

LAYER IT ON: Part I

Jack and Sue Drafahl

This layered image was used in the Sea & Sea promotional catalog. This is the first of two versions of a layered image presented to the client, and the two layers were enhanced with a white border using the stroke command.



This is the second version of the image above. An outside bevel was added to the background layer using Eye Candy plug-in software.





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An "inner" bevel was added to the background layer here, using Eye Candy plug-in software.

Since Adobe Photoshop is one of the most popular image-editing programs, and has outstanding layering commands, we decided to use it as our model for this article.

BEFORE WE GET into all the different layering applications, let's make sure everyone knows exactly what layering is all about. Layering in a bitmap drawing consists of a background layer, and multiple image layers stacked on top of each other to form a single image. Each layer is a distinct photo object, so you can edit one layer or multiple layers, use effects that filter down through all the layers, or skip a single layer.

A big advantage is that as you work on one layer, you can see just how it interfaces with the other layers above and below it. You can save out a layered image with all its parts, re-load it in at a later time, and change any single layer and save it as a new file.

The most common use of layering is with composite bitmap images for posters, brochures, CD covers, ads and catalogs. First, you start with a background image. If you want it to interact with the other layers, you can double click on it in the layers palette and convert it to a layer. You can then change the image opacity so that it doesn't dominate. You can then open image files, drag and drop them onto the background layer, scale them, and make any other necessary adjustments.

If you're going to use only part of the image, you can use the select tools to eliminate the parts you don't want in the image.

We prefer to select the desired image part before bringing it onto the background, so we won't have to deal with the other layered images.

You can continue to edit the layer as it sits on top of the other layers, and if you are unhappy with your editing, simply delete the layer, re-load it and begin again. At any time, you can access any layer by right clicking on that layer and delete it or make any necessary changes.

As you build the image, layer after layer, you may find that one of the layers is in the wrong order. You can go to the layers palette and drag the layer to the new position, or go to the layers pull-

down menu and move the layer up or down in the stack. Somewhere along the line you may need to add text. When you do, the program adds the text as a layer, which allows you to add a variety of filter effects just to that layer.

A corrective application with layers is the ability to add an adjustment layer. This creates a new layer on top of the background, which can have a variety of corrective adjustments such as brightness, hue, color balance or saturation. This allows you to correct sections of the final photo.

If you look in the layers menu, you will see two more tiny controls. The opacity control sets the amount of effect that will bleed through the layer. If it is set to 100 percent, the layer is solid and none of the underneath layer will show through. When set to 50 percent, half the adjustment layer and half the underneath layer are mixed together. This gives you incredible fine-tuning control over image adjustment.

To the left of the opacity control is a menu offering almost 24 ways to blend the layers in conjunction with the opacity control. The default is normal, but if you are the creative type and like to see what all the buttons do, we suggest you try each one, then undo it and try the next. The creative potential is limitless.

In our digital lab, we use the layers functions to create convention posters, presentation images, digital slide show production and to simply adjust photo quality. We often work for the scuba diving industry, and a recent project involved a poster displaying more than a dozen colorful sea

slugs called nudibranchs.

In a traditional photo lab, the process to design this poster would have been very time consuming and costly. With Adobe Photoshop's layers, we were able to create a black background, and drag and drop the images onto the back-

ground as layers. We added yellow borders to each photo insert and text was added. The final layered image was saved out as a PSD file which kept all the layers intact.

A short run of inkjet posters were made to verify acceptance. The client was happy with the results, so we prepared the image for offset printing. This meant going back into the file and changing some of the layers to accommodate the variance between inkjet and offset. It was a piece of layered cake and the final printed piece looks great.

Most recently, we were contracted to put together a digital slide presentation for the Women Divers Hall of Fame. It required a progressive disclosure of 72 layered images on one screen. We created the last image with all 72 layers in one file, then we just deleted one layer at a time, saving each variation as a new image. We then imported the 72 new images in reverse order into Adobe Premiere to accomplish an impressive 72-image build of the award winners.

We look back at how we would have accomplished this visual feat with slide projectors, and realize that we probably would not have even attempted it. Image layering has opened a new door of creativity for us.

To obtain the full potential from your editing program, you must have a good understanding of layering. This is a really tough subject to grasp, so devote some extra time to read the manual and use the tutorial. Still, the best way to really learn this function is to set aside some time and just play with all the layering controls.

Next month, we'll devote the entire article to providing you with a step-by-step breakdown on the creation of a poster we designed. Stay tuned for lots of layering tips next month.

The Drafahls are involved in digital imaging in the Portland, Ore., area, and are also professional photographers.

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