ILLUSTRATION & IMAGE EDITING

# Gimp Transform humdrum images

**If you fancy revitalising an old photo – or can't afford to buy images from a stock library – try these *Gimp* techniques from Michael J Hammel and feel like a graphics god.**

## LAST TIME

**In *LXF67's Gimp* tutorial we explored 3D effects, creating realistic, metal-finished buttons. If you missed the issue, call 0870 8374722 or +44 1858 438794 for overseas orders.**

*Gimp* users start many of their projects with an existing image, usually a scanned photograph. There are many places online to buy high-quality images. These stock image archives are made up of pictures taken by professional photographers and scanned at various resolutions using high-quality equipment, making them suitable for website thumbnails, large posters and everything in between.

Unfortunately, most online archives charge an arm and a leg (though royalty-free options are more affordable, as we'll see). Most are too expensive for the average user looking to create a modest poster for the junior football club or a flyer for the local dry-cleaning business. The average user, therefore, turns to a more mundane source: the family album. We all have our own collection of photos good enough to show grandma but among the blurred shots and red eye there may be promising images that, with a little *Gimp* tweakery, are worthy of a wider audience.

In this issue's tutorial I'll show you how to get the most out of average photos by merging a set of them into a collage. We'll also be turning an ordinary picture into a stunning studio portrait, and creating a simple advert using low-cost stock imagery. As with all tutorials in this column we'll be using *Gimp 2.0*, though any variations in *Gimp 2.2* will be noted as they crop up (pun intended).

## QUICK TIP

**Removing amateur giveaways**

**It's unlikely that you'll have framed each of your own photographs perfectly, so don't be afraid to crop your images to get rid of uninteresting features distracting from the subject. Another trick to remember is that many images look terrible in colour but fine in black and white, so consider converting them to mono. Play with the Levels and Curves of your pictures, improving their sharpness and contrast. And finally, try enhancing your photos with shadows, text and blocks of light and colour.**

## ONLINE STOCK IMAGE LIBRARIES

**There are many stock image archives online. Some are pricey, some aren't. Here is list of sites that can fit the budgets of either the average user or the professional.**

**Low price stock images:**
www.bigstockphoto.com
www.istockphoto.com
www.canstockphoto.com

**Professional quality stock images:**
www.ablestock.com
www.punchstock.com
www.creatas.com
www.stockbyte.com



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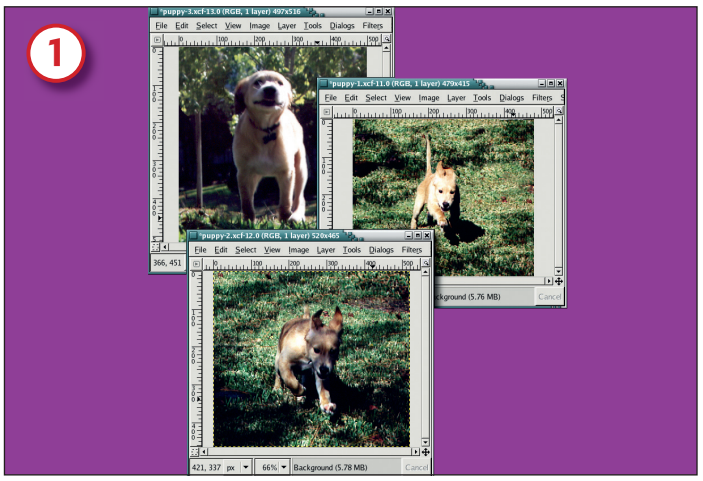
## PART 1 – COLLAGES AND MONTAGES

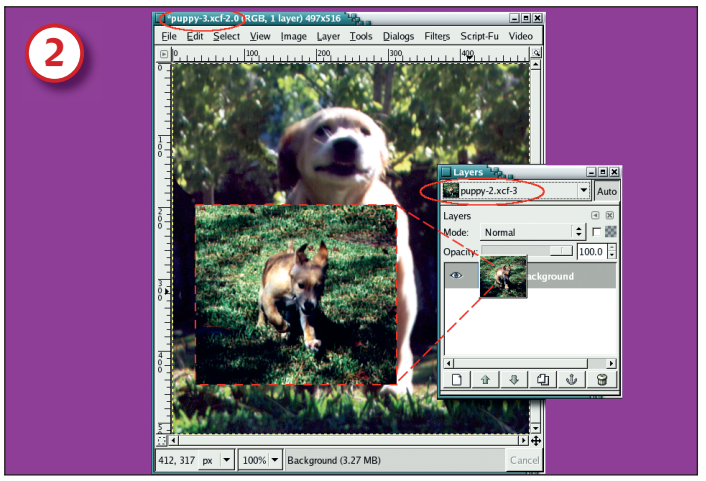
**Collages and montages are just collections of overlaid images.** If you were making a collage by gluing material on to paper or canvas you might mix different types of fabric or paper, frayed or cut in different ways to add colour and texture. In *Gimp*, you can go a step further by using transparency to merge images together.

There are no hard and fast rules for creating a montage. The basic process is to copy the images into a single image window, position them in that window, and then add transparency, shadows or other effects to merge the images together. One tip for scanned images: be sure to scan each photograph at 150dpi or higher. You can always scale the image down later to fit the montage, but most print images need to be scanned at higher resolutions if you plan on printing them later.



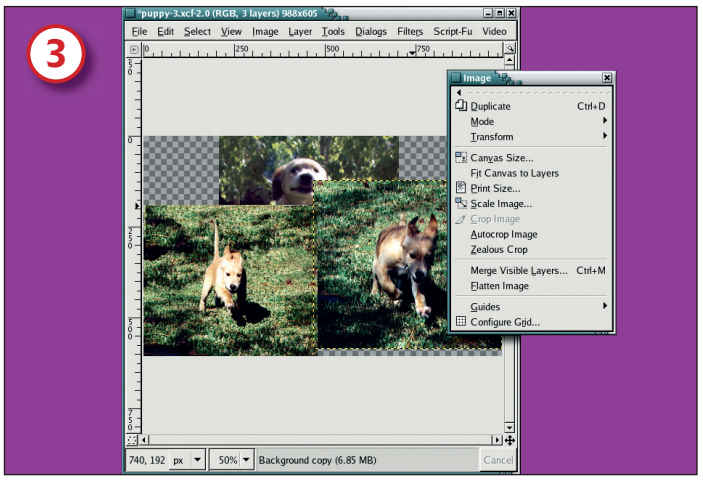

### 1/ Choose your images

This montage is a simple collection of puppies. Three images will be used to show the process, but the final result is a collection of many images. Two photos show a puppy running and another is a head-on shot. The goal will be to merge the two running images into a single flowing image and then integrate the head-on shot with that double image. Substitute any other images you like for the puppies. The process, not the content, is what is important in this tutorial.



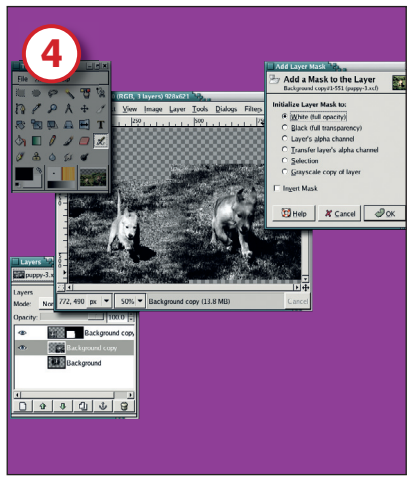

### 2/ Pull the images into a single window

Use one of the images as the base on to which the other two images will be copied. In the Layers dialog, click and hold the left mouse button over the other images' thumbnail preview and drag the thumbnail on to the base image. This is the fastest way to copy a layer from one image into another.




### 3/ Position and resize

The head-on shot is positioned in the middle of the image. The other two images are placed left and right of this and slightly below. In *Gimp 2.0* the canvas must be resized manually (Image > Canvas Size) to allow the image window to enclose all three images. In *Gimp 2.2* this can be done automatically using the Images > Fit Canvas To Layers menu option. Be sure to add an alpha channel (Layer > Transparency > Add Alpha Channel) to the original background layer. The canvas background should be left transparent until all images are added and positioned. Where photos have been taken with different quality film or in different light conditions you may get the same subject in three different shades. Avoid this by desaturating all the layers (Layer > Colours > Desaturate). Later, colour will be added back in using a gradient in a separate layer.




### 4/ Merge into a single image

Turn off the visibility of the original layer for now. This montage will merge the images of the two running puppies. Merging two layers requires only that a layer mask (Layer > Mask > Add Layer Mask) be added to the upper layer. Use the Airbrush tool to paint black into the mask where the two layers overlap until the two images appear to merge. Paint only along the edge and don't paint in straight lines. Zoom in to see the effect a little better.

### WHY PUPPIES?

**If you're wondering why dogs are often used in my *Gimp* tutorials there is a simple answer: dogs don't sue. The use of images of people is covered by various laws and in many cases requires consent from the individual. When doing tutorials showing how everyday photographs with living subjects can be used with *Gimp* it wouldn't do to use stock images. We don't all have perfect images from which to work. So using simple pictures of puppies helps bring home the point without requiring extensive legal clarifications. Plus, they have the cutest little wet noses.**



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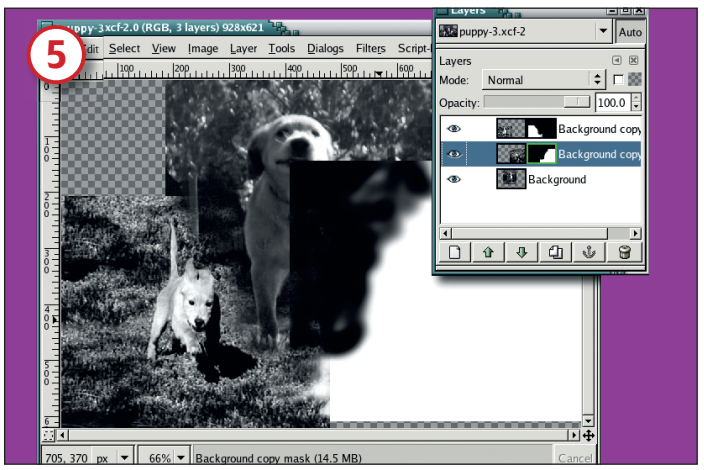
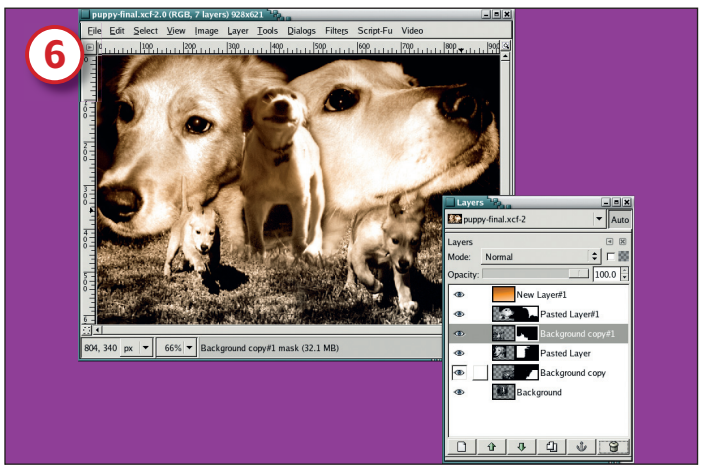



## 5/ Overlay the head-on shot

Add a layer mask to the other visible layer, and turn on the visibility of the head-on shot. Now paint in the two layer masks until the running puppies are merged into the middle image. Hold down the Alt key (the Shift key may also be necessary depending on how your system is configured) and click on a Layer Mask in the Layers dialog. This will make the mask visible in the canvas, allowing a better view of what is being masked. The layer mask will be outlined in green in the Layers dialog. Repeat the Alt+click to return to normal mode.




## 6/ Add colour

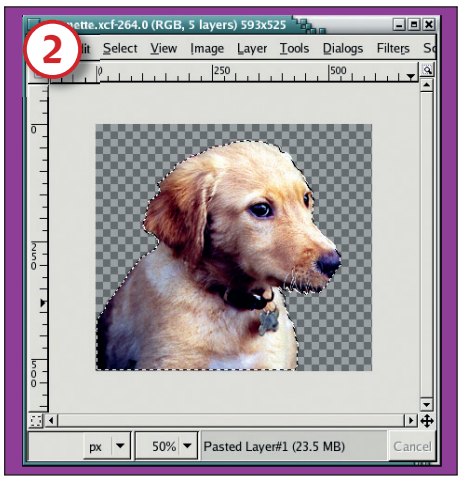
It becomes obvious at this point that a montage makes heavy use of layer masks to merge images. The use of a mask is important because it won't destroy original image content. That means you can edit the montage at a later time to change its appearance by simply modifying or even removing the mask. To add colour back in to the image a transparent layer is added over all the other layers and filled with a colour gradient – from reddish-orange to white, top to bottom at a slight left-to-right angle. This layer is set to Overlay mode.

## PART 2 – VIGNETTES TO SOFTEN A PORTRAIT

**In traditional photography, vignettes are softening effects that use darkroom processes to project a blurred image on to** photographic paper. In the digital realm this process is done with a mask of an image so an underlying texture can show through. Additionally, lighting and blur effects can be applied to the image to soften the subject. This part of the tutorial will take another puppy image, pull it from its background and overlay it on a studio backdrop. The subject is then softened using standard *Gimp* filters.


## 1/ Clean up the original

The original image shows the puppy with highly detailed fur and a flower-filled background. There is also an out of focus flower obscuring the puppy's lower jaw. This flower will be removed by using freehand selections of nearby areas, copying (Edit > Copy) and pasting (Edit > Paste) into new layers (Layer > New Layer). Layer masks are used to merge these copies into the original image and the entire set is then merged into a single layer.




## 2/ Isolate the subject

You'll now need to isolate the subject using the Scissors tool. Drop anchor points by clicking around the edges of the subject. The Scissors tool chooses the line nearest the click point where the contrast is greatest to set the anchors. Where the subject touches the edge of the image, zoom out (View > Zoom > Zoom Out) and click outside the image area. Close the selection by making the last click in the first anchor point. Any anchor point can be moved by clicking and dragging it around the image window at any time. When all anchor points are set, click inside the selected area to convert them to a selection.


## 3/ Add a backdrop

Adding a backdrop is the easiest step in this process. Add a layer above the original image but below the isolated subject layer. A simple gradient is all that you need, though variations on this are always possible. In this example a gradient running from #A71D2F (a blood red) to #000000 (black) is created in this new layer using a square shape. The gradient is created off centre to add a highlight behind the upper left of the subject.



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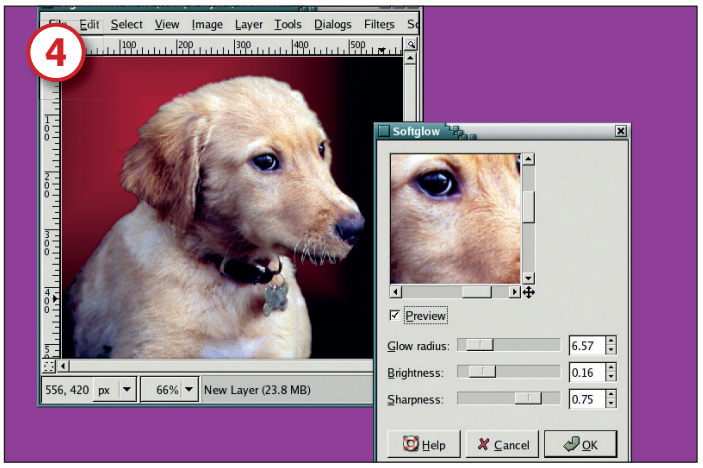
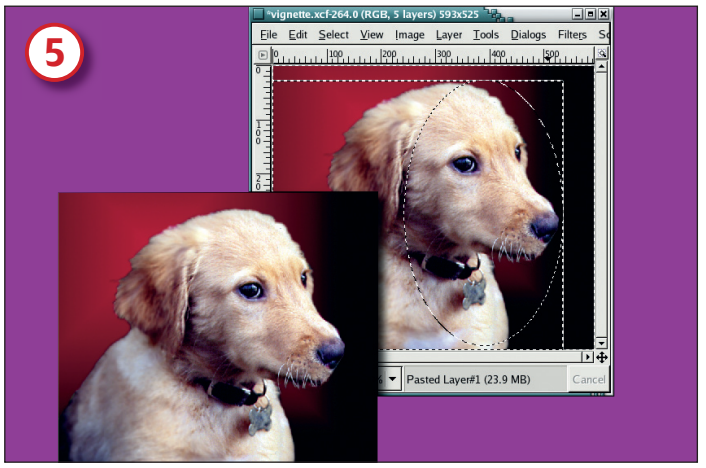



## 4/ Adjust the contrast

The next step requires adjusting the contrast of the subject layer. With the subject layer active, open the Brightness-Contrast filter (Layer > Colours > Brightness-Contrast). Reduce the Contrast setting by sliding the bar to the left. Reducing the contrast softens the image, and the degree to which you use this option will depend on the subject. With *Gimp 2.2* this effect can be significantly enhanced using the Softglow filter (Filters > Artistic > Softglow).



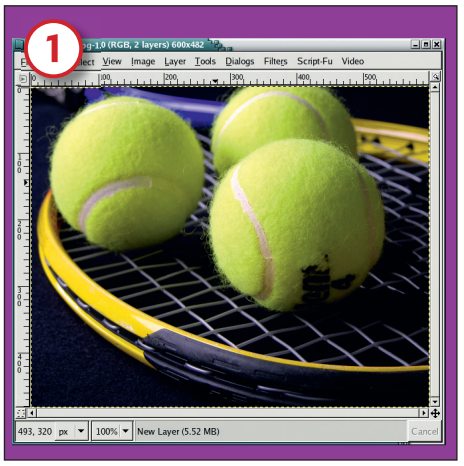

## 5/ Final blur

Final softening comes from creating an oval selection around the face and neck of the subject, feathering by anywhere between 10 and 30 pixels (Select > Feather), inverting (Select > Invert), and blurring by three to five pixels (Filters > Blur > Gaussian Blur) depending on the size of the original image. This adds a depth of field effect to the subject layer.

## PART 3 – BACKSCREEN EFFECT

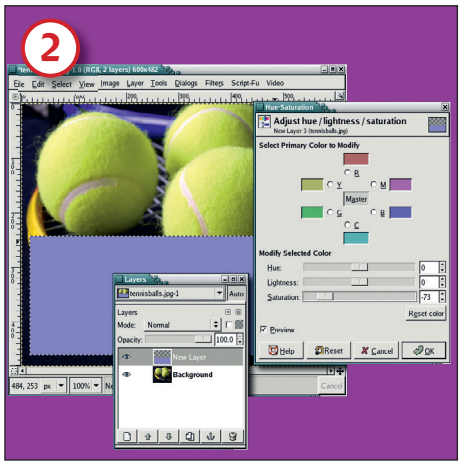
**Not all your graphics projects need rely on questionable quality photos.** There are several websites where you can buy high quality photos for relatively low cost. These photos, referred to as royalty-free stock images, can add a professional look to everyday projects, making them well worth the nominal price.

In this part of the tutorial a stock image is used to provide a focal subject for the project. A backscreen effect is added to allow a text message to be more easily viewed over the busy background



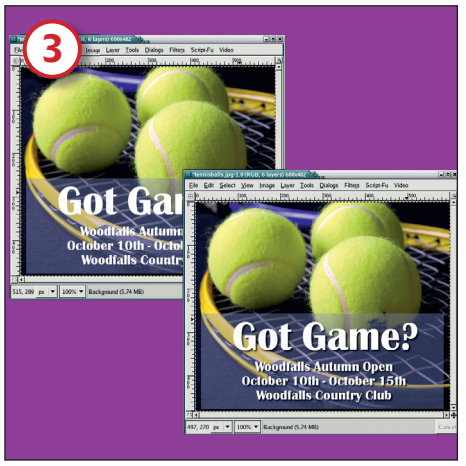

## 1/ Scale the original

The project goal is a flyer for a tennis tournament. A stock image of some tennis balls and a racket provides the starting point. Because the stock image is of such high quality, there is little work to do – not even levels adjustment. The original size of the image was reduced to fit a 4x3 inch card that will be printed at 150dpi.




## 2/ Create the backscreen

A backscreen is nothing more than contrast change in the image that allows you to show some other subject or, as in this case, text. To create the contrast, make a rectangular selection over the area of the image with the least amount of subject. In this case the rectangle is over the bottom part of the image so as not to interfere with the tennis balls. A new layer is created and the selection filled with white. The colour can also be tinted. Use the Colour Picker to pick a colour from the image and fill the selection with that colour, then reduce the saturation (Level > Colours > Hue Saturation).




## 3/ Add text

Reduce the opacity of the new layer – not by a great deal, but if too much of the image shows, it can interfere with the text message. Add text in white then use a drop shadow (Script Fu > Shadows > Drop Shadow) offset by three pixels and blurred by five without allowing resizing. The small offsets and blur let the shadow add more contrast for your message. LXF

**NEXT MONTH**

**Merging two photos can produce some wild images. In *LXF69* we'll do just that then simulate the 'infinite reflection' effect.**