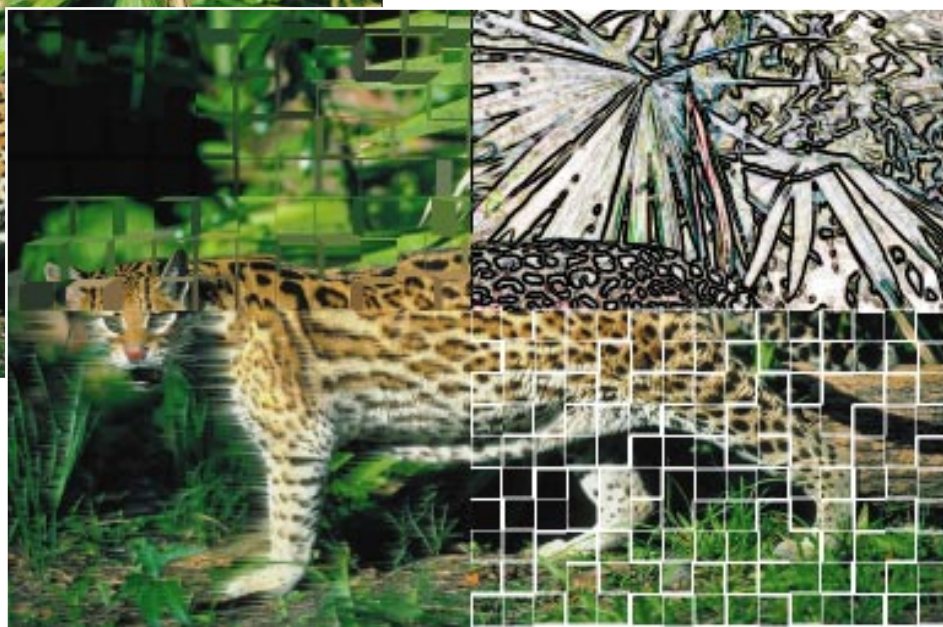# An introduction to
IMAGE-EDITING
software

Image-editing packages – not 'paint programs', please – often seem closer to magic than to science. With the right program, in the right hands, a photographic image becomes something to be played with in a thousand ways that belie the old adage that the camera never lies.

To avoid costly mistakes, you need to understand the increasingly blurred distinction between 'draw' and 'paint' software. Drawing software, basically, remembers shapes. A complex drawing may have hundreds or even thousands of shapes but each one of them is remembered and drawn separately – you can see it happening on a complex design. Paint software, at its simplest, knows nothing at all about shapes: it is about controlling the colour and brightness of a mass of individual dots which – to your eye – make up a picture on the screen.

A good image editor should give you four distinct capabilities: overall adjustment of an image, easy selection of areas, detailed editing tools and special effects.

○ Overall adjustment is used to correct problems like a picture being too dark, lacking in contrast, being too blue and so on.

○ Selection is what distinguishes serious programs from the rest. You want to change the colour of the tablecloth from blue to pink, but how do you do it without changing the sky to pink, too? The best programs now offer incredibly subtle means of identifying just the colours and areas you want and dealing with their borders – and when all else fails they make it easier for you to outline an area manually.

○ Detailed editing tools are what real work with images is all about. How subtly you can edit an image, how much you can imitate artists' tools and how much protection you have against time-consuming mistakes will depend upon your software.

○ Special effects are the icing on the cake, not the be-all and end-all, but whether it's blurring the image of a car to make it look as if it's speeding or transforming a boring snapshot into something that looks like it's by Van Gogh (or even Salvador Dali), special effects filters are often what people notice first. ●

Buying tips

○ Don't buy beyond what your current hardware can cope with – image editing is greedy in terms of hardware, so do check that any program will fit your system in terms of disk space, memory and even speed.

○ Don't pay for more than you have time to use – unless you really need all the bells and whistles of the premium programs and will use them regularly, then it is pointless paying for them – top programs are now far too complex for their more esoteric features to be simply 'picked up' in casual use.

On the other hand:

○ Don't pay less than you need to get the output that you want – if you do need professional-quality output on a regular basis then you will have to pay for a professional program. You can fudge it with a cheaper tool on an occasional basis, but you'll be caught out eventually.