Creative Point of View

Photoshop from the creative to the practical

■ BY KATRIN EISMANN

What's in and Not in the Image Frame?

As they compose, juxtapose, and envision the flattening of a three-dimensional subject onto the two-dimensional photographic surface, photographers simultaneously make decisions on depth of field, shutter speed, focal length, and lighting…all before looking through the lens.

In the 1950s and '60s, Kodak included photo tips illustrated with stick figures in its film packaging. One that I remember recommended avoiding distracting objects in the background with an example showing a tree "growing" out of a person's head. Back in those pre-digital days, the suggestion was to either reposition the photographer or the subject. Now, 50–60 years later, it's still better to take the picture correctly by having the photographer or subject move so that the proverbial tree isn't coming out of someone's head. But now we can also use Photoshop to reduce background distractions with judicious cropping, cloning good information over bad, blurring and darkening backgrounds, or replacing the background completely.

Cropping to recompose

One of my favorite image-composition and -restoration tools is the Crop tool (C). It quickly removes damaged corners and cracked edges, reducing the amount of background that needs to be concealed. Here are a few techniques:

1. To automatically straighten a scan, use File>Automate>Crop and Straighten Photos. (I use this a lot, as it seems more of my scans are crooked than straight!) Photoshop will duplicate the file and do its best to straighten the image. This feature works best on images with clearly defined edges.
2. Cropping to the aspect ratio of a contemporary frame can save time and money—something most clients appreciate. Rather than rebuilding the image corner, which doesn't contain useful image information, crop the image for a suitable contemporary frame size. *Tip:* Say you're cropping to a new size, for example to create an 8x10" print, select the Crop tool and up in the Options Bar, set the Width to 8 in, the Height to 10 in, and leave the Resolution box blank to recompose the image without resizing it.
3. Duplicate the Background layer (Command-J [PC: Control-J]) and use the Clone Stamp tool (S) to quickly cover up the distracting pipe. Then clean up any telltale signs of cloning using the Healing Brush tool.
4. A dead-on neutral, black-and-white image can feel sterile and I often add a subtle tone to an image to make it more elegant. One very simple yet effective method is to add a solid Color Fill layer (Layer>New Fill Layer>Solid Color), change the layer blend mode to Color, and adjust the layer Opacity to 20–30%.
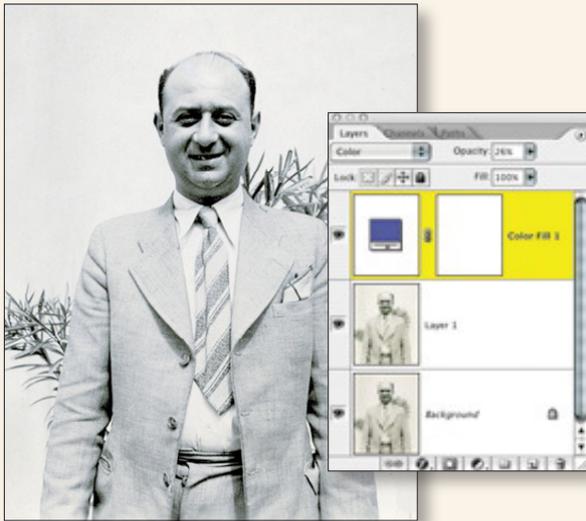
Work smart: Consider the Crop tool an excellent composition and powerful restoration tool and you'll save a lot of time, effort, and aggravation.

Study the background

Just as important as being aware of what's behind you and outside the frame is to see everything that's in the frame and understand that the flattening of the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional plane can cause some uncomfortable or unwanted relationships
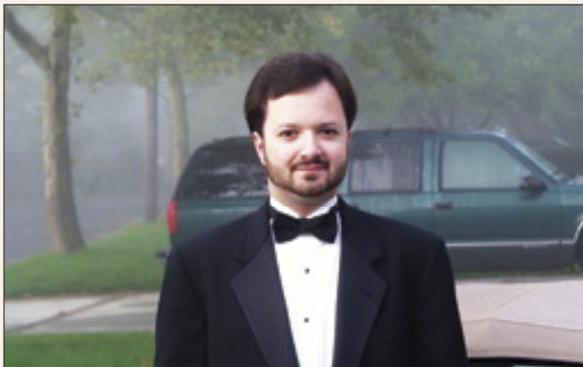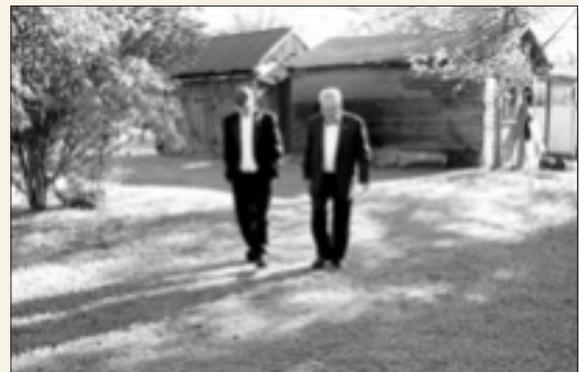

Before

Retouching by Jason Nadler

(as shown in the example, bottom left). With careful duplicating and cloning, the car is removed and the snapshot has evolved into a portrait.

Alan Jones shared the following example of his work. He said that many family members liked this candid shot taken prior to a family wedding and knowing of his Photoshop skills, they asked him to remove the "two distracting elements" to produce this retouched image.

Before

Retouching by Alan Jones

Before you click

Next time you're out photographing, note how much time you take looking through the viewfinder to decide what to include in the picture. But before you press the shutter release, take the same amount of time to be aware of what's outside the frame and how the background interacts with your subject. Being aware of what you're including and excluding will increase the number of successful images you come home with and decrease the amount of time you spend in Photoshop removing unwanted elements. ∎

Katrin Eismann, author of Photoshop Restoration & Retouching *and* Photoshop Masking & Compositing, *and an internationally recognized artist, author, and educator, was recently inducted into the Photoshop Hall of Fame. Check out her website at www.katrineismann.com.*