Introducing layers

IMAGE: **SANDWICH – ABSOLUTVISION.COM; BREAD SLICE – PASCAL THAUVIN (SXC.HU); TOMATOES – WIKIMEDIA COMMONS**

THE CONCEPT OF LAYERS can be a tricky thing to get to grips with; we are, after all, used to creating artwork on the more traditional mediums of paper or canvas, where everything takes place on a single surface. This is unforgiving when it comes to versatility, however. If we make a mistake it's usually irrevocable and we either have to start again, or cover up the error in some other way.

Layers give us much more freedom in our work. We can build up our designs on different levels; it's like using pieces of tracing paper placed on top of one another. Each sheet can contain a part of the final image but is independent of the rest. There are numerous benefits to making images in this way. Each part can be freely repositioned, edited or hidden at will. We can also apply filters and effects that only affect certain parts of the image. If we make a mistake or decide we're not happy with the result, it's far easier to correct if it's on a layer.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

- The basic concept of layers
- Changing the visibility of layers
- Building up an image in stages

1 When we first open the image file all we have is a plain white background. If we look at the Layers panel, however, we can see five stacked thumbnails above the background. These are all additional parts of the document but they're currently not visible. We can tell if a layer is hidden by the state of the eyeball icon to the left of its thumbnail. If there is a line through it, the contents of the layer won't be visible.
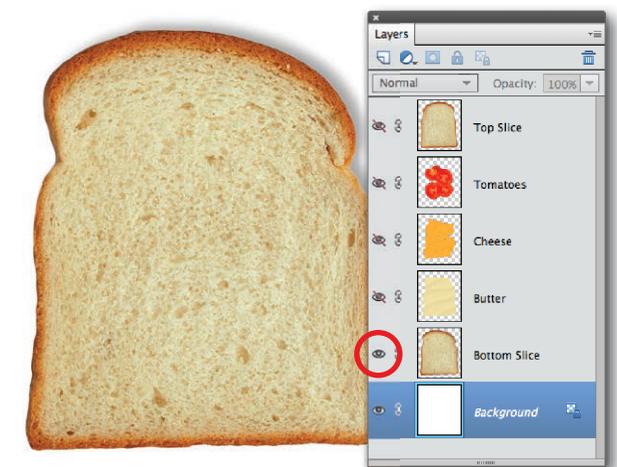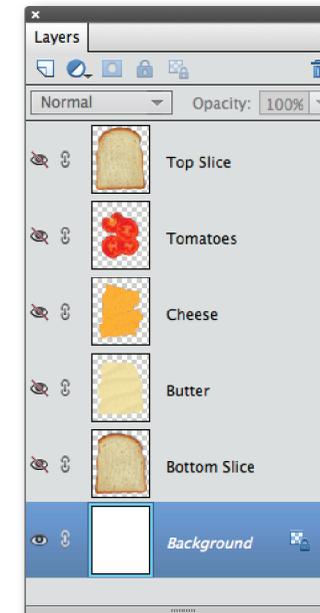
2 If we click the eyeball icon of the Bottom Slice layer the line through it disappears and it becomes visible. This is sitting directly above the background layer. We can still see the background beneath it because the area around the slice of bread contains no pixels; this is denoted by the gray checkerboard pattern.
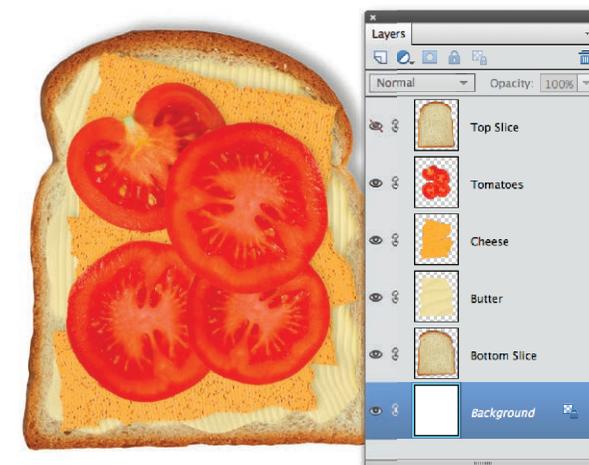
3 When we make the rest of the layers visible, continuing with the Butter layer, the different components of the image start to build up. Each part sits above the last in the same order that they appear in the Layers panel. We've left the last layer – the top slice of bread – hidden here as it would obscure the rest of the image.
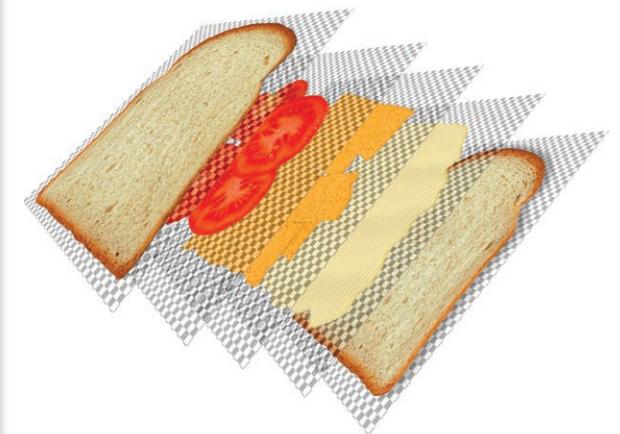
4 If we could see the layers of our completed image laid out in three dimensions, they would appear as something like this. We've included the checkerboard pattern of the transparency in the illustration to show the overall layer dimensions and how they relate to the dimensions of the document; it will never show up in your images.

HOT TIP

Rather than clicking each eyeball in turn, if you keep the mouse button held while moving up the panel, they will all be hidden in turn. If you just want to see a layer on its own, press *alt* ⌥ while clicking its eyeball. This will turn the rest of the layers off. Repeat the action to make them visible again.