

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

Layers and their applications are always a topic of concern and confusion, especially to those that are new to the Photoshop and Elements programs.

Layers will become one of your best tools after you understand their value and apply them to your images.

This tutorial will present the basics of Layers and, hopefully, provide knowledge of creating and applying layers in virtually every image you open in the Adobe programs.

Adjustment layers are different than regular layers and afford additional opportunities and advantages. Because of the difference, adjustment layers will be addressed in a separate tutorial.

Before we start with the step-by-step understanding of layers, let's return, for a moment, to our childhood and the cartoon flip pages. Each different movement by a character was placed on a separate sheet and flipping through the pages created a short "movie" or story. A variation was drawing something on a clear sheet of paper and placing different objects or the same object in a different pose or position on additional clear pages.

With these clear pages of created information, we had the ability to remove one or more pages entirely or pull one or more pages from the stack and move them up or down in the stack to create a new effect.

Layers are very similar to these clear pages we created years ago. Think of a layer as being a clear page with information created on it. We can visually add or remove the layer (page) by clicking the thumbnail "eyeball" on or off and we can change the order of the layer (page) and move it up or down in the stack by clicking on the layer thumbnail and dragging it up or down to a different location in the stack.

Now let's apply this as a graphic representation.

Step One

Create a new canvas by clicking on File > New Blank Layer and select 1024 x 768 from the *Preset* and *White* from the *Background Content* and click OK. This creates a new layer named *Background* which has no information on a white canvas. Refer to Figure One on the next page for reference.

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

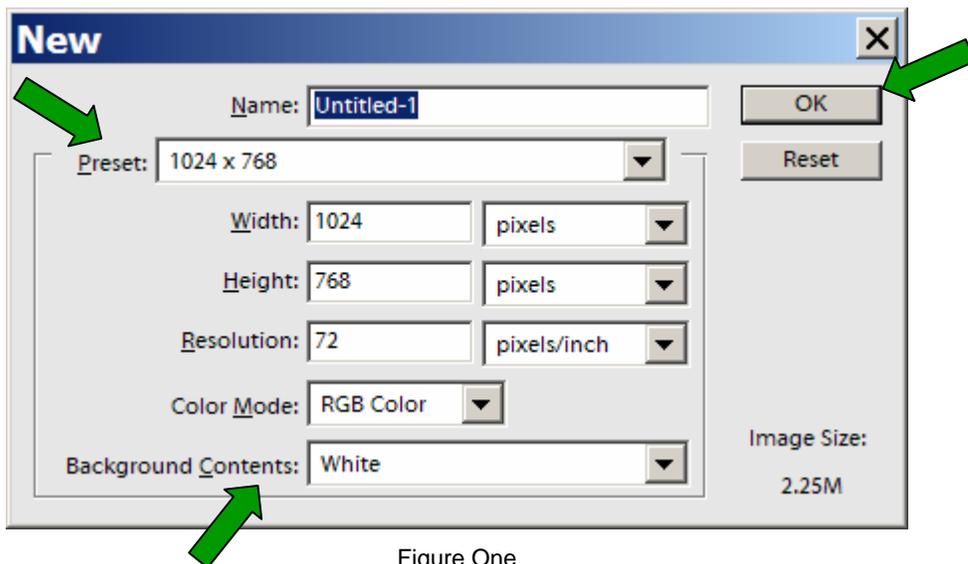


Figure One

Step Two

Click on the *Marquee Tool icon* and select the rectangular marquee and draw a rectangle on the canvas. Refer to Figure Two on Page Two.

Step Three

a) Fill the rectangle with a Red color. One method for filling with color is to select the *Paint Bucket Tool* from the vertical toolbox and click inside of the marching ants to fill with the *Foreground Color*. The *Foreground Color* can be changed by clicking on the *Foreground Color icon* in the vertical toolbox and selecting a new color in the *Color Picker* and clicking OK.

b) Deselect either by pressing the *Ctrl and D keys* at the same time or clicking on *Select > Deselect* on the upper toolbar. Refer to Figure Two.

Step Three

a) Create a new blank layer by clicking on the *Create A New Layer icon* to create a new blank layer.

b) Click and hold on the *Marquee Tool icon* and select the *Elliptical Tool* and draw an ellipse.

c) Fill the selection with a Green color and deselect. Refer to Figure Two.

Step Four

a) Create another new blank layer.

b) Press and hold the *Shift key* to constrain the selection to a circle and draw a circle.

c) Fill this selection with a Blue color and deselect. Refer to Figure Two.

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

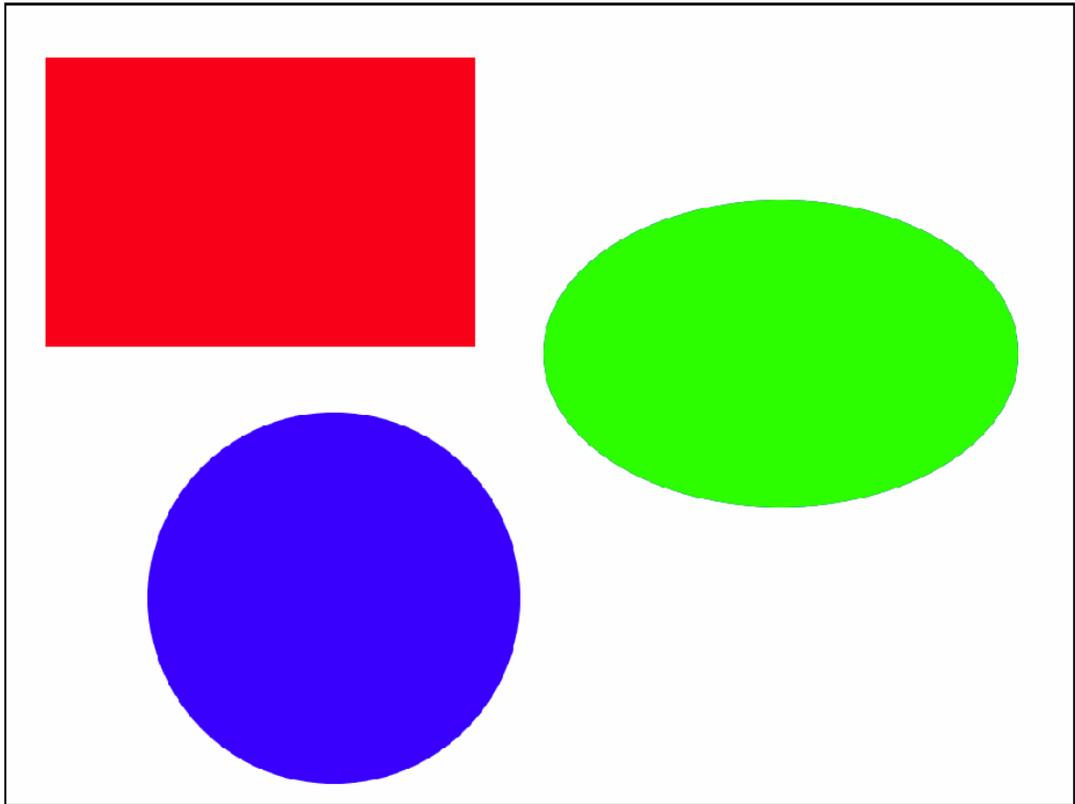


Figure Two

Step Five

- Click on the eyeball of one of the layers to turn OFF the layer visibility and note that the graphic disappears and click the blank eyeball area to turn the layer back ON.
- Repeat for each of the other two layers.

Note that the white background disappeared when the Background Layer eyeball was clicked to deactivate the layer.

Step Six

Let's move the shapes.

- Click on the thumbnail of Layer 2 to make this layer active. You can always tell the active layer by the blue highlighting on the layer text.
- Activate the Move Tool and click and drag the shape to a new location.
- Repeat for Layer 1. Be sure to activate Layer 1 first.
- When you make Layer 1 active and try to repeat for the Background Layer, you will not be able to move the rectangle and a dialog box shown in Figure Three on Page Four appears stating the layer is locked. Click OK and we will address this issue later.

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

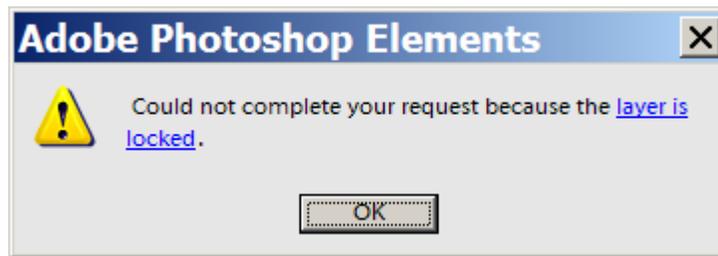


Figure Three

Step Seven

It is possible to move an object on the locked (Background Layer) and we will do that now.

- a) Select the *Magic Wand Tool* (other selection can tools can also be used) and click on the rectangle to create a selection of only the red rectangle.
- b) Select the *Move Tool* again and try to move the rectangle and you will see that you can move it to a new location. Deselect.

Step Eight

Relocate all of the shapes approximately as shown in Figure Four below.

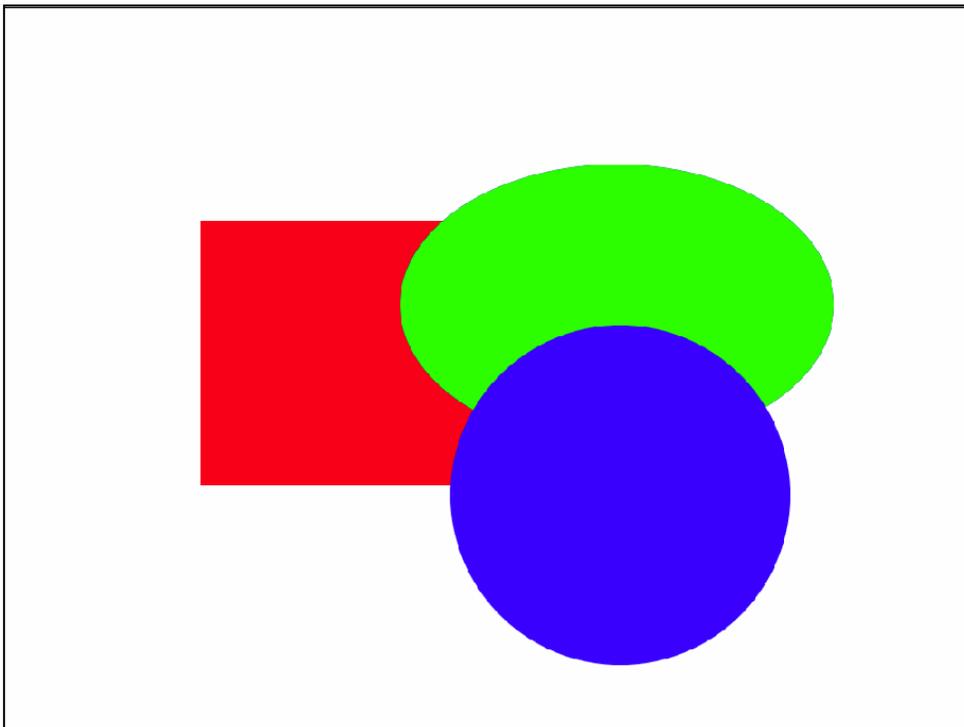


Figure Four

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

Step Nine

Let's change the order of the layer stack.

Highlight Layer 2 in the layers palette to make it the active layer and click and drag it below Layer 1 until a bold border line between layer 1 and the Background Layer is seen. Release the mouse and note that Layer 2 is now below Layer 1 in the palette stack and the Green Ellipse covers a portion of the Blue Circle instead of the other way around. The Ellipse layer is on top of the Circle layer.

Remember our childhood clear acetate sheets and how we pulled a sheet from the stack and moved it downward in the stack to cover a portion of it. Dragging a layer downward in the layer stack creates the same effect.

Moving a selection on a layer like we did in Step Six has the same effect as grabbing a clear sheet of acetate and repositioning it like we did as children.

Step Ten

Let's change the shape of one of the objects.

- Making sure that Layer 2 is active, press and hold the *Ctrl* key and click the cursor on the thumbnail icon of layer 2 to create a selection around the circle. The object is selected when the "marching ants" surround the circle.
- On the *Upper Toolbar*, click on *Image > Transform > Free Transform* and a rectangular box with eight small "handles" surrounds the selection.
- Click and drag the upper center handle upward to stretch the circle to a shape similar to the Blue object in Figure Five below.
- Press the *Enter* key or *double-click on the selection* to complete the transformation.
- Deselect.

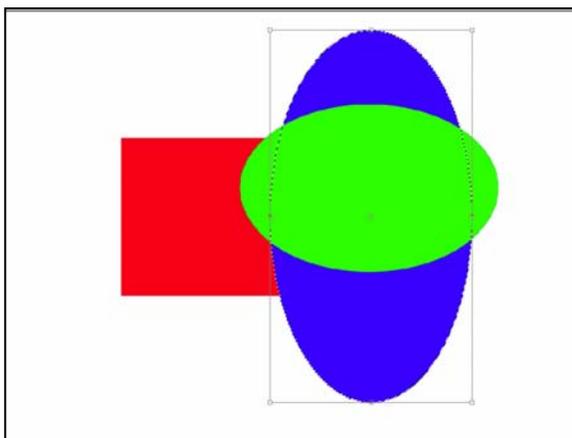


Figure Five

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

Step Eleven

Let's address the locked layer issue we previously had in Step Six. We could not move the layer because it was locked so we moved the object using an alternative method.

The Background layer is locked by default and has limited options compared to a normal layer.

To unlock the Background Layer and convert it to a normal layer, simply double-click on the Background Layer in the layer palette to open the *New Layer dialog box* and click OK to accept the default layer name of Layer 0. See Figure Six below.

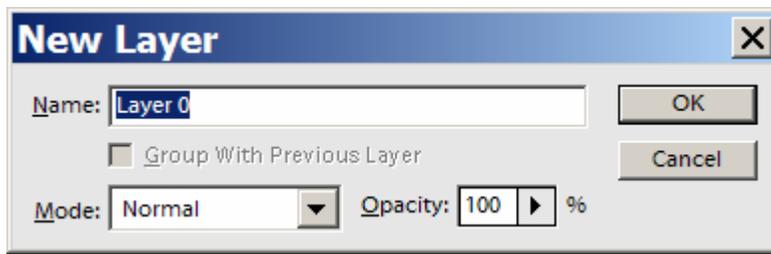


Figure Six

Step Twelve

You may want to move the Layer 0 (previous Background Layer) upward in the layer stack or you may want to have a transparent background instead of the normal colored one. Both of these situations can only be accomplished with an unlocked layer.

- Make sure the Layer 0 is active and select the *Magic Wand Tool*.
- Click on the background color of the layer to select it. The marching ants will be around the White areas only and the red rectangle will not be selected.
- Press the *Delete* key to remove the color and leave a transparent background. Note that a checkerboard pattern replaces the colored background.
- The layer can be moved up in the layer stack now that it has been unlocked.
- Move the Layer 0 upward in the layer stack so it is between Layers 1 and 2.

Step Thirteen

Layers by default, have numbers for the layer name but it can be less confusing to rename them with a title that allows quick access to a specific layer.

Double-click on the text in the layer name to highlight it and type your desired name and press the *Enter* key to complete the renaming.

Rename the layers with more appropriate names such as *ellipse, rectangle and circle*.

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

Step Fourteen

Selections can be made of objects or portions of an image and copied onto a new layer of its own. This is extremely useful sometimes during the editing of an image. Let's copy a portion of the red rectangle onto a new layer of its own.

- a) Make the rectangle layer active.
- b) Select the *Rectangular Marquee Tool* and starting at the lower right hand corner of the rectangle, click and drag a selection of approximately half of the rectangle.
- c) Press and hold the *Ctrl* key and tap the *J* key to create a new layer via copy. This action has automatically created a new blank layer and copied the selection onto it.
- d) Rename the layer *small rectangle*.
- e) Move the shape to a new location near the lower right hand corner of the canvas as shown in Figure Seven below.

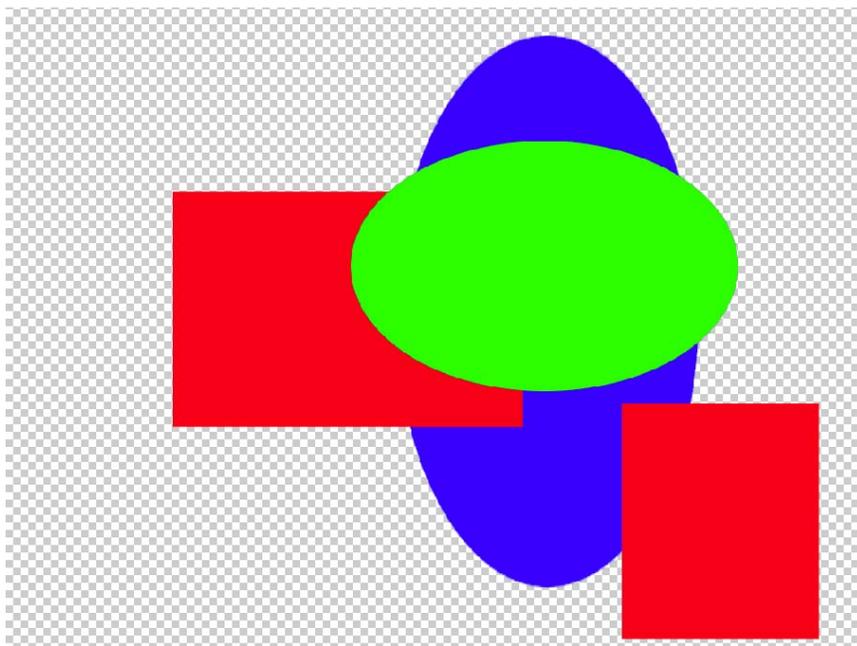


Figure Seven

Step Fifteen

Reducing the *Opacity* of a layer (or selection on the layer) can be a useful tool. An example would be applying a filter effect somewhat greater than may be needed and reducing the layer opacity to achieve the desired effect. Let's reduce the opacity of the small red rectangle.

It is typical in the Elements program to have multiple methods of performing tasks and selecting the layer opacity has at least three different methods.

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

Step Fifteen - Continued

Perhaps the better method overall, is to click and drag the 100% number on the layer palette (near the upper right hand corner) to highlight the number and type the desired number and press the *Enter* key. You can also double-click the number to highlight it.

Alternate methods include clicking and dragging on the *word opacity* to establish a new value. Another variation is after the number is highlighted, use the *up* or *down* arrow keys to increase or decrease the value. Still another method is pressing the *V* key to select the Move Tool and press a number key on the keyboard to set the value to 10X the number pressed. For example, pressing the 7 key would set the opacity value at 70%. Pressing two numbers one-after-another will set a specific value also such as pressing the 4 key and then the 8 key would set the opacity level to 48%.

See, I told you there are multiple methods.

a) With the small rectangle layer active, reduce the layer opacity to 50%.

Step Sixteen

New blank layers can be added anywhere in the layer stack. The most important thing to remember, however, is to make the proper layer active *prior* to creating the new layer so it will be located where you want. You have learned that you can move the layer, if necessary if you forget.

Normally we make a layer active and create a new blank layer *above* the active layer. It is possible to create a new blank layer *below* the active layer by holding the *Alt* key while clicking on the *Create New Layer icon*. Let's create a new layer below the circle layer.

- a) Click on the *circle layer thumbnail* to make it the active layer.
- b) Hold the *Ctrl* key down and click on the *Create New Layer icon* to create a new blank layer *below* the circle layer.
- c) Fill this new layer with a White color.

Note that the small red rectangle has a reduced opacity.

Refer to Figure Eight on Page 9.

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

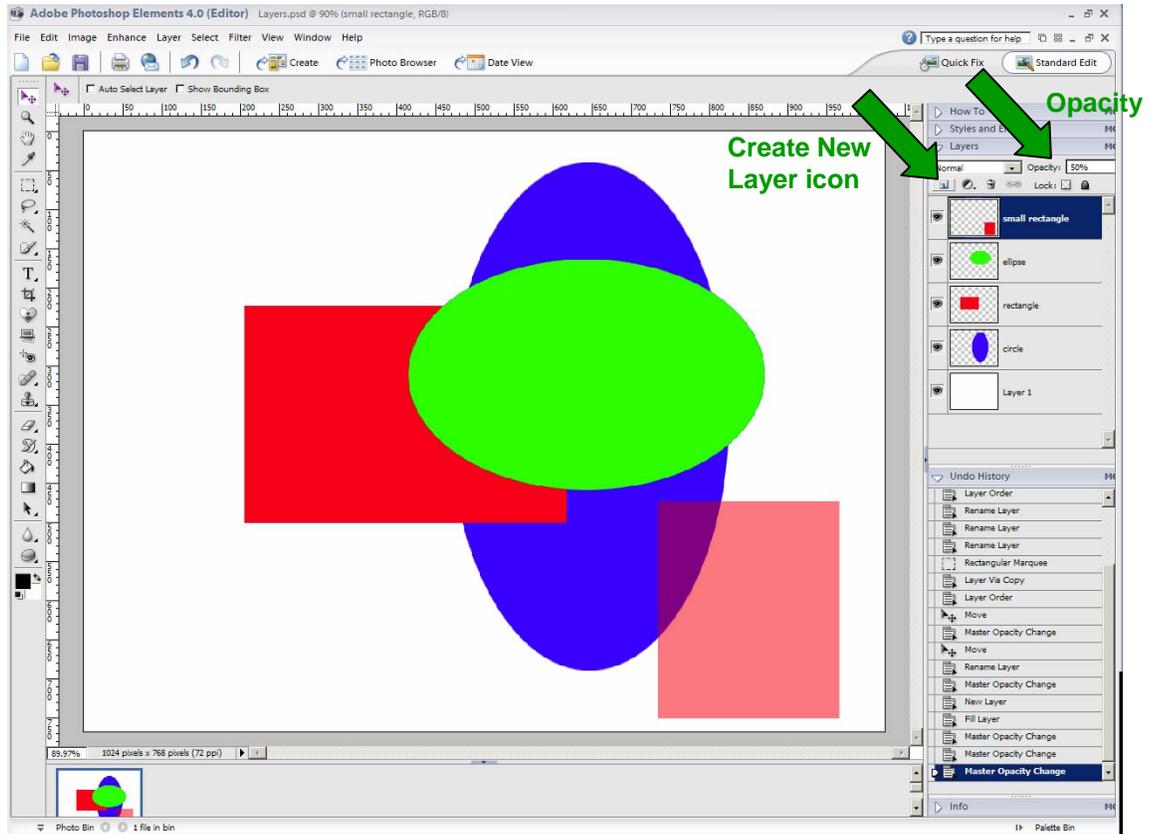


Figure Eight

Step Seventeen

Let's review the items we have learned in this tutorial.

- create new canvas
- preset file size options
- background color for new canvas
- fill with color
- deselect
- create new layer
- create new layer via copy (Ctrl + J)
- changing marquee tool shapes
- turn layer visibility on and off
- move tool
- magic wand tool
- change the layer order
- revise the shape with the free transform tool
- unlocking the background layer
- converting the background layer to transparent
- renaming layers
- selecting part of an image
- changing layer opacity
- adding a layer below another layer
- save as

Layers (Just the Basics)

By Jerry Koons

Step Eighteen

Images can be saved with or without layers, depending on what file format is selected.

An advantage of saving with layers is the ability to return to the file at a later date and because the individual layers are still accessible, changes can be easily made to objects or portions of the image. The disadvantage, of course, is the file size is larger.

The file can be flattened, which combines all of the layers into one. The advantage is a smaller file size and the disadvantage is losing the ability to have access to any individual layers.

Whichever decision you make, it is better to use the Save As option for saving the file and this requires a new file name. The Save As option retains the original image without any change.

Step Nineteen

Let's apply some of these tips we have learned to "real" images.

NOTE: This tutorial is meant to provide a better understanding of layers and how to use them. Obviously, every situation and condition can not be addressed in a few pages but the techniques demonstrated will, hopefully, permit you to apply them to your photographic images.