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Picture Perfect Gift Books—How To for Photoshop Elements

Lesson 01: Easy Spot Art

A spot of art for any kind of gift book or picture book, is fairly easy to create. I'll demonstrate with a photo of an apple that I used in an alphabet book.

Place your object on something white, like a piece of white art board or a piece of thick white paper or a white sheet, and photograph it, making sure there's white around the entire object. It's really helpful to photograph the object in good indirect light. This could be inside the house next to a large window or outside.

Adjust the Lighting

- Open Photoshop Elements, and in the Menu Bar, use the (File > Open) command to open your photo.
- In the Menu Bar choose Layer > New Adjustment Layer > Levels. Click OK to the dialog box that comes up.
- On the panel, there are three eyedroppers. Click on the white eyedropper.
- On your photo, click where you want the background to be completely white.
- If necessary, adjust the sliders under the histogram as well. The apple was reflecting some of the white background, so to darken that area, I moved the far left slider under the histogram to the right a little. You could also adjust the middle slider for the mid tones, to make the apple lighter or darker. Every photo will be different, so use your own judgment when trying this yourself.
- When you're satisfied, click on the close icon to close the panel.
- In the Menu Bar choose Layer > Merge Down to merge the Levels layer with the photo.

Make a Selection

- Get the Lasso tool. In Tool Options, click on the Add to Selection icon. Feather should be 0 and check Anti Alias.
- Click and drag a selection outline around your object. You can keep adding to the selection as necessary to select it all. Include the shadow of your object as well as some white space around the object.
- Right click on your selection (Ctrl click on a Mac) and choose Feather from the menu. Enter 5 pixels and click OK.
- In the Menu Bar choose Edit > Copy.
- Open the destination document. In my case I used a page from an alphabet book. It has a white background layer and two type layers. The Background layer is selected.
- In the Menu Bar, choose Edit > Paste.
- Get the Move tool. In Tool Options, check Auto Select Layer and Show Bounding Box.
- On your document, click and drag from a corner handle to resize the image as necessary. Using a corner handle will make sure the proportions of the image don't change. Click on the green check mark to commit the change.
- Now you can uncheck Show Bounding Box in Tool Options to get rid of the outline.

And Voila! there you have your spot art!

The biggest key to good spot art is to use good practices when photographing the object. If you do that, the rest is pretty easy. Not every photo, though, will be ideal, so let's look at a couple of scenarios.

Direct vs. Indirect Light

I photographed a pepper for a recipe book. I took one photo outside with the sun shining directly on the pepper. For the second photo I moved to a shady side of the house and took a photo in indirect light in the shade. At first it appears that the photo taken in direct sunlight is better, but let's apply our magic Levels trick and see what happens.

- On the image taken in the sun, add a Levels adjustment layer and use the white Eyedropper tool to adjust the background. Make any further adjustments by moving the middle or left slider under the histogram. This makes the pepper look great and the background is white, but I also have a very dark shadow that may be a little distracting in my book.
- Next I adjusted the pepper photo I took in the shade using indirect light. I added a Levels adjustment layer and used the white Eyedropper tool to adjust the background. Notice there are lighter and darker areas of the background. If I click on the lighter area, I still have places where it's a little dark. You can click more than once with the eyedropper, so that's what I did to get a background I liked.

Adjust the middle and left sliders under the histogram as needed.

This creates a soft drop shadow, and that's what you want. You want just a hint of a drop shadow to make it feel like it's popping off the page.

Compare that to the harsh shadow made by the pepper photographed in direct sunlight. The soft shadow is much better. So be sure to photograph your objects using indirect light.

Remove Color Cast

Another problem you may encounter is color cast. This usually happens when you photograph an object inside the house, specifically from the yellow light in house lighting. You can avoid this if you get close to a window, but sometimes you get what you get and you just have to work with it. I fixed the problem, but this is an advanced technique, so if you don't want to learn this, be sure to photograph in a location where you won't get color cast!

Remove the Yellow

- In the Menu Bar, choose Layer > Adjustment Layer > Hue/Saturation.
- Click OK to the dialog box.
- On the Hue/Saturation panel, open the menu at the top and choose Yellow. Move the Saturation slider to the left to desaturate the yellow. For the frog image, I used -55 and also move the Lighten slider up to +3.
- Close the HueSaturation panel.

Adjust the Lighting

Now we're ready for the Levels panel. Follow the same steps as before. After using the Eyedropper, I'll moved the middle slider to the right to darken the frog a little.

The main problem we have now is that the tummy is a little blown out. That's when you can use a layer mask. If you don't know how to use a layer mask, as a courtesy I've put a link next to this lesson where you can access my free video called Layer Mask Basics.

Here's how to remove some of the effect of the Levels layer in specific places.

- Get the Brush tool. In Tool Options, open the Brush Picker and choose a soft round brush. If you don't see a soft round brush, open the menu and choose Default Brushes. The Mode should be Normal, and set the Opacity to around 30%.
- Make sure the Foreground Color Chip is black. If it isn't, click on the double curved arrow to switch Color Chips.

- On your document, brush over any area that's a little too light to remove some of the Levels effect.
- When you're satisfied, in the Menu Bar choose Layer > Flatten Image.

Once you remove the color cast and adjust the lighting, you can create a selection like I showed you earlier.

Minor Adjustments

When you copy a piece of art and paste it onto a page of your book like I've done here, you may want to make some adjustments.

The frog image has a dark area that shouldn't be there, you can see some fold shadows from the bed sheet, and the entire shadow is a bit strong. Those are things that can be fixed with a layer mask.

- In the Layers panel, make sure the art layer is the active layer.
- Click on the Add Layer mask icon.
- Make sure the Foreground Color Chip is black.
- Open Tool Options and change the Opacity to 100%.
- Use the Brush tool to brush away anything you don't want.
- Reduce the Brush Opacity and brush over the shadows to minimize them a little.
- If you accidentally brush away some of the frog, you can change the Color Chip to white and brush to reveal that part again.

So that's how to create spots of art and fine tune them, if necessary.