

Marja-Leena Pelho:
Digital Craftswoman

The Self-Taught Finnish Artist Creates Striking Images for Advertising

By Terry Murphy





If you ask her, Marja-Leena Pelho will probably admit that she's a digital artist, but says she prefers to think of herself as more of "a digital craftswoman." Enamored of the work of skilled artisans like goldsmiths and woodcrafters of the past, Pelho taught herself the intricacies of creating beautiful, striking and humorous images in Adobe Photoshop and other imaging editing software.



From her home office/studio in Espoo, Finland (just outside Helsinki), Pelho also makes good use of her formal education in architecture to create images for advertising clients. It's a business that grew somewhat unexpectedly from the "at-once" need for images by the prepress shop where her husband Timo Arpe works.

Sometimes given as few as four hours to conceive and create an image, Pelho began her professional imaging career by cranking out photo montages, collages, custom typography, and illustrations. In 1998 she began her business in earnest, opening under the name Quadretto, and launching an elegant Web site, www.quadretto.fi.

Building a Career

"In 1982 I started my studies at the Helsinki University of Technology to become an architect," Pelho says. "During the '80s I studied, worked, married and had my first child. My husband was working in prepress all the time, and was using these hugely expensive Scitex workstations. Many times I said to myself that I'd like to do what he does, but kept on with my architectural studies."

Pelho had nearly completed her degree in the early 1990s, when Finland fell into the worst economic recession

in the country's history. With few prospects of employment as an architect, Pelho concentrated on raising her children and, with the purchase of her first desktop computer, teaching herself the emerging craft of digital imaging.

In December 1995 she invested \$1,000 (U.S.) in her first computer, a 120MHz Pentium PC with a 2.5GB hard drive, 15-inch SVGA monitor, and 16MB RAM, which struggled with images that could grow to 30MB. "It is still working well," she notes. "My daughter uses it.

"I started teaching myself Adobe Photoshop and Macromedia Freehand. My husband was of great help in the beginning, and is still the first person I go to with professional questions. I discovered an amazing thing had happened: It had become possible to do photo manipulation and editing with a cheap PC. This gave me the possibility to begin to learn what I had been wanting to for a long time.

"My business started gradually and quite slowly, because I had never done this kind of work professionally before. My first customer was the prepress Quattroskan, where Timo works, and I still do a lot of work for them. I do all kinds of image collages, photo manipulations and special effects at high resolution that are used mainly in advertising."

As the business became more sophisticated, so did

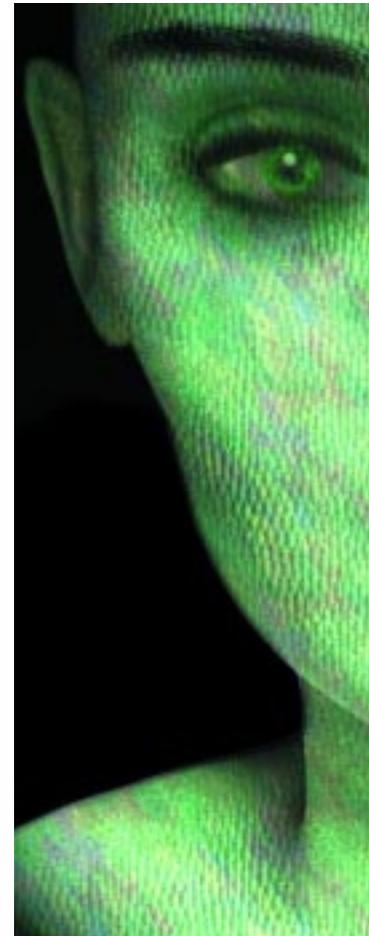
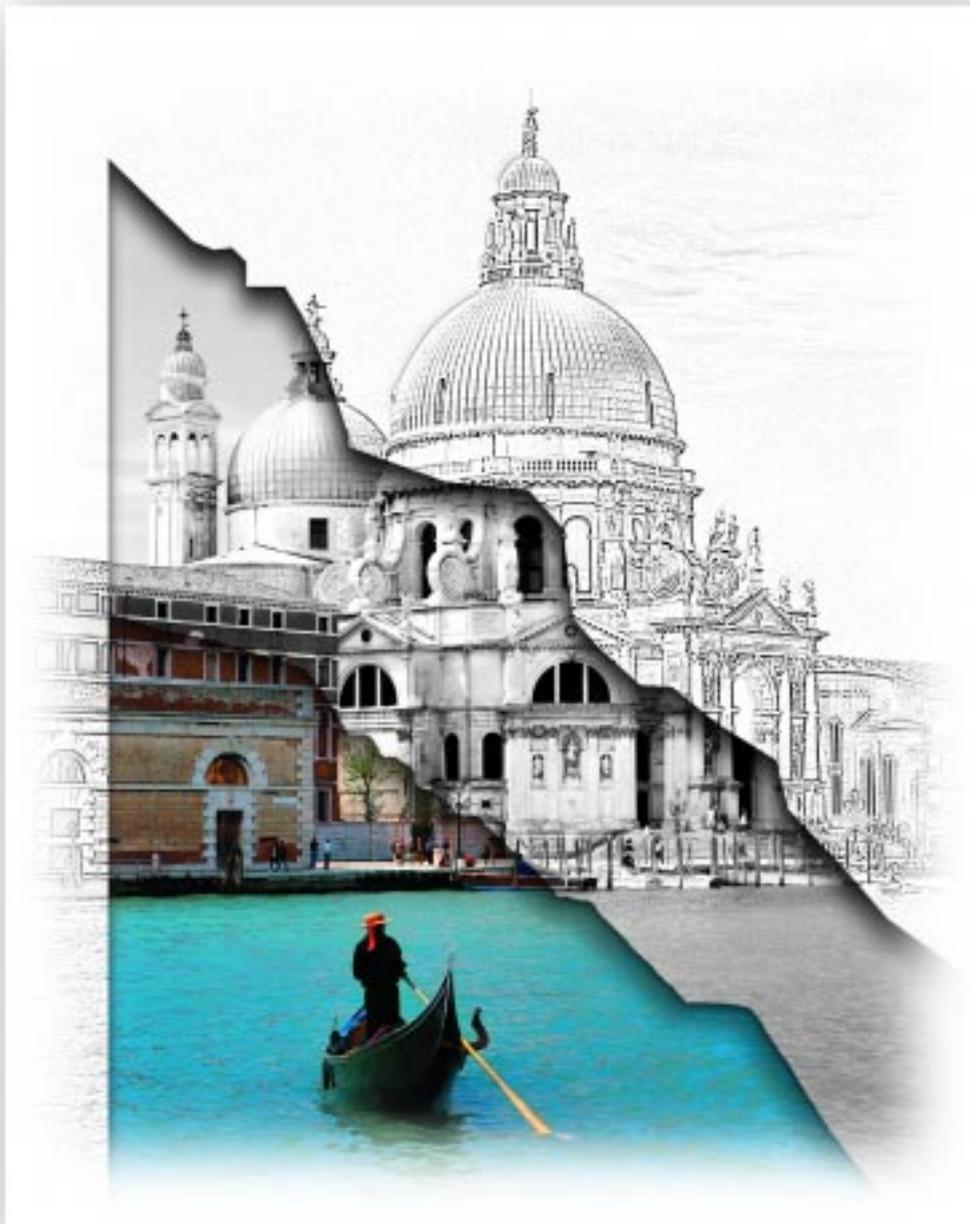
Pelho's equipment. In April 1998 she bought a 233MHz Macintosh G3 with 288MB RAM and an 8GB hard disk. The monitor is a 19-8ony Hitachi CM752ET with a 1,024x768-pixel display. "Most of my clients here in Finland are on Macintosh," she says.

The system also includes a 2GB external hard drive, an Epson Stylus Color 600 ink-jet printer, Zip and CD-R drives, and a 19-inch Hitachi CM752ET monitor that displays 1,024x768 pixels.

She creates "working scans" on a Umax Astra 1200S, though all "real" images are scanned at a local service bureau. "I always work with high resolution images because







I find low-res images lacking so much information,” says Pelho.

Commercial filters and plug-ins can often yield stunning effects in low-resolution images, she notes. “But when that image is for print, it must

be done at 300 dpi and sometimes the effects of the commercial filters don’t work as well at that resolution. This is when I do what I call my ‘handwork.’ I figure out how to create all the effects myself in Photoshop; this is often quite a challenge.” Pelho’s finished images are so finely crafted that both the artifice and the hours she spent over them are invisible.

Upon being invited to craft a cover for *PEI* magazine, Pelho ran out one weekend in May to buy the new 2.47-megapixel Fuji FinePix 4700 zoom digital camera to photograph her daughter, the girl in the striking summer/winter image (see how Pelho created this multi-layered image in the tutorial on page 16).

In the studio, the day-to-day software workhorses are Photoshop 5.5, Adobe PageMill 3, and Macromedia Freehand 8. Last year, Pelho added a 350MHz Compaq PC with 128MB RAM, a 4.3GB hard disk, and a 17-inch Siemens monitor, just for the clients who use Windows systems. “Mac is what is used most among my customers in this country, and it is my working computer.”

Finland is not a large country, so Pelho is looking worldwide for customers with fresh visual ideas that are waiting to be realized. “I enjoy doing my own art now and then, but I really love this commercial work—using my skills to make other designers’ visions come true.”