

The Orton Effect

By Rick LePage

In the late 1980s, photographer Michael Orton developed an innovative technique for creating rich, glowing landscape scenes. Using slide film and a tripod, he shot overexposed versions of the same scene, one with extreme sharpness, and another with the scene completely out of focus. Then, once his slides were developed, he “sandwiched” the film together, which created the ethereal look that became known as the “Orton effect.”

Thanks to the magic of digital photography and Photoshop Elements, there are many ways to simulate this effect, and it can often be an excellent technique for livening up otherwise drab photos. Here’s a quick tutorial on how to achieve the basics of the Orton effect, with a little bit of advice on how to play with it for lots of different types of photos.



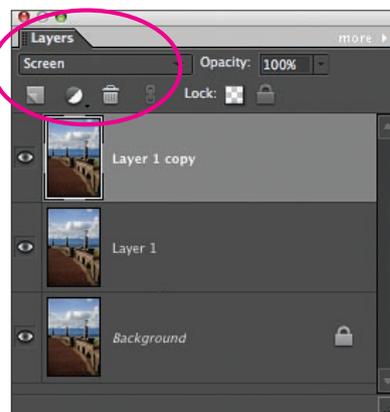
IMAGE © RICK LEPAGE

EXTRAS: GET THIS IMAGE!

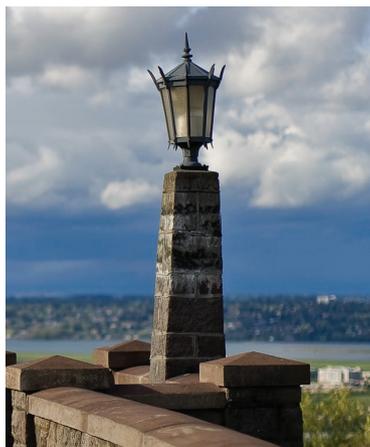
Follow along by downloading the image used in this tutorial from the Subscriber Extras area at photoshopelementsuser.com.



1 First, we’ll create a new, lightened version of the image on a separate layer, which will be the base for building the effect (and which mimics the overexposed settings used by Orton). Click on the Background layer in the Layers palette and duplicate it two times by pressing **Ctrl-J (Mac: Command-J)** twice. Making sure that the top layer (“Layer 1 copy”) is the currently selected layer, choose **Screen** from the Blend mode pop-up at the top of the Layers palette.



For many photos where I use the Orton effect, I find that it helps to reduce the Screen blending mode's Opacity setting a bit—for this image, I lowered it to 75%. I also zoom in a bit on my image by pressing **Ctrl-+** (Mac: **Command-+**): This makes it easier to see the intensity of the effect as I apply sharpen and blur filters.

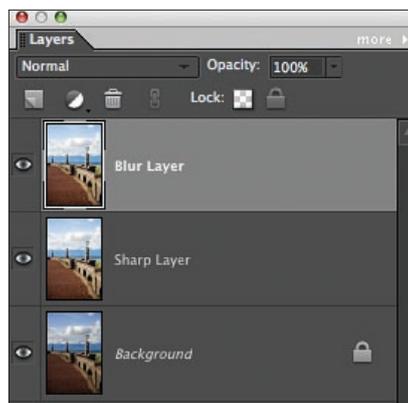


Original

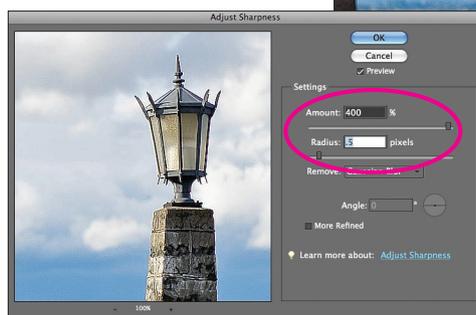
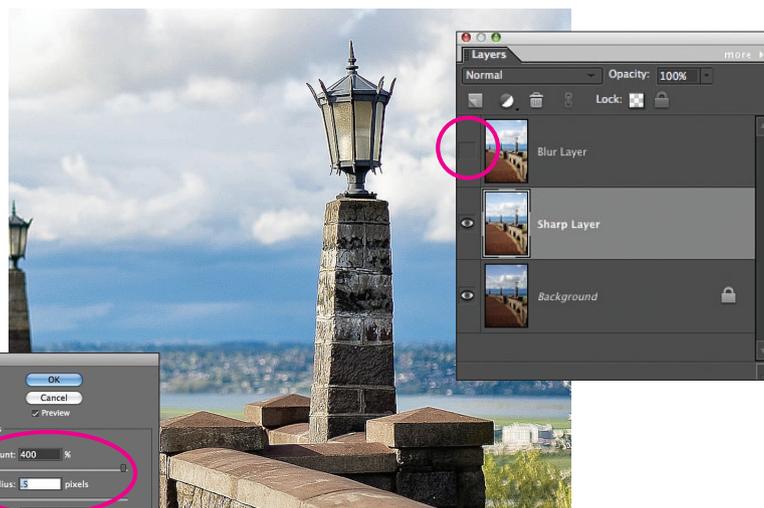


After Screen (Opacity 75%)

2 We're going to merge the two layers we just duplicated. With the top layer still selected, choose **Layer>Merge Down**, or **Ctrl-E** (Mac: **Command-E**). Since we need both a sharp layer and a blur layer to create the effect, press **Ctrl-J** (Mac: **Command-J**) to duplicate Layer 1. Double-click on the top layer ("Layer 1 Copy") and name it "Blur Layer"; double-click on the middle layer ("Layer 1") and call it "Sharp Layer."



3 Turn off the Blur layer's visibility by clicking on the Eye icon to the left of the layer name, and then click on the Sharp layer to make it active. From the **Enhance** menu, select **Adjust Sharpness**. We're going to oversharpen this layer quite a bit; here I used a percentage of 400% and set the Radius to 0.5 pixels. (If you have a version of Photoshop Elements without the Adjust Sharpness command, you can use the **Unsharp Mask** filter with the same amounts.)



More Orton

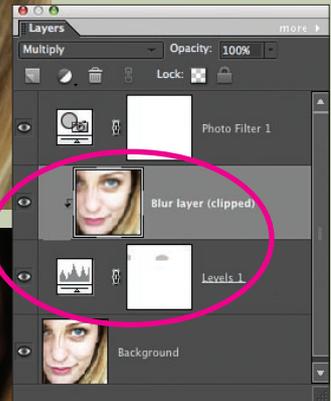
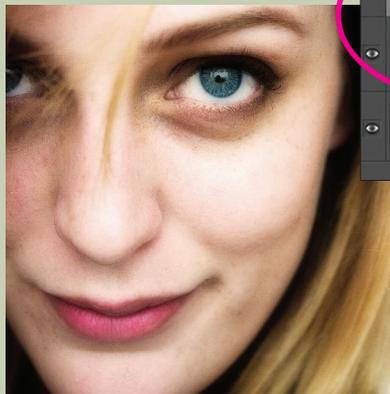
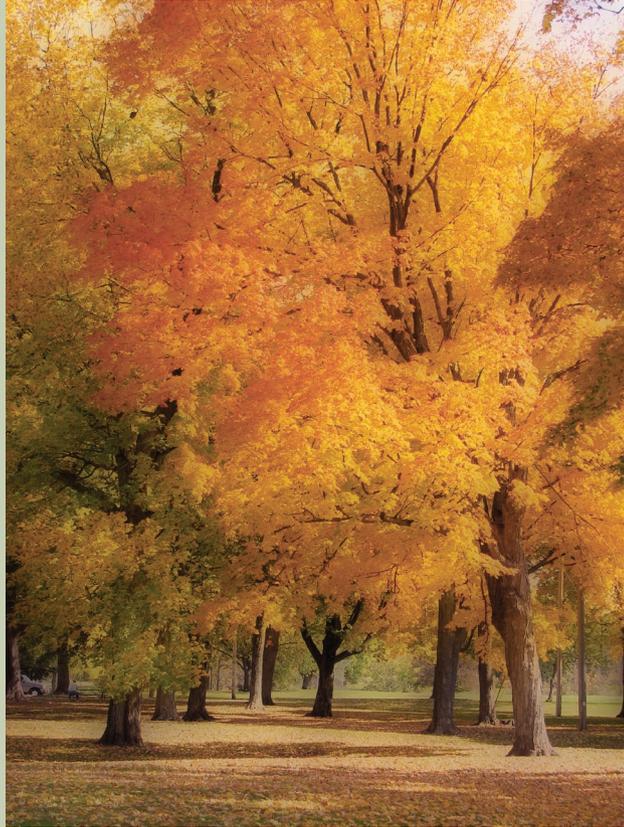
One of the great things about this technique is that it can be used in so many different ways, letting you create everything from subtle glowing images to outlandish, highly processed photos. If you look on the Web, there are endless variations of the Orton effect, although technically, many of them really are more Orton-influenced than actual photos using the full technique.

To see some excellent samples of the effect in use, you can check the Orton galleries on Flickr and Smug-Mug, among other photo-sharing sites. A few *Photoshop Elements Techniques* subscribers have posted excellent Orton-style photos in our own galleries, among them Tina Bakken's beautiful Fall Splendor (right).

And don't think that this method only works with landscapes; it can create a nice effect with portraits as well, smoothing the skin and creating a lovely glow. When working with faces, use less sharpening than you would on a landscape—I often use only 200%—and you might find that you need to play around with the opacity in the Blur layer to get the right level of effect without making the person look a bit like an alien (unless that's what you're going for).

And, if you use clipping groups and a layer mask, you can paint the effect out in certain areas. For example, in the portrait on the right, I applied the Orton technique (bottom right), but wanted the eyes to remain sharp. Clicking on the bottom layer, I added a Levels adjustment layer and clicked OK when the Levels dialog box opened. This created a layer mask that I could use to paint the original eyes back in.

I clicked on the layer mask icon (the white box to the right of the Levels icon in the adjustment layer) to select it. Then I chose the **Brush tool (B)**, and, in the Options Bar at the top of the screen, I chose a small, soft-edged brush, with the Opacity to 60%. I carefully painted inside the eyes, which reduced the effect and brought back some of the model's sparkle.



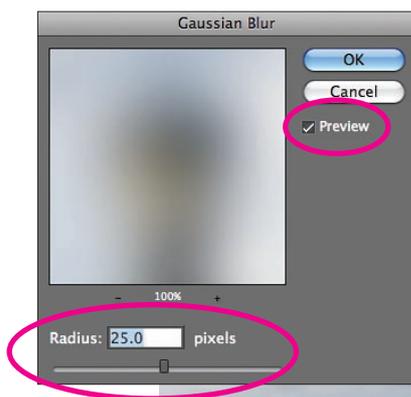
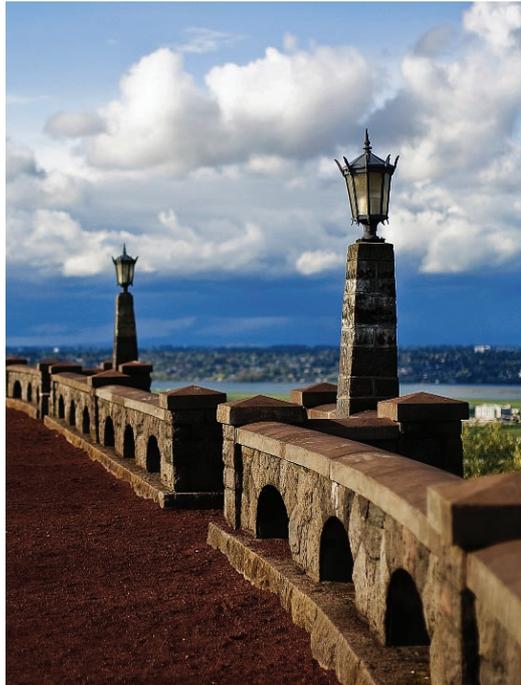
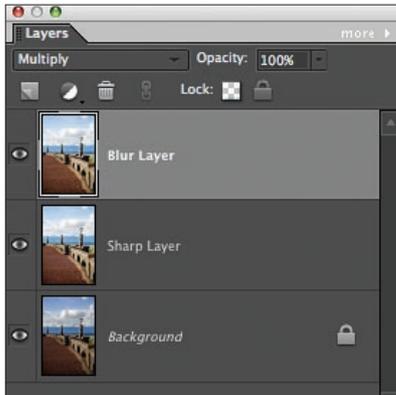
Create a clipping group with an adjustment layer mask to reduce (or remove) the effect in portions of a photo.

EXTRAS

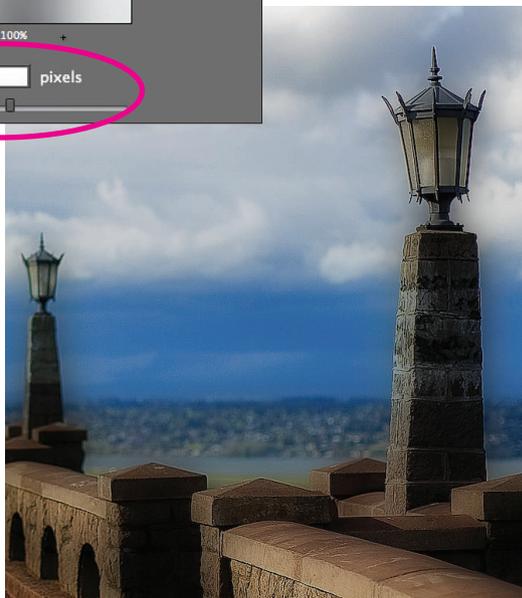
For more on the effect, including links to explanations about the technique's origins, and links to photos in the *Elements Techniques* galleries, on Flickr and more, go to the Subscriber Extras area at photoshopelementsuser.com.



4 Click on the Blur layer in the Layers palette and turn its visibility back on by clicking on the Eye icon. From the Blend mode pop-up, select **Multiply**. You'll notice that the photo immediately has a bit more punch than the original, but we also see the effects of the oversharpener in Step 3.

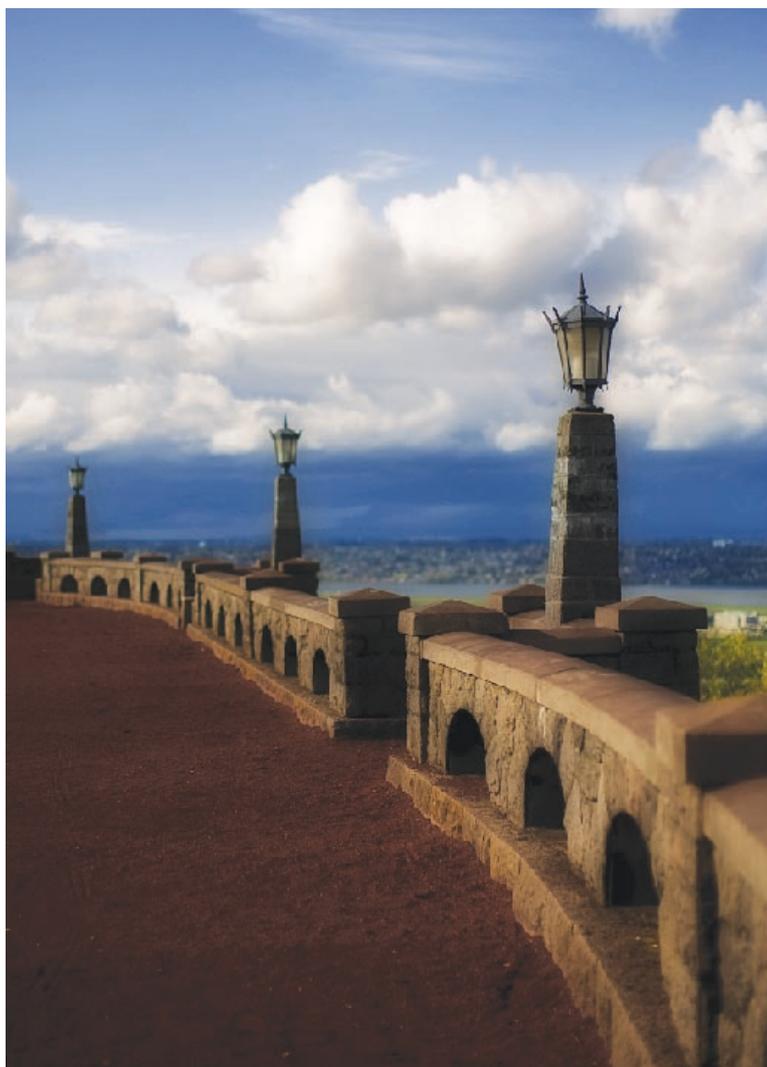
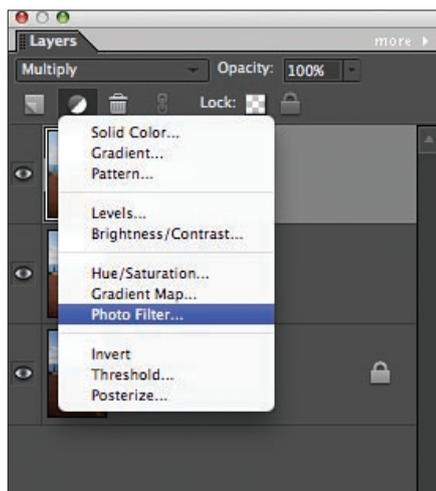


5 From the **Filter** menu, choose **Blur>Gaussian Blur**. Here, you want to apply a blur strong enough to reduce all detail in the image. For most photos, a setting of 25 pixels is sufficient, although some lower-resolution pictures benefit from using a blur setting in the 10- to 20-pixel range. The beauty of performing the sharpening step first is that you can see the final effect in the image before you click OK (make sure you have the Preview check box set in the Gaussian Blur dialog box to see the changes directly to your image).



tip One of the biggest issues you'll run into when using this approach is shadows and halos along the edges in your photos. Sometimes, they'll make your image look too processed, while other times they add the depth you want. If you don't like them, reduce the amount of blur by 5 pixels and see what the image looks like, or alternatively, increase the amount by 5 pixels. I generally don't go over 30 pixels of blur, however.

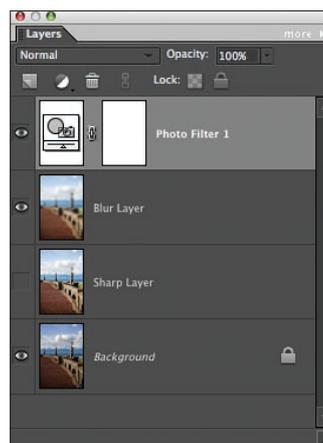
6 That's the basics of the technique in a nutshell. With many landscape photos, however, I will add a **Photo Filter** adjustment layer above the Blur layer, to give a little bit of warmth to the final image. Here I used a Warming Filter (85), although I'll also use the Warming Filter (81) from time to time.



Alternative: Orton without sharpening

Many people often omit the sharpening step entirely, preferring the soft hazy effect that the Blur layer achieves. In our tutorial image, you can see the difference between using the sharpening step and not by simply making the Sharp layer invisible (by clicking on the visibility Eye icon in the Sharp layer).

The image is darker, because you are now using the original image from the Background layer, but you can adjust it with either the Opacity setting for the Blur layer, or by creating a new version of the base Orton layer you created in Step 1 (by duplicating the Background layer twice and applying a Screen blending mode). ■



Rick LePage is the editor-in-chief of Photoshop Elements Techniques.