

Some notes on adjusting photographs of ceramic art objects in Photoshop

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This method assumes you are photographing a ceramic art object on plain background paper. Gray paper is best for most purposes. If you are photographing a wall-hung work, you will not want to have a gradient background, but you will find the other information here useful.

Please note that Photoshop is a very complicated program. We will only cover a few aspects here. Also, there are several ways to perform many tasks in Photoshop. I am covering some of the ones that I use. Please note that you may find other ways that work for you, especially in specific circumstances.

I would also like to point out that the reason that I am teaching you to adjust an image of your work in Photoshop is NOT to change your actual art object. That is, I do not recommend that you correct glaze defects, change the color, add new parts, hide cracks, etc. in Photoshop. Rather, I am promoting a way to correct the image so that a) it looks more like your work than the raw digital image does and b) it showcases your work in a realistic and professional-looking format. I have mixed feelings about gradient backgrounds, but I note that the ceramic art objects that get attention these days all have them.

Inspect your photographic file

It's a good idea to take more than one digital photo of your piece. Try different angles – some will look a lot better in a photo. Remember that photography flattens a three-dimensional form. You want a photo that reads well to someone who has not seen your actual piece (but who will in the future).

Also check to make sure the entire piece is in focus from front to back. Make sure there is no camera shake and that the shutter speed was fast enough. A good way to check is to View Actual Pixels. (Then hit View Fit on Screen to see the whole image).

To navigate around in the image, pick up the little hand from the tool palette. You can also use spacebar-drag.

You'll get the largest, richest file if you fill up the screen with your piece while photographing it, leaving little background. We can add more background later.

File formats

First, save your file in .psd format. Save As, pick .psd format. This is a Photoshop-specific format that you will need to support layers.

Know the difference between lossy and lossless image formats:

.jpg – lossy, but compresses really well, and everyone accepts it. But every time you work on the file and save it, it shrinks.

.tif – lossless, but makes a huge file. Most everyone can read it.

.psd – lossless Photoshop format, huge file size, supports layers.

My advice is to work on the image as a .psd and save this as your master copy (which you can re-adjust later). When you send the image out to others, make a .jpg version. Use only .jpg files in PowerPoint presentations - .tif makes the program jam sometimes.

First corrections

If your image is sideways, you'll need to choose Image Rotate Canvas, then select the appropriate direction, clockwise or counterclockwise.

Next, I make another layer. On the Layers palette, I drag the background layer to the square icon next to the trash can. Then I click the Background Copy layer to work on that (I leave the lowest layer alone as a kind of backup). Note: layers are a weird mental adjustment; you'll need to work with these until they make sense.

Is your image straight up and down, or does it need to be rotated a bit? If so, choose Image Rotate Canvas Arbitrary and enter a small number and choose clockwise or counterclockwise. Keep trying till it looks right.

Usually objects photographed outdoors have a blue cast on them (this is less likely to happen if the work is photographed on a cloudy day). To remove the blue: pick Image Adjustments Curves. Pick the middle eyedropper – the middle one selects the point on the image that should be neutral gray, and adjusts the rest of the image at the same time. Using the gray dropper, click at various points on your image until the color looks great, and just like it does in real life. Hopefully this is the only color correction of the image that you will need.

Sizing

You need a comfortable amount of background showing around the image, neither too much nor too little. If the image will be made into a slide, allow a little extra space around the image because it will be covered slightly by the slide mount.

If there is too much space, pick up the crop tool, apply it to your image, and adjust until you get it just right.

If you need to add more background (I usually do), pick Image Canvas Size. Add height or width as needed. Now you need to extend the background paper, which you can do by using the Clone Stamp tool. Adjust the brush size at the top of the screen to fit your needs. Opacity should be at 100%.

To use the Clone Stamp tool, alt-click to pick up image information. Click to deposit that information on your image. You'll need to practice this. If you make a mistake, you'll find it handy to go back steps in the History palette. It helps to make the brush temporarily smaller when you are close to your piece in the image. Note: it is much easier to use a graphics tablet than a mouse for this kind of operation.

After you get your background well cloned in, you'll probably need to crop for the final pleasing proportions.

You might need to correct little specs on the background from where the paper got dirty when you were photographing. Use the Clone Stamp Tool for this. Use a small brush size. Magnify the image so that you can see what you're doing. To magnify, pick

the magnifying glass from the tool palette, or use ctrl-spacebar. Pressing alt with the tool selected will make the image smaller on the screen, or you can use alt-ctrl-spacebar.

Now is a good time to “Create a New Snapshot”. Go to the History palette, then click on the small icon next to the trash can. This should create something called “Snapshot 1”. In some cases, it will be useful to have this information later in case you need to paint it into part of your image. (If you don’t need this later, it won’t hurt to have made the snapshot.)

Adding a gradient background, part 1: Extracting the image

At this point, you should have a great-looking photo of your work. The color is accurate. The image is well centered. The proportions of the image are pleasing. You could stop here. However, if you want to get that Ceramics Monthly look, you’ll probably need a gradient on the background. To do this, we first make a copy of the image on another layer, then cut the background out. The only thing on the uppermost layer is your piece, with no background around it. Then we (carefully) apply a gradient to the layer below. The result is your piece looking great on a realistic gradient background.

Therefore, copy your color-adjusted layer (on the Layers palette, drag the nice “background copy” layer onto the icon next to the trash can. The new layer should pop up on top of the other layers. Alt-double click the layer, and a little box will pop up so you can rename the layer. Call it something like “object” (or “pot” or “vessel”, etc.). This is the layer we will extract. Make sure this layer is highlighted.

Pick Filter Extract. On the screen that comes up, make sure your brush size is 5 pixels. Change the color if you need to in order to make the line you draw more visible (Photoshop doesn’t care which color you pick). This is a really small brush, so you will need to magnify the screen a number of times (magnifying glass – you can find one on the Extract screen). Make the line and the edge of your piece really easy to see. Note: you will really appreciate using a graphics tablet rather than a mouse for extracting.

Outline your piece using the Highlighter tool. Your objective is to cover the edge of your piece with the Highlighter. Ideally, an even amount of Highlighter pen should straddle over the edge of the outline on either side. You are not cutting the piece out by Highlighting it – you are telling Photoshop exactly where the outline is, so that the program can do the extracting. When you have highlighted all the outline you can see, you’ll need to use the Hand tool to move the image around so that you can see and highlight more of it. Go all the way around the piece until your line completely surrounds it.

If you make a mistake, simply pick up the Eraser tool and erase, then pick up the Highlighter and go back to highlighting.

If there are any holes in your piece (i.e. handles or other openings), you’ll need to highlight the edges of the openings also.

When you have all the edges highlighted, back out from the image so that you can see it all on the screen (try alt-Hand tool and click several times). Pick up the Fill tool (it looks like a pitcher). Click in a solid center area of your image. All that area should turn blue. This is the area that will be saved on this layer after the extraction. Hit Okay on the Extract screen.

Now take a look at your extracted image by going to the Layers palette and unchecking the eye on all the layers except the extracted one (this makes them invisible). View Actual Pixels and see if you got a clean edge (usually Extract works well for this, especially with the 5-pixel highlighting brush). Hit View Fit on Screen.

Adding a gradient background, part 2: the gradient

In the Layers palette, click the eye box again on the Background Copy layer so that you can see it. Highlight that layer.

Pick Layer Layer Style Gradient Overlay. A gradient immediately applies, but it's not realistic. Check Reverse on the Gradient Overlay box. Then click on the shaded gradient in the Gradient Overlay box. Look at the little colored boxes called Presets. Pick the gradient that shades from a color to checks (as you know by now, the presence of pale gray checks is Photoshop's way of telling you that there are no pixels in that portion of a layer). The name of the gradient is Foreground to Transparent (you can hold the mouse over it until it shows the name if you want). In the smooth gradient bar lower down in the same box (it's called the Gradient Editor box), click the lowest, leftmost stop. Below that, notice a little box that has sprung to life – it says Color. Click inside the color. A Color Picker box pops up. Click black – it's on the lower left of the color box. If black is too intense for your image, you can try picking dark to medium grays until something looks good.

Now, drag the stops around and play with the color picker until the gradient works visually. I find that each piece needs something different. But do stay with blacks and grays for realism. When you're done, hit okay to close out the gradient screens.

Final adjustments

Hopefully your image is looking pretty good. Some adjustments may be necessary. For instance, you may now notice streaks in the darkest part of the image where your clone stamping wasn't perfect. If so, highlight that layer and clone stamp to fix that.

You may want a stronger shadow under your piece. What works for me lately is highlighting the Background Copy layer, then Image Adjustments Brightness/Contrast. Play with decreasing brightness and increasing contrast – that usually brings up enough shadow for my taste.

You also need to be aware of how the lighting in the original photograph may be different from the implied lighting in the gradient-filled image. Sometimes the outline of your piece is the wrong color against the gradient – especially if the outline of your piece is reflecting a lighter gray of the original background paper, and it's directly against a very dark gradient. Try adjusting the gradient first, before messing with the pixels on the edge of your piece. Realism is a very delicate thing – tread lightly in order to preserve it. Ideally, you would not alter the pixels of your ceramic piece at all except through the general color adjustment using the gray dropper (under the Image Adjustments Curves command).

Now compare to your original image and see if it wasn't all worth it.