MakeBetter Layer Masks

Create more effective composites and selective adjustments by adjusting the properties of your layer masks

Photoshop CC has a new 'Select and Mask' option that enables you to refine and improve existing layers masks with rough or pixelated edges. In fact, it offers tools you might be familiar with from the Refine Mask option in previous versions.

To show you how this works, we've created a layered image montage combining this travel shot with a new and more interesting sky on the layer below - to try this out yourself, load up the TYCC102.psd sample file.

This new Select and Mask dialogue can be used to modify an existing selection, or to make a new one from scratch. In our example, we're using the Quick Selection tool to select the blank blue sky in the top layer (it's quicker than trying to select the more complex foreground) to create our layer mask. It works well enough along the hard edges of the building,
but not so well around the irregular outlines of the trees on the right hand side.

With the Select and Mask dialogue, though, we cannot only preview the new layer mask, but also modify it as we work.

1. Select and Mask

Open the sample image "Make Better Layer Masks.psd" and you can see the two layers in the Layers panel on the right side of the screen. We need to mask out the blue sky in the top layer so that the new and more interesting sky underneath shows through. The Select and Mask command is on the Select menu...
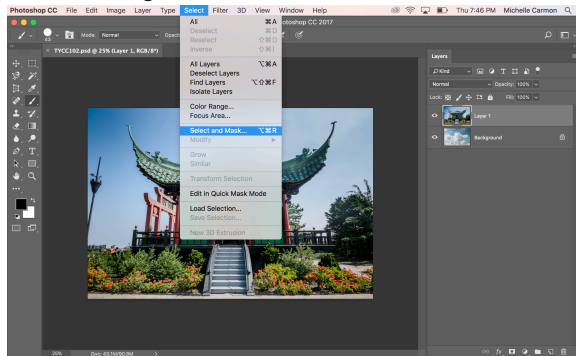

2. Transparency Setting

You can use the Transparency setting near the top of the Properties panel to show both layers at once. This can help you see which areas you need to be masking. We're using the Quick Selection tool to select the sky - we can then invert this selection to select the building instead.
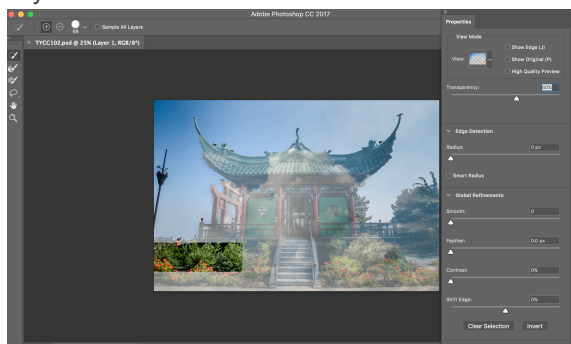
3. Check the Edges

Once the sky selection is complete, we click the Invert button in the Properties panel to switch the selection to the building. The edges around the roof and walls look fine, but the selection hasn't worked well in amongst the branches of the trees alongside, we need to fix that.
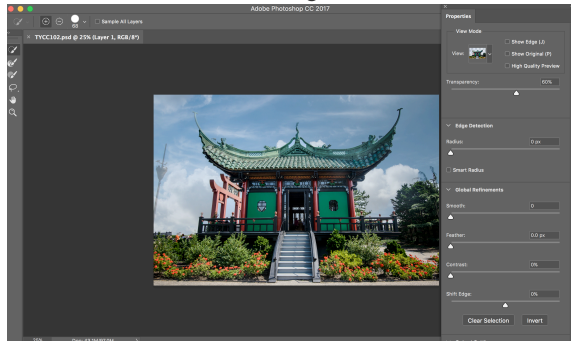
4. Refine Edge Brush Tool

To do this, select the Refine Edge Brush tool from the small toolbar on the left of the window. Now just brush over the problem areas to refine the selection. If the selection still looks unnatural, try dragging the Shift Edge slider to the left to reduce fringing.