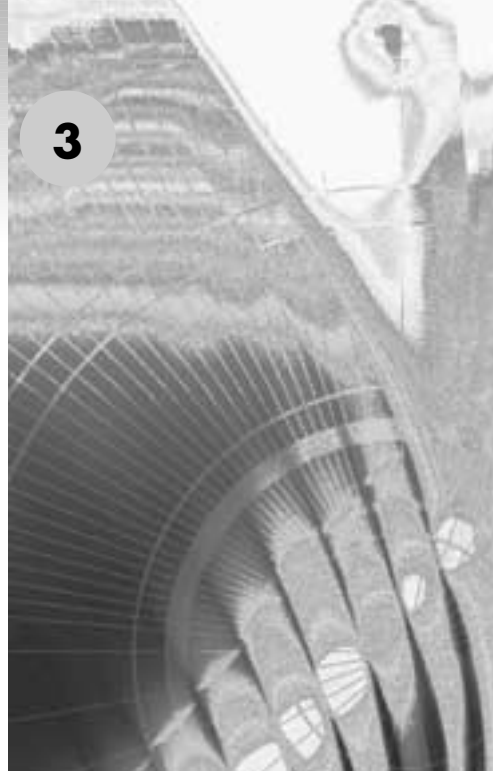# TRANSPARENCY

NOW YOU SEE IT,
NOW YOU DON'T

How useful would it be if you had the ability to make unimportant things suddenly disappear? By one touch, any undesirable thing in your life would no longer hold any significance or be in your way? Credit card bills, toxic waste, mimes, and children who cry on airplanes would suddenly vanish as the world breathed a sigh of relief, wondering whether we could get rid of Barbra Streisand records just as easily.

I'm sorry—I got lost in a personal daydream. Obviously, these things can't happen. To better illustrate my point on transparency, I'll provide a better example:

See that white space directly above? Well, it's not really white space—it's a transparent paragraph. I wrote it, but decided that because it was boring and unnecessary to the rest of this chapter, I'd make it transparent. It's still there, but you can see the white

65

of the page in its place. I've saved myself the cost of the ink that would have been used to print it, and it is no longer able to detract from my primary message.

Transparency on the Web works in much the same way—you make a portion of your image vanish, so it is no longer visible. It will still act as a placeholder, but, like my transparent paragraph saved the cost of the ink I would have used to print it, transparent portions of my Web graphics save me the cost of large file sizes, and they help my images download faster.

As we discussed in detail in Chapter 2, however, time marches on and things change. The properties of transparency still hold true, but do they have any real value? As a tool to reduce file size, they are only beneficial in certain cases. For example, Chapter 4, which deals with backgrounds, will use transparency to significantly reduce excess file size from tiled backgrounds when creating borders or sidebars. But it's no longer as important when dealing with removing a few small areas of flat color in individual images. Let's say that you could save 10K of file size in an image by making a color transparent. Well, a year or two ago, most designers wouldn't create a page that was heavier than 100K, at the most. Saving 10K meant saving a minimum of 10%, or more in a lot of cases. That's pretty significant. But today, it's not unusual or detrimental for a page to be 300K or even more. Cutting 10K of file size, in that case, only saves you a small percentage. Not really worth the effort.

But there is always the case where you'll want something behind the image to show through your image in certain places. Say, for example, you have a picture of a soccer ball on a white canvas, but want the green grass color of the web browser background to surround the ball—a soccer ball in a big white square over a field of green isn't very attractive. Making the white background transparent in this instance is necessary for effect. So while the reasons for using transparency on the web may have decreased a little, they haven't "disappeared" completely (get it? Disappeared? Transparency? Well, I thought it was funny, anyway).

TRANSPARENCY MADE EASY

It wasn't that long ago that making a portion of an image transparent was kind of a chore, involving a now-outdated dialog box called GIF89a. Since Photoshop 5.5, though, there are a number of ways that we can create transparency in our images, all of which are a lot easier and more effective than earlier transparency solutions. Now, the only reason you might ever open the GIF89a dialog box again would be strictly for nostalgia … kind of like playing an old Donny and Marie album, just to torture yourself with bad memories of the past.

The new tools for transparency creation, the magic eraser, the Background eraser, and the Extract function, each help make transparent desired portions of your image which can later be translated for direct web use in the Save for Web dialog box.
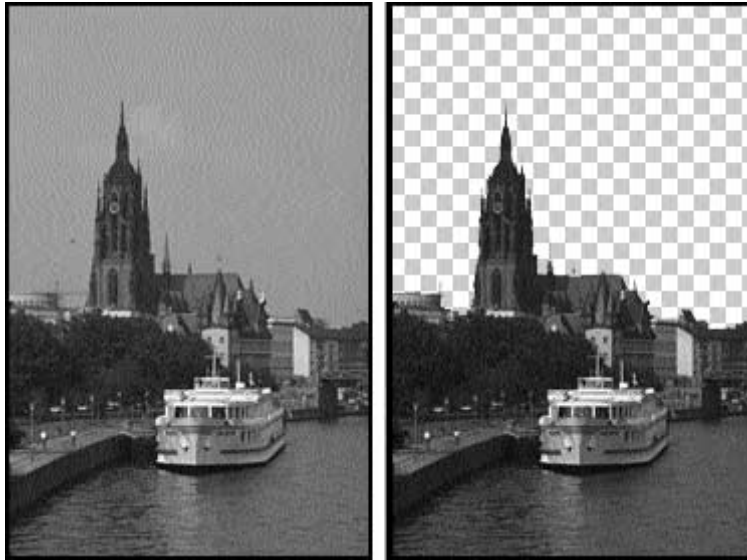
Figure 3–1: The Magic eraser tool at work. The sky in the image on the right has been made transparent. (By default, the transparent areas will appear as a checker board.)

The Magic Eraser

The Magic eraser, shown in Figure 3–1, works just like the Magic Wand tool, with one distinct difference: Instead of creating a selection of certain pixels, it makes those pixels transparent. Simply click on a pixel of any color you choose, and all contiguous pixels (by default) within a certain shade of that color will become transparent. Figure 3–1 demonstrates this.

The Options palette for the Magic eraser tool, shown in Figure 3–2, allows you to manipulate how the tool works. Access the Options palette as you would for any other tool by double-clicking on that tool, or by simply selecting the tool and hitting the Return key (Enter in Windows). Click on the Contiguous checkbox to keep the erased pixels contiguous to the selected pixel. Click it off to allow non-contiguous pixels of the same or similar shades to be erased.

You can also manipulate how many shades of the selected color will be affected. Set the tolerance by manually entering a value in the Options palette to make your transparent area smaller or larger. A small value, say 10, in the tolerance area will mean that when any pixel is clicked on, the only pixels that will become transparent will be those that fall within 10 shades of that particular color. A higher number will allow more pixels to be affected.
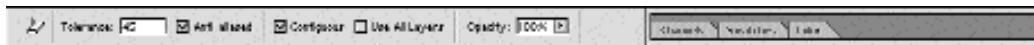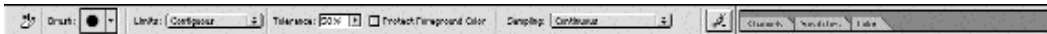
Figure 3–2: The Magic eraser Options palette.

Figure 3–3: The Options palette for the Background eraser.

> **Note**
>
> **Even though this is an eraser tool, you do not need to worry about a brush size—this is a point-and-click tool, and you will only be clicking on one pixel at a time.**

The Background Eraser

The Background eraser, also new as of version 5.5 and shown in Figure 1–1, works much like the Magic eraser if it were crossed with the Airbrush tool. To make an area of your image become transparent with the Background eraser, simply select your desired brush size and drag your mouse over the areas of your image that you wish to make transparent. It's just as simple as that, really. There is a cool twist, though—a small center point in the middle of your Background eraser brush will determine the color of the pixel you click on. As you drag around your image, pixels of that same color will also become transparent.

The Option palette for the Background eraser, shown in Figure 3–3, allows you to choose which type of eraser you want to use:

◆ Find Edges will help maintain the integrity of the edges of an object, while erasing contiguous areas of the same color.

◆ Contiguous will erase all areas in an image that contain the selected colors that are next to each other.

◆ Discontiguous erases all areas in an image that contain the selected colors. These areas do not have to be next to each other or touching.

Figure 3–4: The result of using the Background eraser on my image.

The Tolerance slider works the same way that it does in the Magic Wand tool. The higher the tolerance, the more color tones will be eliminated based on the selected color.

You can also choose Protect Foreground to make sure that any areas in your image that contain the foreground color will not be erased.

Figure 3–4 shows the result of using the Background eraser tool.

Extract Image

This cool feature was introduced in version 5.5, and it gives you better masking control to create transparency in hard-to-define areas, such as around hair, fur, etc. It's a good tool, and helpful, but, well ... you know how the hamburger that you actually get served never really looks *quite* as good as the picture of it in the menu? Well, it's kind of the same thing here. The advertisements and magazine reviews make it look like this is an infallible way to make a good mask, but it can take a few tries to get it right for any particular image.

To use the Extract Image command, follow these steps:

1. With your file open, choose Image -> Extract to access the dialog box shown in Figure 3–5.
2. Make the Edge Highlighter tool active by clicking on it. The Edge Highlighter tool works just like the Paintbrush tool—just drag your cursor to create a stroke. However, with this tool, you're not as much applying paint as you are isolating an edge.
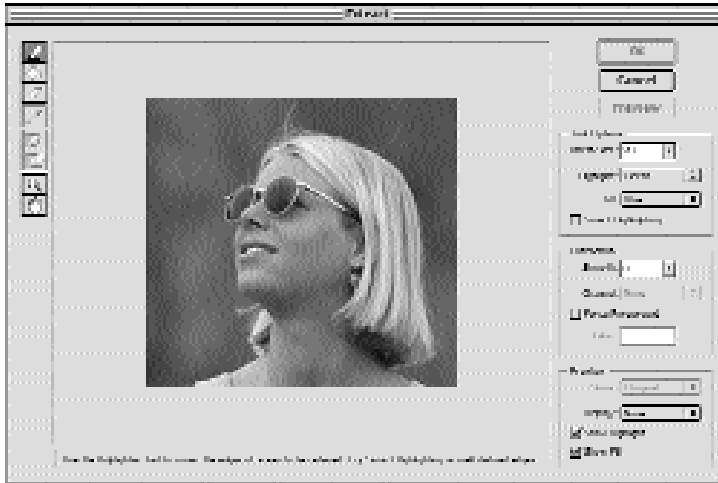
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Figure 3–5: The Extract dialog box.

*Figure 3–6: The Edge Highlighter tool is used to trace around the image. I used
a larger brush for the main area, and small brushes for the wisps of her hair.*

3. Create an edge around the object you want to extract—remember, everything out-
side your edge will become transparent. If necessary, you can increase or decrease
your brush size by adjusting the Brush Size slider on the right (sorry—no Brushes
palette here!). Figure 3–6 illustrates this task.

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For very hard-to-define edges, such as those shown in the figures for this example, select a fairly large size brush, and create your edge outline so that the highlight color overlaps both the image that you want to extract and the background that you want to make transparent.

4. You can change the color of your highlight by selecting from the Highlight pull-down menu. Red, green, and blue are available as presets, or you can access the Color Picker by choosing Other. Once you have created a highlight around the entire edge, activate the Fill tool (the same paintbucket icon that appears in the regular toolbar). Fill the inside of your edge selection by clicking on it. Make sure that the edge is completely closed before you click, or you will fill your entire canvas.

You can edit either the fill or the edge highlight by using the Eraser tool. You can start over from scratch, too, by holding the Option (Alt in Windows) key, and pushing the Reset button (formally the Cancel button).

5. You can change the fill color by using the Fill pull-down menu. Decide how precise you would like your extraction to be by changing the Smooth slider in the Extraction area. Choose a lower number for less precision, and a higher number for greater precision (although this will take a few moments longer to complete).

6. Click the Preview button to see your extracted piece. Cool, huh? Figure 3–7 shows a sample of what this should look like.

You might notice that the Preview button is grayed out and not available until you fill your selection. If you would like to make an extraction of just the highlighted area (I'm sure that with six billion people in the world, *somebody* will find a reason to do this), click the Force Foreground button. The color that is chosen in the accompanying color display will be the color in the highlight that is retained. Click this display to access the Color Picker, or make a direct selection using the Eyedropper tool and selecting a color from your image.

7. To see your edge highlight and fill again, click the appropriate checkboxes to make each appear. Re-edit if necessary.

8. By default, the transparent areas will appear as a checkerboard. You can change this by selecting a Matte color from the Show pull-down menu (customize your color in the Color Picker by choosing Other, or see your results as they would be represented in a channel by choosing Mask).
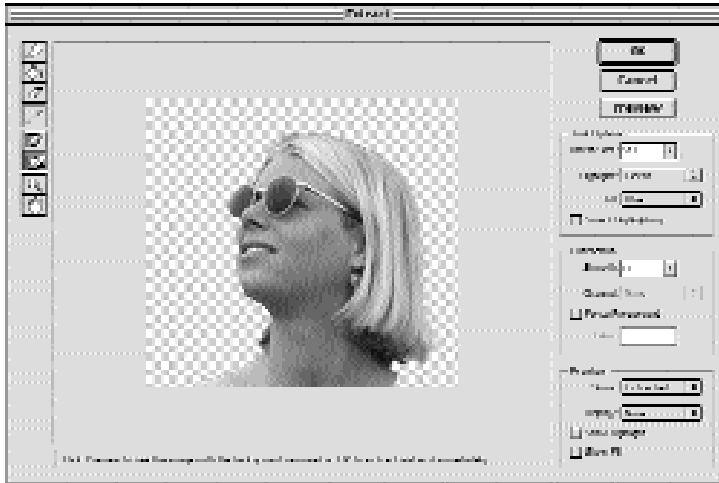
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Figure 3–7: My image when the extraction has been made.

9. To go back to your original image, choose Original from the View pull-down menu. Return to the extraction by selecting Extracted from the same menu.

10. If you already have a selection saved as an alpha channel, you can use this as a starting point, by loading it from the Load Highlight pull-down menu.

11. Click OK when you are happy with your extraction.

Setting Transparency for the Web

After you've used one or more of these tools to create your transparency, you'll be able to save it that way for web use through the Save for Web dialog box that we reviewed in Chapter 2. Choose GIF for your desired format (GIF is the only format other than the rarely used PNG that supports transparency), then click the Transparency box to turn the transparency on. If you want to create a smoother transition from your image into the browser's background color, set the Matte option to your desired color by clicking on it and choosing a color from the pop-up menu.

SHADOWS, GLOWS, AND TRANSPARENCY

There are some who claim to have developed fairly elaborate methods of preserving shadows and glows when they are part of a transparent GIF. The truth is, however, that there is really just one basic rule that must be followed: Put your shadowed or glowing image or the average color of your background texture over your background color and hope for the best.
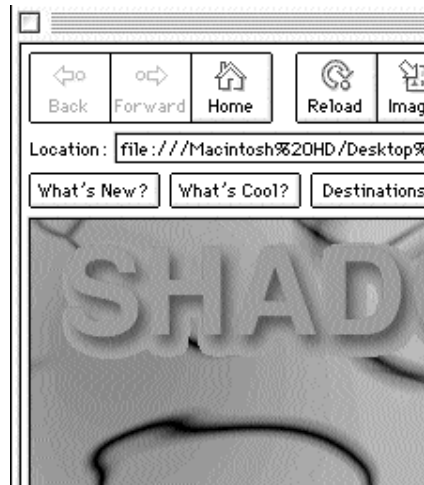
Figure 3–8: Placing images or text with drop shadows or glows over patterned backgrounds creates a pretty ugly effect.

This kind of "dirty" look, as shown in Figure 3–8, may be partially to blame for a severe decrease in both multicolored, wallpapered backgrounds, as well as the number of drop shadows that appear on the web (that, and the possibility that somewhere along the line, designers developed a sense of taste).

SUMMARY

If you take a look at my earlier book on Photoshop 5, you'll see that just a couple of years ago, creating transparent files was far more of a chore. New tools introduced in Photoshop 5.5, as well as an improvement of style in general web creation, have made transparency on the web a little easier to deal with, even if you won't necessarily need to use it all that much.