aspect ratio by dragging the handles in the middle of the top, bottom, or side edges.

You can rotate the extracted image by dragging the curved arrows that appear when you place the cursor just outside the corners.

The last operations (resizing, changing the aspect ratio, and rotating) require that you confirm the operation by clicking on the green arrow at the bottom of the image.

You can flip the extracted image following this pathway: Image > Rotate > Flip Layer Horizontal.

Additional editing and sharpening can be done at this stage. Remember: you can make changes only to an active layer.

Before closing your project, you may want to save it in two versions:

1. If you want to be able to make future changes to the separate layers, you must save the photo in the PSD format (the default for any project with layers). This will be a very large file, many times larger than an equivalent JPEG file.
2. For emailing and printing save a second copy as a JPEG (medium quality, unless you want to turn it into a huge enlargement). Choose “Save As...” from the “File” menu, and select the JPEG format.