

Photoshop Elements 6 (Mac), 7 (Win)

www.adobe.com/products/photoshopelwin/

I've been a Photoshop user since Version 2.5. Consequently, I've pretty much ignored Photoshop Elements, and I think with good reason. Early versions of Elements lacked even the most basic tools that a serious amateur or a professional photographer needs, like Curves (yes, there were third-party software hacks that would enable Curves). Basically, Elements was a software package for duffers and for the casual snapshotter who needed something more serious than the tools built into Windows and Mac OS.

Things started to change with Elements Version 4, though it still wasn't a package I could recommend. With Elements 6 I think it's a whole different world. This is by no means cheap Photoshop (oh, if only!), but it's well worth the \$100 price tag if you can't afford full-blown Photoshop and can't (or won't) use Picture Windows.

Elements 6 includes some serious professional capability. Elements 6 is only semi-16-bit aware — about the level of Photoshop 7. Elements 6 has curves and adjustment layers but no 16-bit or curves adjustment layers. It supports multiple levels of undo, but there's no history brush. It includes the same Photomerge function built into Photoshop CS3 and CS4, although that only operates on 8-bit images (there's that layer limitation again). I am a huge fan of Photomerge; I use it to routinely stitch together scans of film or prints that are too large for my scanners.

While I'm strongly recommending a 16-bit workflow as standard in this book, it's not absolutely necessary. If you take care with your scans, making sure you're capturing the information you need and getting a well-populated histogram, you can get by with 8-bit operations just fine. (See Chapter 4, “Getting the Photo into the Computer,” for a proper explanation of what constitutes a good scan.)

Elements 6 even goes one step further, adding a new Photomerge Group command that can combine faces from several different images into one seamless result. Some folks may think that's cheating, but most serious portrait photographers I know long ago decided it made a lot more sense to get a good group portrait by combining faces from multiple photographs than trying by chance to get everyone to have their eyes open at the same time. Although this doesn't fall into the realm of the usual restoration job, I can imagine circumstances where multiple instances of a group photo exist and it would be nice to restore and construct a composite in which everyone has their eyes open (historical accuracy be damned).

Elements 6 incorporates Photoshop's Lens Distortion and Smart Sharpen (called Adjust Sharpness in Elements) tools. Adjust Sharpness is profoundly better than Unsharp Mask. Lens Distortion is, in my opinion, a little bit clunky (Picture Windows does this better), but it's a serviceable way to correct geometric and chromatic aberration in the original photographs you're restoring. The Convert to Black and White function is pretty slick—good and intuitive.

Performance-wise, Elements is not on par with Photoshop. I fed Elements the same stress tests that I use to test Photoshop scratch drives. Elements took about twice as long to run the same tests. On a positive note, Elements didn't choke when thrown those truly massive files. There's probably a file size big enough to kill Elements, but I couldn't find it.

I can't speak to the redesigned interface in Elements 6. It's just enough like Photoshop and just enough different to leave me fumbling for commands. That isn't Elements' fault; it simply means that I'm not competent to evaluate its ease of use. I strongly suspect that it makes it better for the serious amateur photographer or restorer who isn't already Photoshop-savvy. I am no fan of the Photoshop interface; it just happens to be what I know.

One area that could use improvement is the installer. Under Mac OS, on my fast, late-2007 MacBook Pro, it took 25 minutes to run! It was so slow that the first time I tried the installation I thought the program had hung, so I killed the process and rebooted my system. No software glitch; it was just an appallingly slow installer. Don't ask me why.

The new versions of Photoshop Elements will support pretty much the same set of plug-ins that Photoshop CS3 and CS4 do. That provides an alternative way of running many of my favorite tools. Mind you, some of these plug-ins and third-party applications cost more than Photoshop Elements itself. Still, it's a lot less money to be spending than buying full-blown Photoshop.

Photoshop Elements is no longer a trivial or easily dismissible program; it's a really useful image processor.