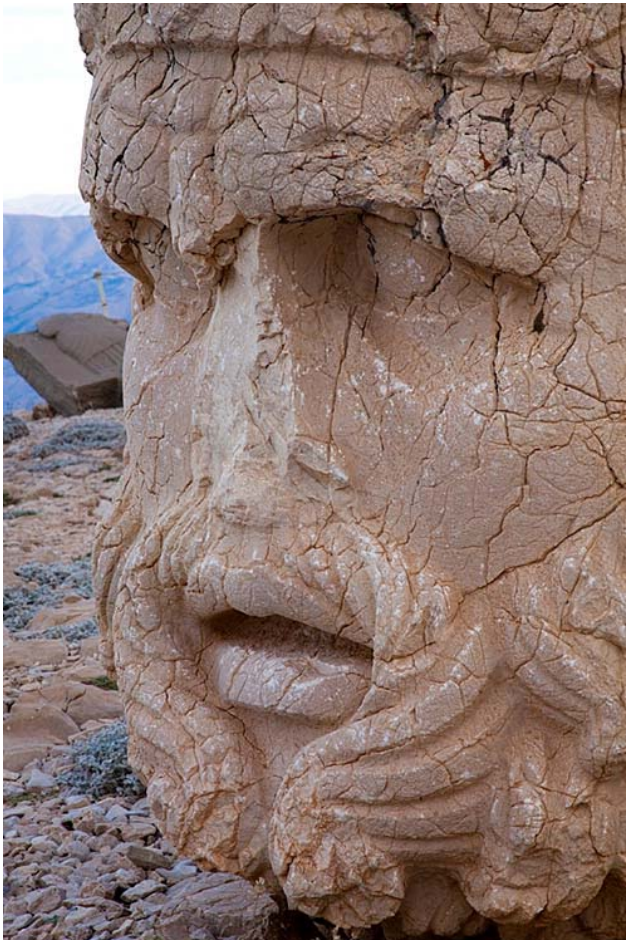


# Replacing a Sky

By Jim Zuckerman

One of the things I see over and over again in students' work when they submit pictures to me in the online courses I teach for better-photo.com is distracting backgrounds. There are many factors that constitute a background that takes attention away from the subject, and one of the most egregious is when a white or very light element is behind a darker subject.

A case in point is the closeup of a megalithic head from the 1st century B.C. I photographed last week in Turkey, below.



The light sky takes attention away from the subject by attracting our eye. We tend to be drawn to very light areas of an image, and if that area is not the subject, the background is usually considered to be distracting. I would call this picture a failure. In addition, the pole and the other slab of stonework are distracting. They are too graphic and they stand out too much.

I took the shot anyway, knowing I could fix this problem in Photoshop. I photographed a section of the distant mountains separately and made sure the lighting was the same as the light on the head -- soft and diffused -- and when I put the two photos together, below, it made a world of difference. The image was transformed from a failure to a success.

Never underestimate the power of a background to make or break a picture. Ideally, of course, we would all like to get it right the first time with a single click of the shutter. But you know very well that so much of the time conditions aren't right for that perfect picture. That's where a knowledge of Photoshop comes in handy.



Here are the steps I took to replace the sky:

1. I used a combination of the magic wand tool and the lasso tool to select the background. By holding the shift key down, you can add to the selection. So, first I selected the sky with the magic wand tool, and then, holding the shift key down, I used the lasso to select the rest. I worked at 200%
2. Using the pull down menu command Select > modify > expand, I chose one pixel in the dialog box.
3. Using the pull down menu command Select > modify > feather, I again chose one pixel in the dialog box. Doing steps 2 and 3 eliminated all telltale lines that might show up from the original background.
4. I opened the photo of the mountains and sky and chose Select > all, and then Edit > copy

5. I chose Edit > paste special > paste into (all of these commands are from CS5). This put the sky into the selection.
6. Using the move tool, I moved the sky/mountain image into place.
7. I chose Filter > blur > gaussian blur to blur the sky photo because the ground behind the head wasn't sharp due to a lack of complete depth of field (my mistake). If the ground wasn't sharp behind the head, the sky had to be soft, too.
8. Using the clone tool, I blended the edge of the ground with the sky.