

P L U G - I N S

Masking tools for Photoshop

Chroma Graphics MagicMask
Extensis Mask Pro

BY JOHN KORCHOK

OK, ALL YOU *PHOTOSHOP* DWEEBS OUT THERE! WHAT'S THE NUMBER ONE time-waster in your day (I mean, besides speculating on the sexual availability of your friendly co-workers)?

That's right, masking! Are you the sort who finesses every hair and wart with the pen tool, only to descend to madness at an early age? Or are you of the "Wham, bam, thank-you-ma'am" school that lays down a few curves and figures the film guys will take care of it?

Whatever your style, relief from masking drudgery is here at last in the form of two *Photoshop* plug-ins that promise to do the dirty work for you. Is this for real, or just another wheelbarrow of black gold from the outhouse?

Chroma Graphics has released *MagicMask*, while Extensis offers *Mask Pro*. Both work with *PhotoShop* 3 and 4, both come on CDs with Mac and Windows versions included. Both work with CMYK as well as RGB images and both make masking easier and faster than what you can do with the limited tools offered with *Photoshop*. You can't lose: either is better than neither.

When you begin to work with them on real images, you begin to see the differences in their approach. Your first clue is the demo images included with the software. These have been chosen to highlight the strengths of each package. *MagicMask* includes several ordinary photos with broad areas of bright color. *Mask Pro* uses a shaggy lion (lots of big hair!) against a background that shares some colors with the subject. This is more of a challenge.

MAGICMASK HEADS UP SUITE OF THREE

MagicMask is the first of three linked plug-ins that Chroma Graphics is releasing. Just being shipped as we go to press is *EdgeWizard*, and last, in late 1998, will be *ChromaZone*. All three are based on the technology found in *Chromatica*, an all-in-one masking and recoloring plug-in which was Chroma's 1996 entry into the plug-in business. *MagicMask* breaks out the masking portion of this code, enhances the interface and adds innovative selection tools. The most interesting of these is the Magic Lasso (I didn't name it, I just review it).

This is a drawing tool that *recognizes edges*. It can actually tell what a logical route for your masking is. You are not bound to use that line: a move of your cursor to one side will move the line off the edge to follow other visual contours in



MagicMask Magic Lasso. This intelligent tool can follow the edges of color areas, making it fast and accurate to select hard-edged areas.



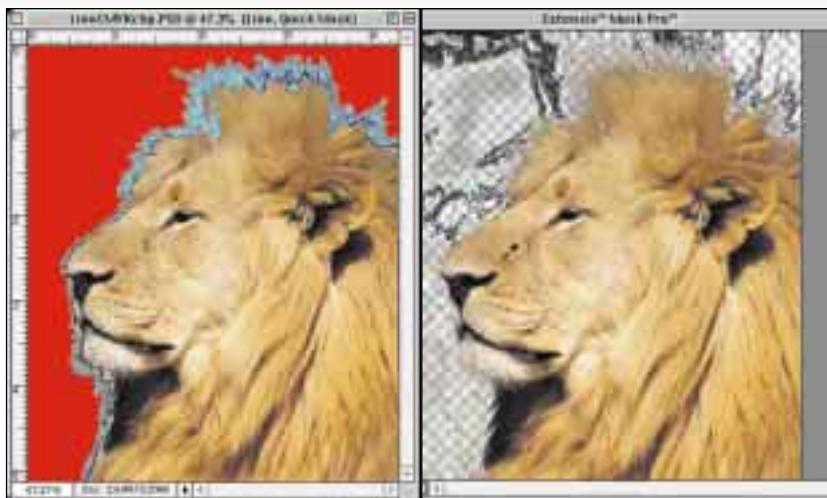
MagicMask Pro Panel. You can adjust the color range of your most recent selection to fine tune which color characteristics are added and dropped.



This was about the best I could do on a hairy subject using *MagicMask*'s Magic Paintbrush. Too many wispy hairs have disappeared, not enough background areas near the roots have been masked out.

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Mask Pro Masked and Clipped. All done and clipped in 15 minutes. How long would it take you by hand?



Trying to mask too much in *Mask Pro* with inadequate samples will give you too many dropouts in the mask. Sure, you can fix this up later, but it's faster to sample frequently as you mask and avoid the cleanup altogether.

the drawing. It's fascinating, it's accurate and it's fun.

My only quibble is that the tool tends to follow the light side of a color boundary. This tends to give light edges to dark objects. Chroma's *EdgeWizard* plug-in is the feathering/edge blending module which should ameliorate this bug.

EdgeWizard may also help with the Magic Paintbrush tool. The selection edges are hard as nails: the Paintbrush paints with a bitmap rather than grayscale. It has a selection effect similar to *Photoshop's* Magic Wand, but it offers a couple of improvements. You

Mask Pro's transparency in hair. Subject areas that were contaminated with background color have the background component replaced with transparency. When dropped onto the new background, you will retain all the subject information and still have the edge looking perfectly natural.

can vary the brush size, which is in effect a really large eyedropper sampler, and you can drag the brush over an area to sample a typical variety of colors. It works well in relatively flat areas of well-defined colors, but has difficulty in the shadow areas and tends to select unwanted image. The Minus Paintbrush will replace your original image, but I'd prefer a smarter color discrimination algorithm: the one they're using isn't much better than *Photoshop's*.

Each new drag of the Paintbrush creates a new selection palette, and in a stroke of genius, the software engineers at Chroma have given us access to it. Underneath the Range slider is the "Pro Panel", which slides out to give us live control over the most recent selection. We can vary the Hue, the degree of Saturation or the Value

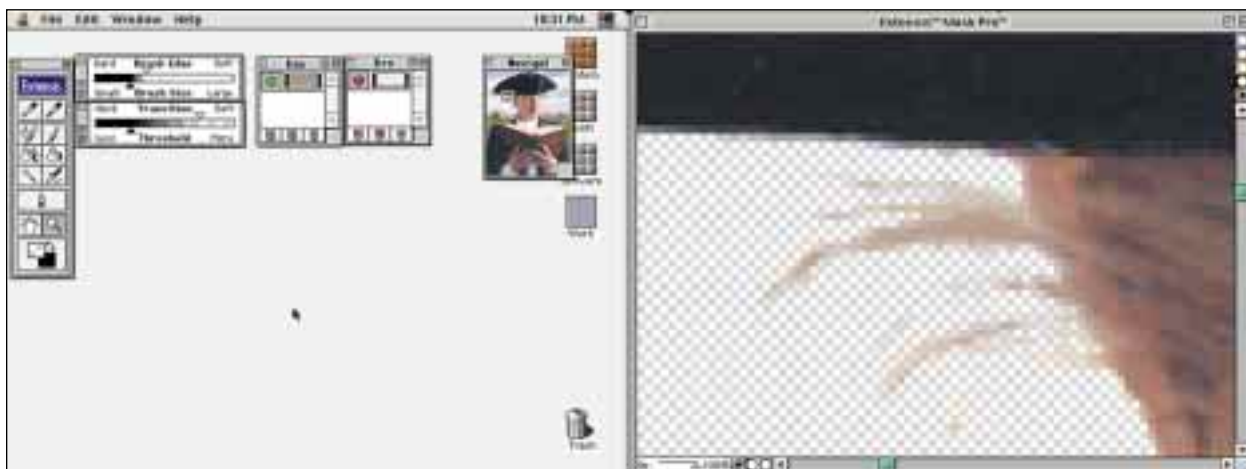
(Lightness/Darkness) of the range of colors in the selection.

It would be a tweaker's paradise were it not for one design oversight: the cursor readout is only in CMYK for a CMYK original. The translation to HSV is not trivial, and it renders the controls nearly useless.

MASK PRO ADDS INTERFACE SOPHISTICATION

After a bit of frustration with these shortcomings, I began on *Mask Pro*. It took me a little while to get my bearings with it, as it was more complex to get set up than *MagicMask*.

MaskPro uses samples not only for the colors you are trying to mask, but also for colors you are trying not to mask. Each of these categories, called Keep and Drop colors, can consist of single colors or sets of colors. There is



more to learn here, but the net result is far more accurate masking in hairy situations. Magic Brush is able to distinguish between similar tones that befuddle Magic Paintbrush in *MagicMask*.

Another interface complication that took some playing to figure out was the two Brush and two Transition sliders. The brush sliders control brush softness and size, while the Transition controls change the weighting of Keep and Drop colors relative to each other. Varying these parameters as you brush



Mask Pro handles the fine strands much more convincingly, rejecting the background areas in between them and adding transparency where the colors mixed.

using the arrow keys on the keyboard gives the experienced user unparalleled intuitive control over masking production.

It also helps that the Magic Brush is producing a soft-edged grayscale mask. When you zoom in on a wispy area of the mask, you can see that *Mask Pro* has knocked out all the undesired colors and substituted transparency for them. This is the best way to do it. When composited over another background, the effect looks like you spent days on it instead of minutes.

Upon leaving the plug-in, *Mask Pro* will automatically generate a clipping path for you based on your mask. You can vary the parameters to give a looser or tighter path. The path generated can be extremely complex, but

the fact that the line segments are straight rather than bezier curves means that even the most dense path will still print.

The downside to *Mask Pro* is that it is not automatic. To use it effectively, you have to know what you are doing. As you brush the edge to be masked, you constantly have to resample the color areas which you are trying to separate. *MagicMask* tries to automate things more, but the quality of the automated work isn't good enough to use without tweaking, and then you're

right back to needing some color knowledge to make it work.

Both *Mask Pro* and *MagicMask* have additional fill and selection tools which assist in filling holes, restoring image areas and cleaning up ragged edges, but I have tried to concentrate here on the

essential tools that are at their cores.

ONE OR BOTH A MUST FOR PHOTOSHOPPERS

MagicMask is a fine tool for occasional retouchers. It's Magic Lasso tool would be fantastic for users who are masking a lot of hard-edged images, as in product photography. In tandem with the *EdgeWizard* plug-in, *MagicMask* is likely to become a more polished and useful tool.

Mask Pro is a heavy-duty masking application, with a steeper learning curve. If your subject matter is mainly portraits or soft-edged objects, you'll be happier with your results from *Mask Pro*. Of course, if you're one of those who spend so much time in *Photoshop* that you didn't understand my earlier innuendo about availability of co-workers, you are in serious trouble. You will only be happy if you get both of these plug-ins and own *all* the tools.

Whether you choose one or both, you'll find that your time spent on the chore of masking will go way down. Tell your production manager that your productivity will double: that way you'll get them installed tomorrow. While their operation still requires a brain in the head of the user, they are a big improvement over the way you've done it before.

For more information about *MagicMask* (list \$99.95 US), check Chroma Graphics' website at www.chromagraphics.com.

A free demo of Extensis *Mask Pro* (priced at \$299.95 US) is available at www.extensis.com/products/MaskPro. *

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Dreamweaver

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in, which raises Netscape *Communicator's* requirement to near 14,000 KB. With all the above open, my system consumption is in the 25 MB range. You can make do with much less, but I would want 100+ Mb of RAM available when using *Dreamweaver*.

My enthusiasm for *Dreamweaver* is slightly tempered by the fact that it's pretty buggy for a post-beta release. And some of *Dreamweaver's* DHTML code produces quirky results, even in version 4 browsers.

Fusion 3.0 will support DHTML, but only *Dreamweaver* has Roundtrip HTML technology. HTML pros, who generally advise building pages manually for control and compatibility, may now have a visual editor they can love.

Dreamweaver for Windows 95, Windows NT and Power Macintosh lists for \$499 (US), but is available for \$299 (US) until March 1998. Go to www.macromedia.com/software/dreamweaver to download a free demo version. *