The Photoshop user interface

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The Photoshop interface shares the same design features as all the other creative suite programs, which makes it easier to migrate from working in one creative suite program to another. You can also work with the Photoshop program as a single application window on both the Mac and PC platforms (Figures 1 and 2). This arrangement is more in keeping with the interface conventions for Windows, plus you also have the ability to open and work with Photoshop image documents as tabbed windows. But note that now the Application bar is gone, the Workspace options can be accessed via the Options Bar. Meanwhile, the documents layout options are now solely available via the Window ⇨ Arrange menu.

Tools panel   Tabbed window document   Options bar   Mac OS menu   Photoshop panels   Workspace options

Figure 1 This shows the Photoshop Application Frame view for Mac OS X, using the default, dark UI settings. To switch between the classic mode and the Application Frame workspace, go to the Window menu and select or deselect the Application Frame menu item.

Tools panel   Options bar   Windows OS menu   Tabbed window document   Photoshop panels   Workspace options
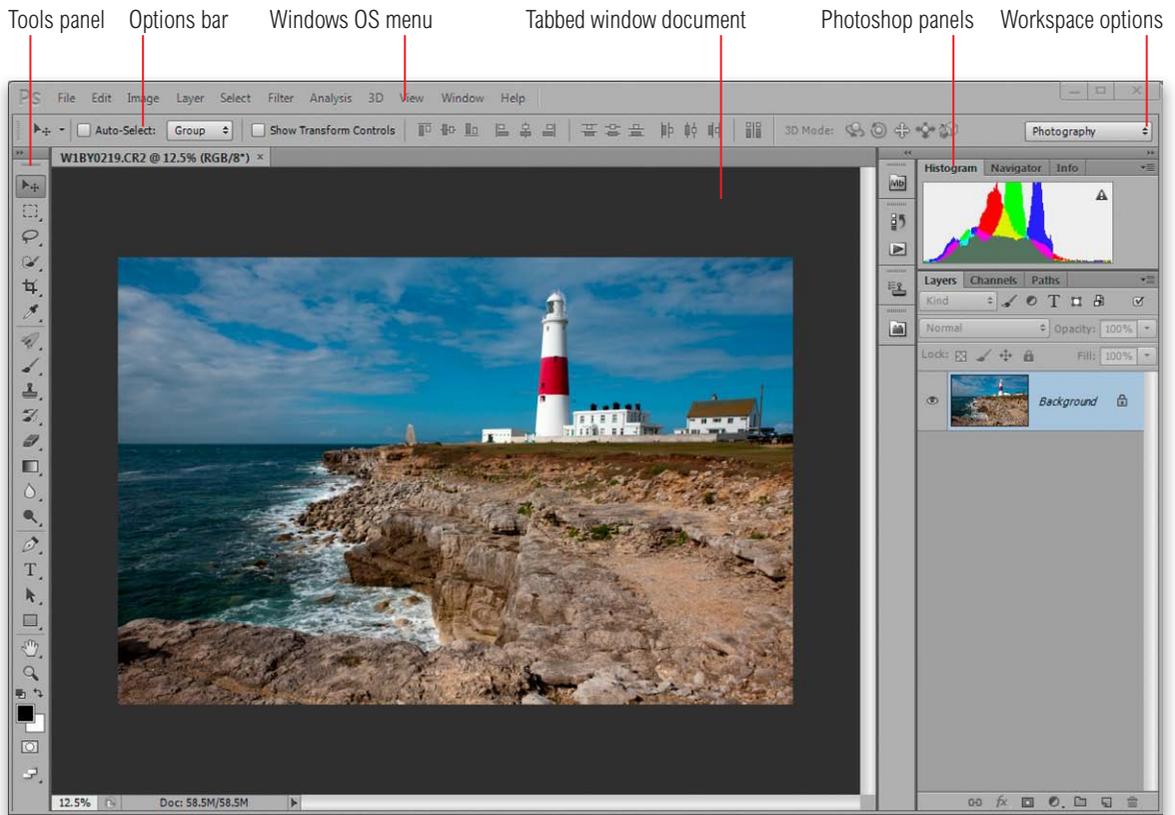
Figure 2 The Photoshop interface for the Windows OS. This has been captured using the middle light gray theme and the Photography workspace setting.

The Photoshop panels are held in placement zones with the tools panel normally located on the left, the Options bar running across the top and the other panels arranged on the right, where they can be docked in various ways to economize on the amount of screen space that's used yet still remain easily accessible. This default arrangement presents the panels in a docked mode, but over the following few pages we shall look at ways you can customize the Photoshop interface layout. For example, you can reduce the amount of space that's taken up by the panels by collapsing them into compact panel icons.

User interface brightness

The most noticeable new change in Photoshop CS6 (or later) is the interface, which not only has newly-designed panels and icons, but also offers the user four color themes with different levels of brightness (you can adjust the program's appearance via the Interface preferences shown in Figure 5).

Having the ability to adjust the brightness of the interface has to be a good thing. But, having said that, you do need to decide carefully which setting is right for the kind of work you do. By default, Photoshop uses a dark color theme and Figure 3 shows an example of how the Layers and Histogram Photoshop panels will look when this is selected. Now, dark themes can look quite nice when they are implemented well. For example, the Lightroom interface has been a great success. But the thing to be aware of here is that the dark default setting in Photoshop isn't particularly easy to read, especially if you are working on a large display where the panel lettering can appear quite small (more of which later). More importantly, the canvas color is linked to the interface brightness setting, and in the case of the dark default, it's almost completely black. This can lead to problems when editing photographic images because how we perceive tone and color is very much dependent on what surrounds the image. To show you what I mean, take a look at the photograph in Figure 4. Do you think it looks OK? Now compare this with the Figure 7 version on page 7. Does it still look the same when viewed against white? Actually, I adjusted these two versions of the photograph separately using a Curves adjustment to obtain what I thought looked like the best-looking result, first against the black background and then against white. You can see a comparison of these two versions, both displayed against a neutral gray background (Figure 8). This highlights the fact that the canvas color can greatly affect the edit decisions we make. What you have to understand here is that Photoshop is a program that's used by a wide variety of customers. For example, those who work in video will probably find that a dark interface works best for them. This is because the work they produce is intended to be viewed in dark surroundings. Photographers on the other hand are mostly focussed on how photographs will look when they are printed, and where the photographs they edit will ultimately be viewed against a paper white background.
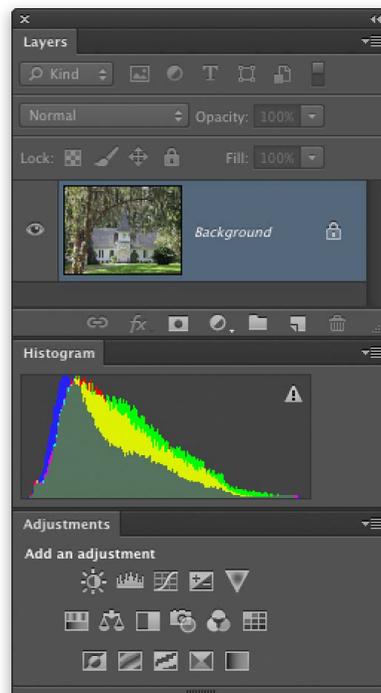
Figure 3 This shows an example of how the Photoshop panels look when the default UI setting is selected.

Figure 4 This shows an image that was curves adjusted while viewed against a black canvas color.
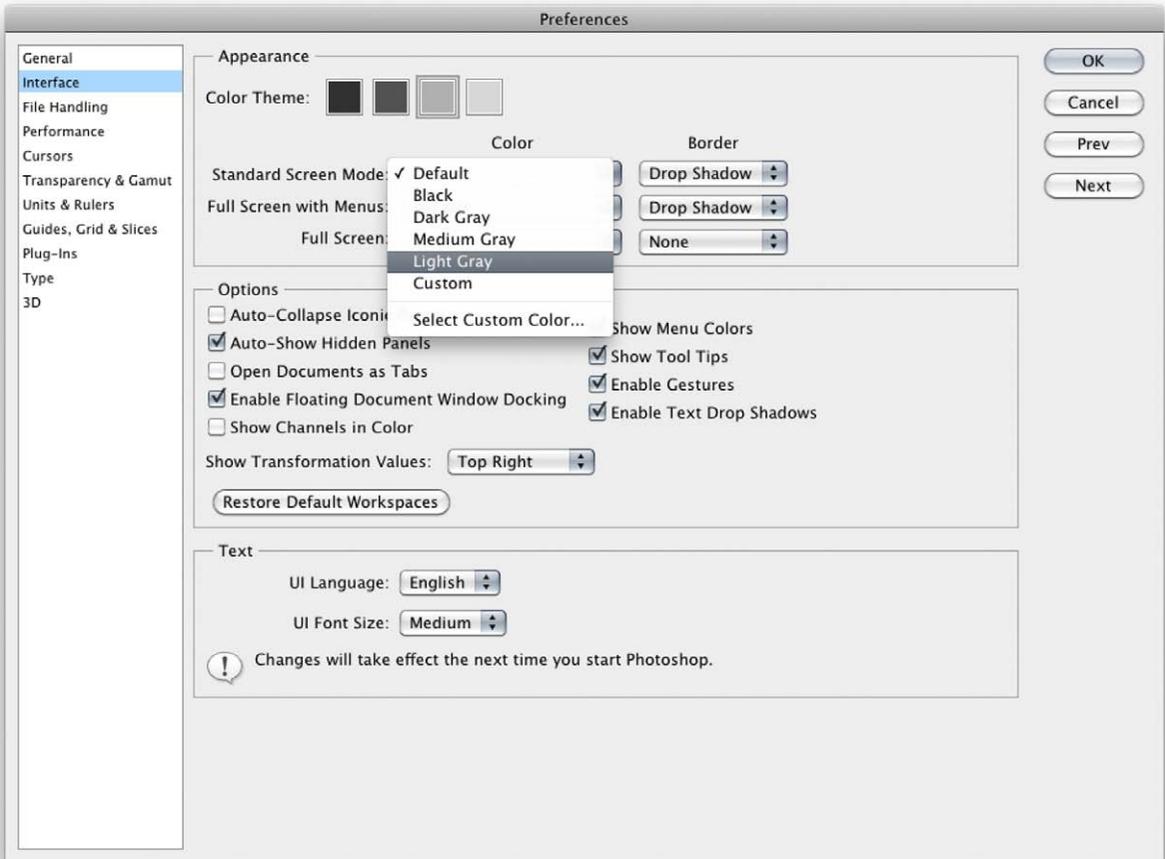
Figure 5 This shows the Photoshop Interface preferences, where you will want to edit the canvas color and set this to 'Light Gray'.

Regardless of whichever interface theme you decide to use, I strongly recommend you customize the Photoshop canvas color to make it suitable for photo-editing work. To do this, Choose Photoshop ➾ Preferences ➾ Interface… (Mac), or Edit ➾ Preferences ➾ Interface… (PC) This opens the dialog shown in Figure 5, where, if you go to the Standard Screen, Full Screen with Menus and Full Screen options you can click on the pop-up menu and choose an appropriate canvas color. If you would like to match the previous Photoshop canvas color, I suggest you choose the Light gray option. Do this for each menu and click OK.

Figure 6 This shows a comparison of the different interface options. The top row shows examples of the four main brightness themes in Photoshop CS6 (or later) ranging from the lightest to the darkest. In the bottom row, the bottom left example shows how these same panels looked when viewed in Photoshop CS5. Next to this I selected out the second darkest theme from the top row and captured this using the default small UI font size, next to it the medium UI font size and lastly, the large UI font size.

The other thing to consider is the legibility of the interface. Figure 6 shows a quick comparison of the different interface brightness settings. If you compare the CS6 or layer panel design with that used in CS5, you'll notice that the separation between panels is less distinct and the panel lettering doesn't stand out so well. This isn't helped either by the 'dark wash' effect as you select darker themes. It seems to me that the lack of tone contrast in the overall interface tends to make the panels blend together such that they are less distinct compared to CS5. However, there are things you can do to further tweak the interface. If you refer to Figure 5 there is an option marked 'Enable Text Drop Shadows'. This allows you to add a drop shadow edge to the lettering (actually it's a white edge). With the two dark themes this is really effective in making the lettering stand out more, but with the two lighter themes it just makes the lettering harder to read. Another thing you can do is to adjust the UI font size (see Figure 5). Any changes you make here won't take place until you relaunch Photoshop. As you can see in Figure 6, increasing the font size marginally increases the overall size of the panels, but this certainly makes the lettering stand out more clearly. Throughout this book I mainly captured the screen shots using the medium light gray theme with a medium UI font size and the Enable Text Drop Shadows disabled.

Figure 7 This shows the same image as in Figure 4, but it was curves adjusted while viewed against a white canvas.
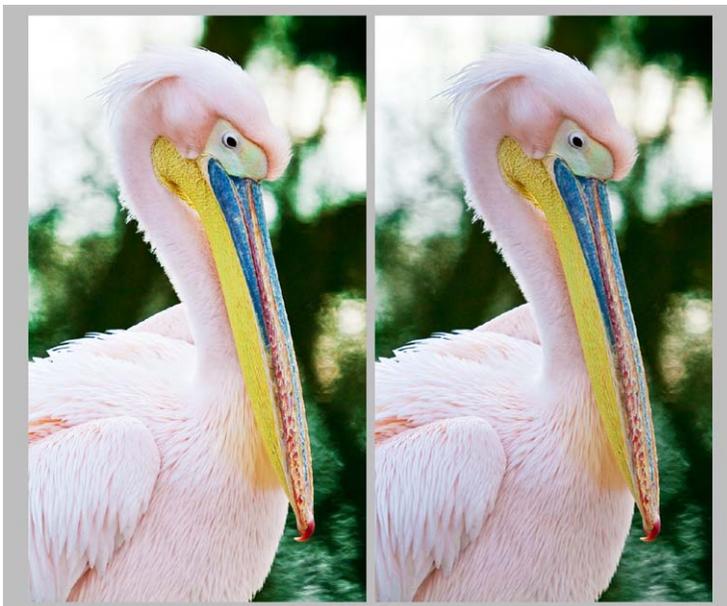
Figure 8 Here, you see how the image views shown in Figures 4 and 7 looked when compared alongside each other using the 'Light Gray' canvas color. The white background edited version is on the left and the black background edited version is on the right. Do they still look the same to you? As you can see, although these image views each looked fine when viewed against a black or white background, when you compare them side by side, you can see that the canvas color choice has had quite an impact on how the image was perceived when making those all-important tone adjustments.