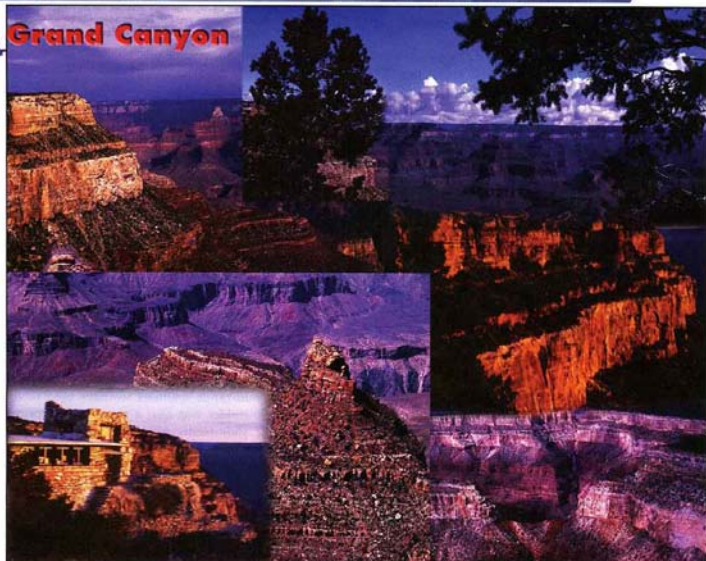


Digital Photographer August, 2006

HOW TO Create a Photo Montage

Grand Canyon



BY PETER SMOLENS

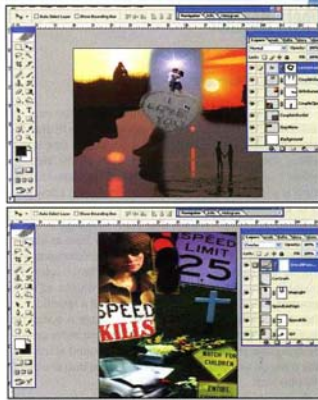
Last year my wife and I accomplished one of the goals of our lives—to see one of the wonders of the world, the Grand Canyon. For three days we stayed at Bright Angel Lodge, located only yards from the south rim of the canyon. While there, I documented my stay by shooting many wonderful images. Upon returning home, I wanted to show friends the beauty and expanse of the Grand Canyon. Although I had taken enough photos to create a small book, I decided to combine a group of them together into a single image and create a *montage* to illustrate a Grand Canyon theme.

The process is called a montage, which is a derivative of the long established art form called collage. A *collage* is a technique that allows you to combine different elements into a pleasing format. Derived from the word *coller*, collage was originally a French word meaning “to paste” or assemble different forms creating a new whole. It is said that the great Pablo Picasso invented the collage technique in 1912 with his Still Life with Chair Caning (*Nature-morte à la chaise cannée*), in which he pasted a patch of oilcloth with a chair-caning design to the canvas.

For years photographers have used a variation of this old technique. According to Webster's dictionary, “a



A series of photos copied into an Adobe Photoshop file, showing the detail of Layer Styles drop shadow dialog box. After some editing, the montage of the Grand Canyon can be seen on the opposite page.



Using the feathered mask feature in Photoshop, the author was able to merge the two images into two separate montages.

montage means the combination of images from different sources into a single composition as a picture." You've seen them as travel posters, advertisements and in magazines where they are often used to illustrate an article. Even wedding and portrait photographers use montages. Creating them has become easier using a computer and image editing software. Using photo manipulation and composite design techniques you can combine many images into one.

The beauty of creating a montage is that the possibilities are endless. In addition to creating a new and different kind of portrait, you can combine images to document a recent trip. Over the years I have created montages on many different subjects. For example, illustrations shown include montages that depict the death of the friend's daughter, golf courses in Jamaica, and musician Eric Clapton. To capture a trip to Cape Cod, I created a montage that showed the many windmills that are located on the "arm that sticks out into the ocean."

Both smooth-blending transitions as well as defined lines can quite often characterize a montage. By selecting and merging chance associations of different visual elements through a combination of blending styles, you can tell a story in a single image. While the following techniques can be applied in almost any image-processing program, specific references are based on Adobe Photoshop. Creating montages is one of the fun aspects of working in the digital format on the computer.

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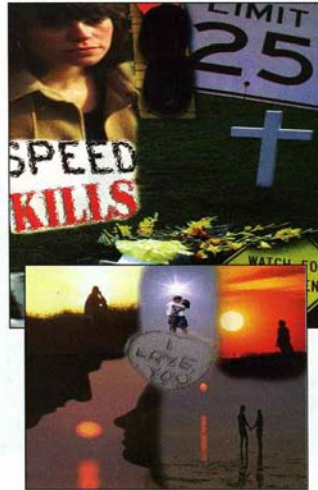


Photo Montage

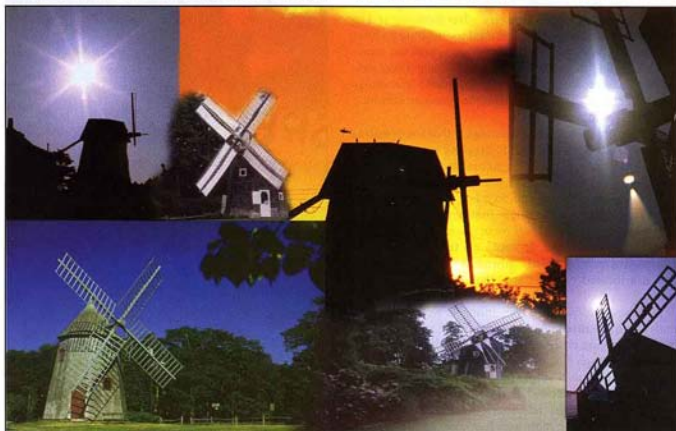
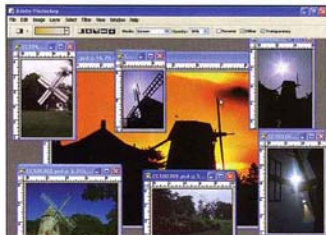
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CREATING A MONTAGE

The key to creating successful montages is planning and judicious use of the **selection tool** along with the **feather feature**. Planning your montage is an important first step in telling your story. Make sure you have all the elements before you start. Use this time to determine where each element is going to be placed on the montage, and allow plenty of time later for experimentation.

When selecting pictures for your montage, look for images that help tell the story. Once you have assembled the images that will make up the montage, determine what will be the background. You can use a basic color. For example, black or white are easy colors to use as backgrounds, but not always the best. Selecting a specific color that conveys the overall feel of the montage is a step further in the right direction. You can get even more creative by using the gradient tool so the background starts with one color on one side (or corner) and fades into another at the opposite.

A favorite method of many photographers when creating a background for a montage is using a primary image. This should be a simple graphic image that jumps out at you. In my windmill montage, I decided to use a graphic image of a windmill silhouetted in the sunset. The key to a



Before the image is completed as a windmill montage (center), the author shows all the images on screen before he works on the montage (bottom). The top image shows a close-up of the use of the Gradient Tool.

good background image is to have a central point with plenty of open space around the image. Still, you don't want to go overboard, it is only the background. Remember not to ruin the original image. Use the Save As option and save as a new image.

Next step is to start adding images to your montage. With your background image open, open the first image that you want to add to your montage. There are a number of tools available to select these images. Keep in mind the final destination when selecting the image. You might want to use the feather option to provide a soft transition between the imported image and the background. These imported images will become separate layers. Use the layer naming function to name each layer. This will help you keep track of which image you are working with later when you are arranging your images around the montage.

Once you have imported all the images onto the background, move your images into position. This is the time to experiment—see which images work well together. Don't be afraid to play with the layout and visual effects. It is easy to push around photos this way to try different looks. Pay attention to the visual composition of your montage. Try to position elements so they draw the eye through the picture in a way that somehow relates to the theme of the montage. You can try arranging things symmetrically or randomly. Try both—you have nothing to lose.

There are a number of methods to make transitions smooth between the imported image and the back-

ground. Try using the **gradient tool**. This tool allows you to blend a progression of colors into one another for smooth transition. When you select the gradient tool from the toolbox there are a number of options in the options bar that allow you to customize your gradient. Depending on how you want to make the transition, you can select one of the following types of gradient—Linear, Radial, Angle, Reflective, or Diamond. After selecting the type of gradient, click on the gradient preview to the left to open the Gradient Picker editing tool. Here you can select how the gradient tool will work. To get the smooth transition, select the Foreground to Transparent option. It is the second one from the left on the top row represented by the black to white icon. Once the options are selected, move your cursor to the image. Position the cursor where you want the image to be completely hidden. Click and drag to the position where you want the image to be completely shown. In the example of the windmill, I started from the right edge of the image and dragged upwards.

Two things to note: when using the gradient tool, it's best to work on the image before you move the image to the montage image. Also it might take a few tries before you get exactly the transition look you want. Remember, Ctrl-Z is the "undo" command so if you don't like the look of your selection, hit undo and try again.

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LAYERED MASK

The most popular method of creating a transition is using a feathered, freeform layer mask. This involves adding a layered mask to hide part of the overlaid image as it fades into the next image or the background. To add a layered mask, select the image in the layers palette then click on Add Vector Mask icon (second from the left at the bottom of the palette). The mask will become active and will be shown to the right of the image selected. At this point, the mask is like a clear layer on top of the selected image.

Once you create a layered mask, there are a number of ways to soften the transition from one overlaid image to the next. For example, you could use the lasso tool around the image with a large feather (50 to 75 pixels) will provide a soft transition. By using the large feather, some of the background image will show through the edge as it blends with the overlaid image.

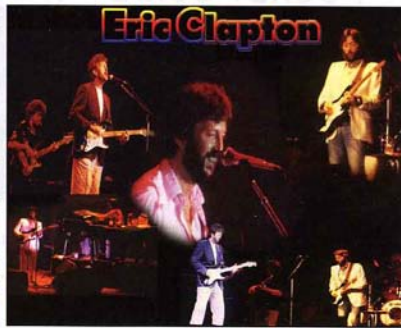
The ultimate tool for creating a transition mask is the soft edge brush. Make sure your foreground color selection is black. With the layer mask selected use a large, soft edge brush and "paint" away the part of the image you want to make into the transition. To get a smoother transition, change the opacity of the brush. This way you can "customize" the transition. If you paint away too much, just change the color to white and paint back the image.

To create a different look, take one or two shots and remove the background by "cutting out" the subjects of some pictures from their backgrounds. This adds a little variety to the composition. As you isolate the subject, feather the edge a pixel or two so the edge isn't so harsh.

Once you get the pictures arranged, to add depth to the additional images, use a drop shadow. To add a drop shadow, click on the image in the layer palette to make sure the appropriate image layer is active. Click on the "Add a Layer Style" icon (first icon to the left at the bottom of the layers palette). Click on drop shadow and the layers styles dialog box will appear. Through this dialog box you can change the length, color, structure and quality of drop shadow.

When the montage is done, don't forget to add a title. That's an important part of the story, too. Depending on final outcome, work in the highest resolution mode (300 dpi or better) you can so you can get a better print. However, when e-mailing the montage, change the resolution down to 72 dpi and save the image in a JPEG format. This is standard resolution for most computer screens and the JPEG is the most universal format for viewing images today. By making the file as small as you can, it's easier for the recipient to download the file.

Remember to relax and have fun while shooting. When visiting a place take lots and lots of pictures, and don't worry about whether your shots will be "good enough." Remember that with today's digital editing tools the images that you take do not always have to be the final image. By using your images as part of a montage you can tell a story in a single image. ■



Another depiction of using the Feathered Mask feature, the merging of the photos creates a great montage of an Eric Clapton concert.