Article: Digital Fills for Photographs with Glossy Surfaces
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Digital Fills for Photographs with Glossy Surfaces

Victoria Binder

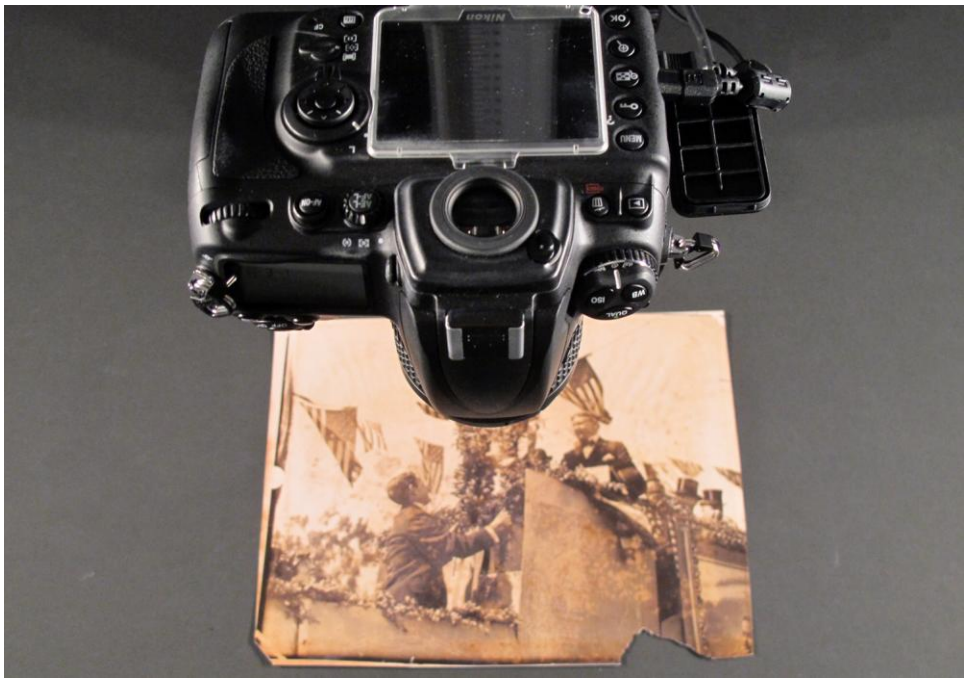
Presented as a poster at the 2013 AIC & ICOM-CC Photographs Conservation Joint Meeting in Wellington, New Zealand.

Introduction

Filling and inpainting losses in photographs with glossy surfaces can be challenging, particularly when the loss is sizable. The process is often difficult, time consuming, not easily replicated, and ultimately unsatisfactory. The surface of glossy and luster inkjet papers can be a remarkable match for smooth photographic emulsions. With Adobe Photoshop® skills and a good inkjet printer, good quality digital fills can be achieved in a relatively short period of time. This article shows a step-by-step approach to filling a loss in an early 20th century gelatin silver print including reproducing and resizing the loss area in Photoshop®, choosing paper, printing multiple versions of the fill in various tones, shaping and manipulating the printed fill, and attaching the fill. Of course, technology is always changing, and there are many approaches and possibilities for creating digital fills for different kinds of photographs. The purpose of this article is to serve as a jumping off point in which these possibilities and approaches can be explored, discussed, and hopefully put to good use!

Start

Start with a high-resolution digital image of the entire photograph.

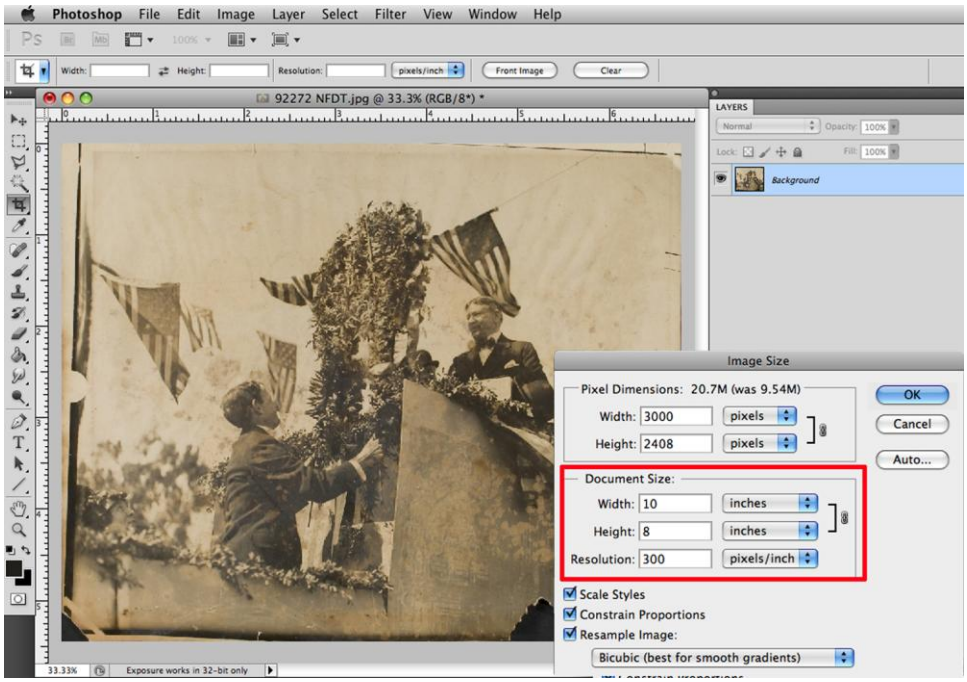


Get the Dimensions Right

To get the measurements of the photograph and digital image exactly the same, measure the height and the width of the actual photograph.

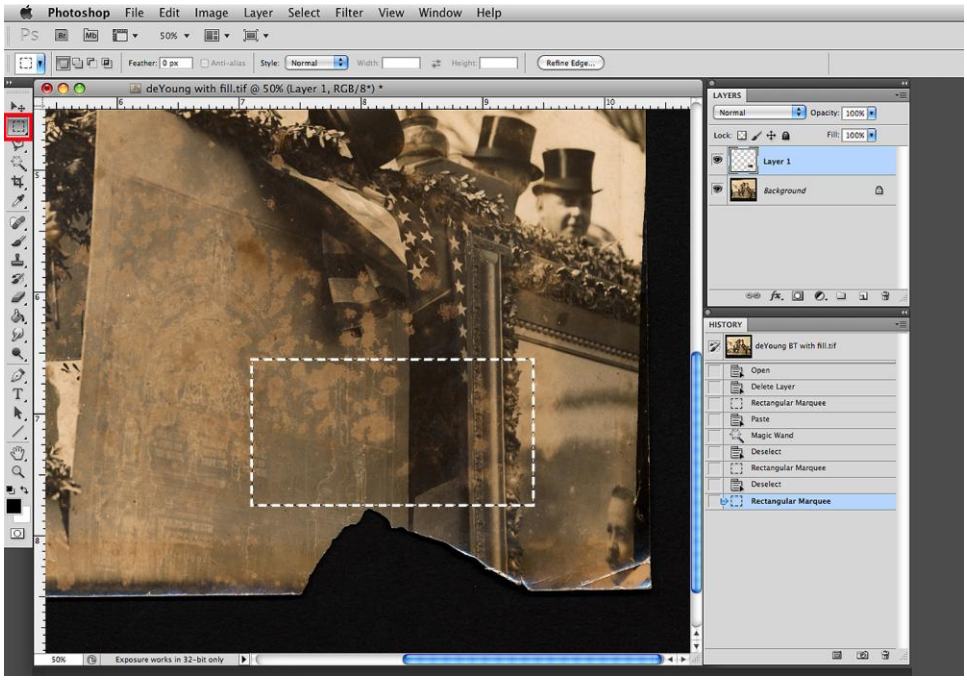
Next, in Adobe Photoshop® crop the digital image to the outer edges of the photograph.

Size the cropped digital image to the exact dimensions as the actual photograph.

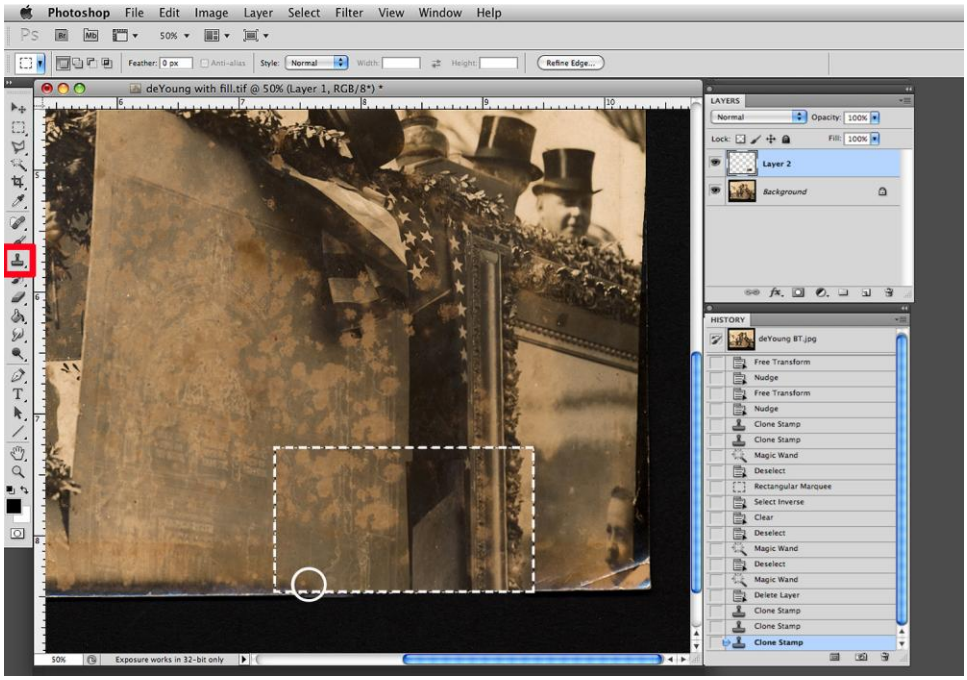


Create the Fill in Photoshop®

To create the fill area, use the rectangular marquee tool in Photoshop® to select an area similar to that of the loss. Copy the area and paste into a new layer.



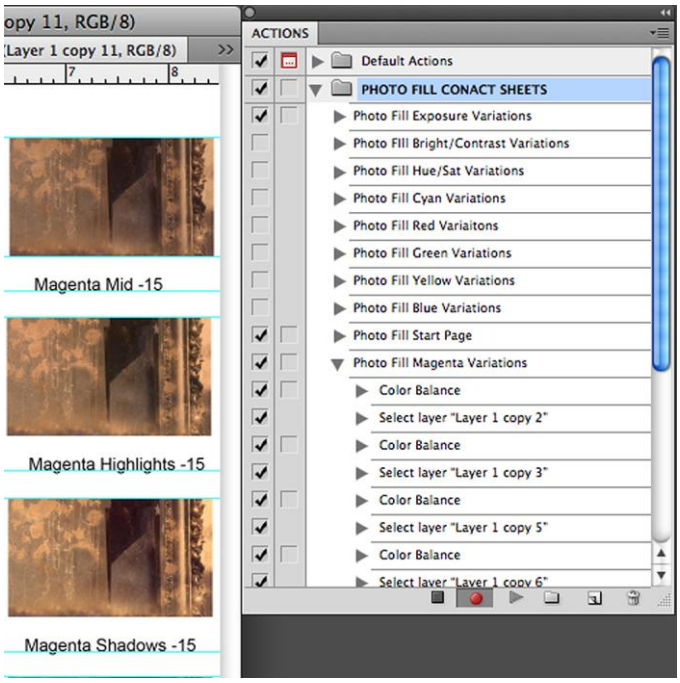
Manipulate the fill in Photoshop® to complete the composition and make a more seamless transition from fill to original object. The clone stamp tool is often helpful. In the picture below, the clone stamp tool was used to replicate the dark gradation along the bottom edge.



Get the Tone Right

Once your fill is made and saved, the next step is printing. Even with good color management it can be difficult to immediately get a print of your fill that is accurate in tone. It will likely take some adjustments in Photoshop® (using features such as levels, exposure, and color balance), and a number of printouts. A system that works well involves creating a contact sheet that depicts variations of the fill. From this, the best match can be chosen. For example, in the image to the right, the fill has been reproduced on the contact sheet with variations of exposure (in increments of .1).

Making contact sheets can be a time consuming task in itself. To remedy this, the Actions feature in Photoshop® can be used. With Actions, a series of tasks can be recorded in Photoshop®, saved, and reapplied. For example, Photoshop® Actions can be used to record and save all the steps it takes to make a contact sheet that depicts variations in magenta. The creation of an initial contact sheet might take a bit of time, but once the steps are recorded as an Action, it can be simply applied to another fill generating a new contact sheet within seconds. Using this approach, a library of Actions can be built for various contact sheets.

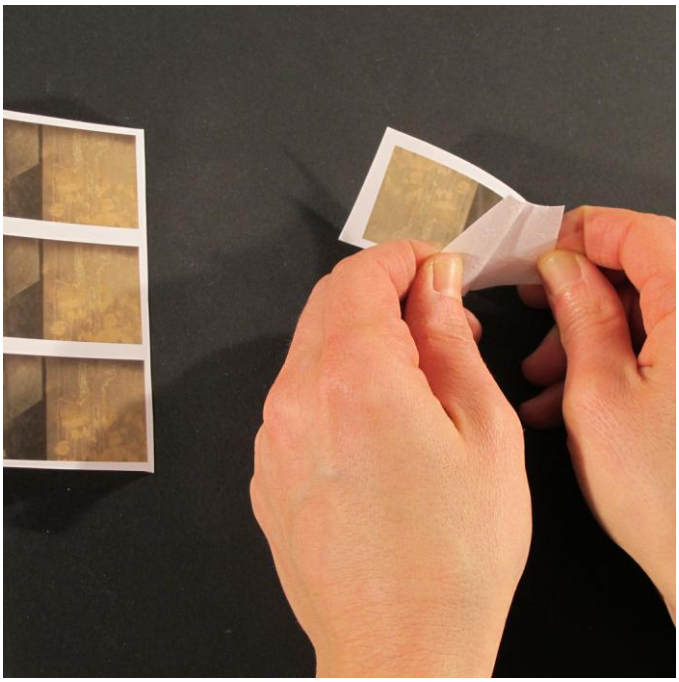


Choose the Right Paper

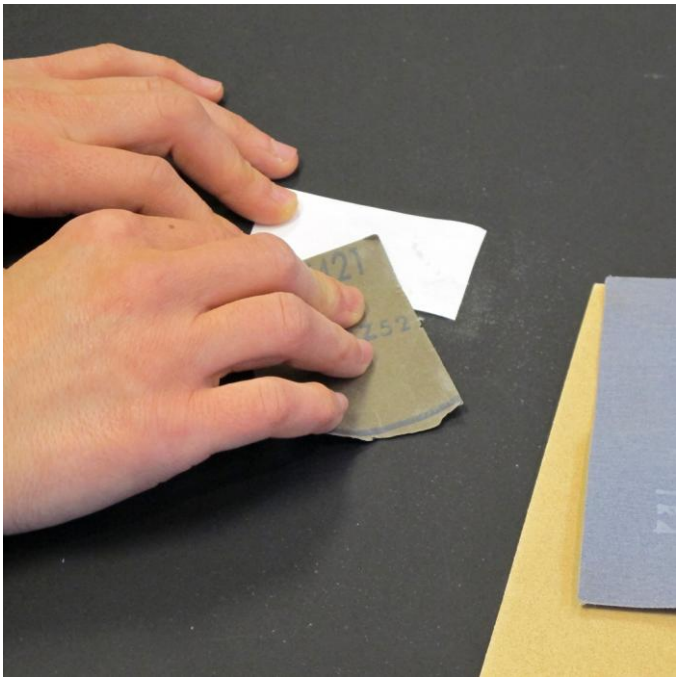
Making a sample set of various types and brands of glossy and luster papers can help you chose the paper and surface that best matches your object.

Delaminate, Shape, and Attach the Fill

The beauty of working with inkjet glossy and luster papers is that they can be delaminated right down to the thin image layer. This is very useful as inkjet papers are often stiff and incompatible with historic photo papers.



The back of the delaminated image layer can be thinned even further with fine grit sandpaper.



The fill can be backed with a paper that matches the thickness, texture, and tone of the photograph being filled. In the photograph pictured, the fill was attached with wheat starch paste to a piece of thin Japanese paper toned to a light beige color. The Japanese paper was made slightly larger than the fill to facilitate attachment to the back of the photograph.

If desired, the surface of the fill can be altered with various media such as acrylic paint, watercolor, and acrylic spray coatings.

Before Treatment

After Treatment

FINISHED!

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