

PHOTOSHOP CS4 HAS ARRIVED

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Actually this is Photoshop version 11, since Adobe still does keep a number ID for Photoshop. Adobe has been releasing new version about every 18 months, and they are right on track for this newest version. I've been reviewing Photoshop since version 2.5, and it really has come a long way. With each new version, I ask myself what they can possibly add in to warrant a new version. Adobe has always surprised and delighted me with the new features.

Most of my activities in Photoshop are related to image retouching and restoration. I closed my custom darkroom and switched to all digital about 5 years ago. Color processing in the complete dark, along with the smell of chemicals can't hold a candle to processing in Photoshop. It's like comparing the stone age to today's hi-tech world. And with all the digital tools in Photoshop, pure magic can be accomplished when compared to what could be done in the darkroom era.

I consider Photoshop to be the finest program ever written for the PC.

SOME OF THE NEW GREAT FEATURES

Adobe has been refining and improving the program's ability to work better, faster, and more smoothly, using new approaches for many of the tools and processes that Photoshop incorporates. There are a number of new capabilities that build upon existing tools to make using them better, and more flexible. And, there a number of totally new features which allow users to improve their work flow. Many of these are described below.

ADJUSTMENTS PANEL

Up to CS3, the various tools such as curves, etc., were individually selected from a dropdown menu. Using them in an adjustment layer required that the user click on a different menu path to create a specific adjustment layer. Adjustment layers are the best route to take, as one can go back to that layer at any time, and change the adjustments made. Each adjustment layer had to be called up from the dropdown menu lists.

In CS4, there is a new Adjustment Panel with a choice of 15 icons, all representing the various adjustments that are possible, such as Levels, Hue/Saturation, Exposure, Channel Mixer, Color Balance, a revised version of Curves, and also a brand new Vibrance adjustment tool. All these adjustment layer capabilities can now be created from a central panel. With each choice, there are also a number of preset adjustments, along with the ability to create a custom "adjustment", and save it for future use. The user can readily turn off/on any adjustment, delete it, or reset that adjustment to the starting no change default.

There is enormous flexibility in the adjustments panel. You can resize it to take up more or less space than the default size. When any of the various buttons on it are selected, the display in that panel changes to what one would normally see for that adjustment. Having the ability to use the default presets, and custom user saved presets, make it all the more powerful

THE MASKS PANEL

Masks are an indispensable feature of Photoshop. They allow the user to block/pass material from one layer as needed. Painting with white on a layer mask will allow the painted material in that layer to become visible. Black will block it. Gray will partially pass it. A mask is actually a selection that is created. The selection can be "adjusted" via the usual selection modifiers, to soften expand, contract, etc., the selection boundaries. And it can also use other selection tools to modify the actual selection mask. The Mask panel has a collection of all these tools in one place to make working with masks much more efficient. And this panel can handle both pixel and vector based masks. An update color range feature is included in the Mask panel. "Density" and "Feather" sliders are also included. In the Mask panel, you can select the color range to apply the changes to, use a brush to change the mask, and adjust the mask edge to suit your needs. All in all, this panel makes using masks much easier, and more powerful.

ADOBE CONFIGURATOR

This is something totally new to Photoshop. Configurator is a utility that enables the user to create custom “panels” within Photoshop CS4. Running this utility brings up a window where you can create (drag to size) an empty panel. Then you can drag just about anything that Photoshop has in the way of commands, tools, actions, et al, to build a custom set of Photoshop activities, with all of them at your fingertips. Configurator provides you with a good-sized window on the left of the Configurator program window, where all the tools, menu items, et al are displayed. And, for those tools where there are multiple tools for a given tool choice, all the choices are displayed for one to choose from. The same goes for all the dropdown menu items in CS4. Every one is displayed.

Now, just drag the things you want to be available into the custom panel. You can position them where you like, and in any order you want. If you need more room in the new panel, just drag an edge to adjust the size. When you want to call up that custom panel, click on Window>Extensions, and select it from the menu. Then drag the panel to the desired location on your screen, and you can now click on any of the buttons in the panel to make things happen. Configurator does not give you any added activities that were not in CS4 to begin with. But it makes accessing them much quicker, much as the Adjustments and Mask panels do.

BRIDGE CS4

Bridge has been the “file manager” for Photoshop and other program in the “CS” suites since the suites started. Bridge is more than just a file manager however. It has a wide range of features and customization capabilities that make it the tool to use when browsing, selecting, rating, and editing the EXIF information in images.

Users can customize the display, set the thumbnail sizes, and the size of the individual right side image display for the image selected in the left side thumbnail area. It can mark images via a user set rating value, and of course sort images via the many choices of parameters. Any custom settings can be saved and recalled for specific tasks. Files can be renamed in batches, via a comprehensive set of rules which the user can customize. And contact sheets can be designed in Bridge, and saved as PDF files for printing and other uses.

CS4 does not appear to have any significant changes from CS3. But it is a powerful tool to use in viewing, ranking, selecting, evaluating, and ranking your images prior to opening them in Photoshop.

ADOBE CAMERA RAW 5.0

Adobe Camera Raw is the intermediate step for users to open RAW files from their digital cameras et al, and do some preliminary “processing” before then moving them to Photoshop for the final retouching. All the activities in Camera Raw are non destructive, that is the file in question is not permanently changed. And Camera Raw has the equivalent of a “Panel” of very comprehensive image adjustment features, some of which are not in Photoshop, such as color temperature.

Prior to version 5.0, adjustments made in Camera Raw covered the entire image. Now, however, the user has the ability to restrict the areas where adjustments are made, essentially functioning like a layer mask does. The “Adjustment brush” is the tool that does this job. One can paint onto and limit the affected areas. There is also a Graduated Filter that applies a selected effect using a gradient, which tapers the effect from full to none. This filter was previously only available in Lightroom, but has now been included in Photoshop CS4.

When CS3 was introduced, it included the ability to open a JPG file in camera raw, which was not possible earlier. So, that gave the user the ability to work with the “Panel” of adjustments that camera raw offers, even if the file is not a RAW file. This became a usual route for me when working on JPEG images, as the clustering of tools in Camera Raw moved most retouching tasks along much faster.

DODGE & BURN IMPROVEMENT

The dodge and burn capability in CS4 has been improved considerably. In earlier version, when dodging and burning, the tone of the are being worked on suffered a shift in the actual color/tone. Now an option to “Protect

Tones” has been added to the options for these tools. When dodging in CS3, without the “Protect Tones”, the area being dodged looks as if a whitish color is overlaying the dodged material. When “Protect Tones” is checked, this whitening is greatly reduced, and the tone/color seems more vibrant after being dodged. The same saving of the tonal quality is preserved when burning.

THE VIBRANCE TOOL

This was a tool only available in Camera Raw in CS3, but it is now available in Photoshop CS4. It appears to similar to the older Hue/Saturation tool. But Adobe has improved the results here, similarly to the way they improved the old Brightness/Contrast tool. Vibrance does add saturation to a color, but the more saturated it is, the less it gets changed. Avoiding the garish results when using the older Saturation tool.

SPRING LOADED KEYS

Photoshop has always had several keys that can switch to different tool functions while the key is held down. This feature allows you to access a tool temporarily by holding down the key for that tool, similar to using the spacebar for the hand tool - only for many more tools now. After learning the letter for the tools you use often, you can quickly invoke that tool temporarily, by holding down that letter key. This can be a great time saver.

IMPROVED GRAPHICS PERFORMANCE

Photoshop CS4 makes use of the power of a good graphics card to improve your screen display. Users with a graphics card with 256 Mb (or more) of card memory and a GPU can now do smoother scrolling, zooming, and panning. The capabilities of the “better” card in your system will now be recognized by CS4.

IN CONCLUSION

The new features in CS4 that I've presented are only a partial listing. I've concentrated mainly on those which I feel are most important to me, in my tasks of retouching and restoring images. Photoshop can of course do much more than that. It has creative capabilities far beyond what most people realize. The more I use it, the more things I discover. It is a bottomless pit of wonderful tools and capabilities.

To discover more of its wonders, sometimes I just open Photoshop and start browsing around in the many menus and command listings, and just “play”. And every time I do this I come away with more knowledge of it what it can achieve. It's hard to imagine what CS5 will bring, but I can be sure that it will be more and greater tools and capabilities.

Here's a number that I find amazing. I did a search for “Photoshop” on Barnes & Noble, probably the largest book vendor on the Internet. There were 1080 items found. That is a testament to the widespread popularity of Photoshop.