

COLOURING A PHOTOGRAPH

**By David Marsden
(8th November 2021)**

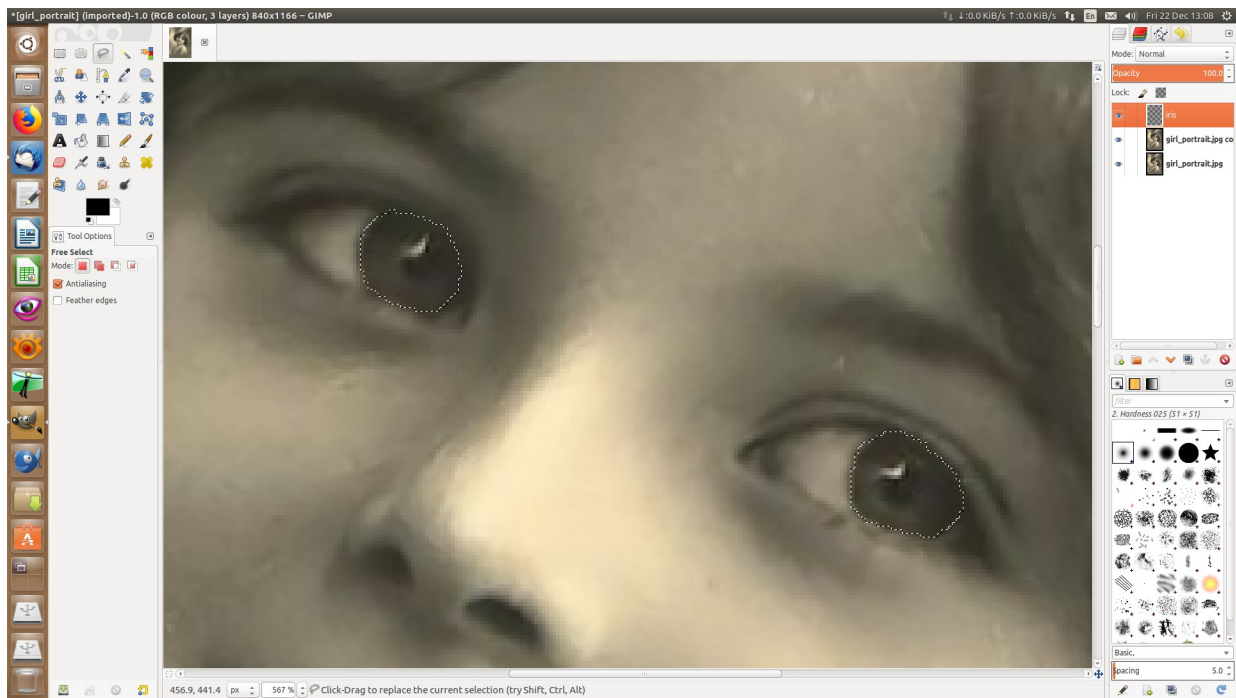
Load your original photograph into GIMP. Here I have selected a portrait as a good example of the technique, but the process can be applied to any image.



The original photograph

Zoom in and select the iris of the eyes. Ellipse-select can be helpful here to make an accurate selection. Use the “add-to-selection” if you wish to select the iris of both eyes. However, if the lighting of the eyes is different it may be necessary to select them separately.

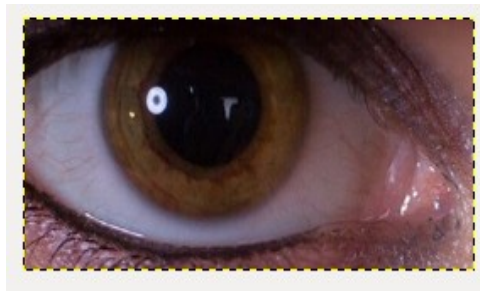
Save the selection(s) to channel(s). Double-click on the channel name and rename it to something suitable – for instance “iris”. We will be creating many channels and layers, so naming them will avoid confusion!



Iris selection

Make a new transparent layer, with the same name as the channel you have just created and put the channel into “Soft-light mode”.

Search on the internet for a suitable image with the eye-colouring you desire, save it in a convenient location and minimize the internet. Open this image in GIMP and use the eyedropper tool to sample the colour of the iris.



Sample for eye-colouring

Open your original image and feather the selection (here the default 5px seemed suitable).

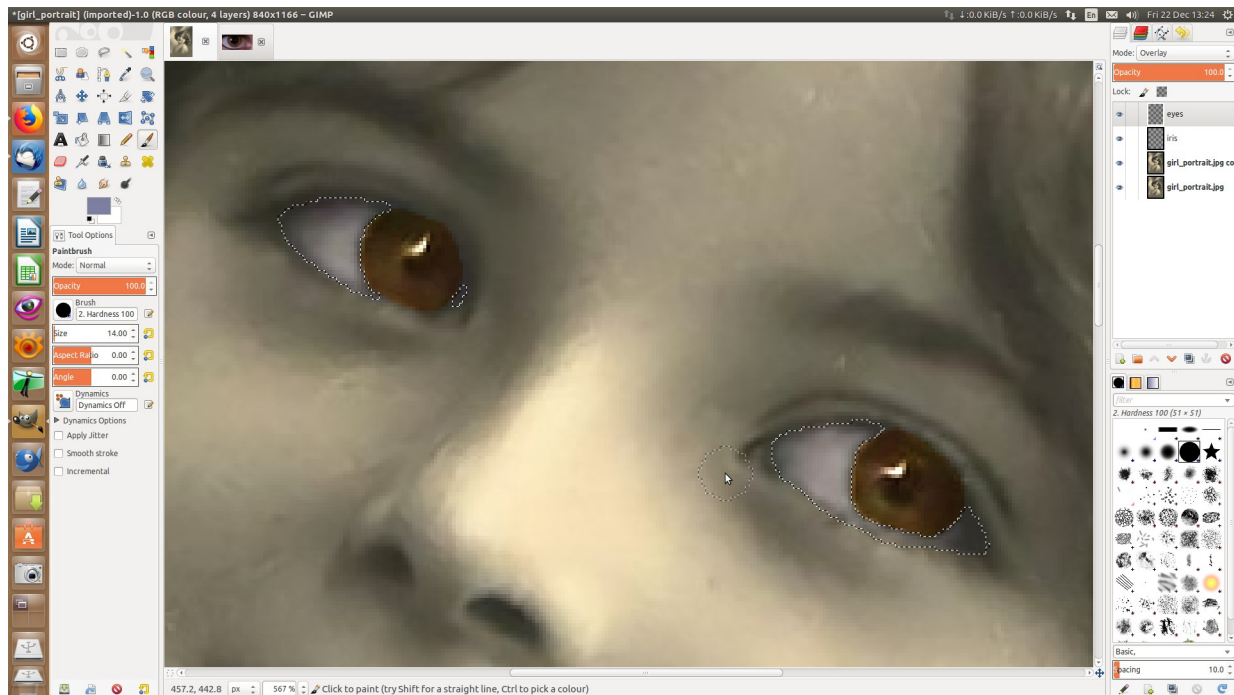
Paint over your transparent layer with a large brush. Because you have a selection the painting will be confined within that selection, therefore you can paint with abandon knowing that it will be restricted precisely to the required area.

At every stage of this process you can make adjustments within the selections. Brightness and contrast are adjusted on the original black and white background image and colour adjustments on the soft-light (coloured) layer.

Select all of the eyes, save the selection to a channel and rename it to “eyes”.
Create a new transparent layer, also renamed to “eyes” and change its mode to soft-light.

Go back to your eye sample and with the eyedropper tool sample the colour from the “white” of the eye. Right-click on your iris channel and select “Subtract from selection”, so that only the white of the eye is selected. Feather your selection, again for this example 5px is suitable. Feathering the selection avoids a hard transition between areas so that they will blend smoothly one to another.

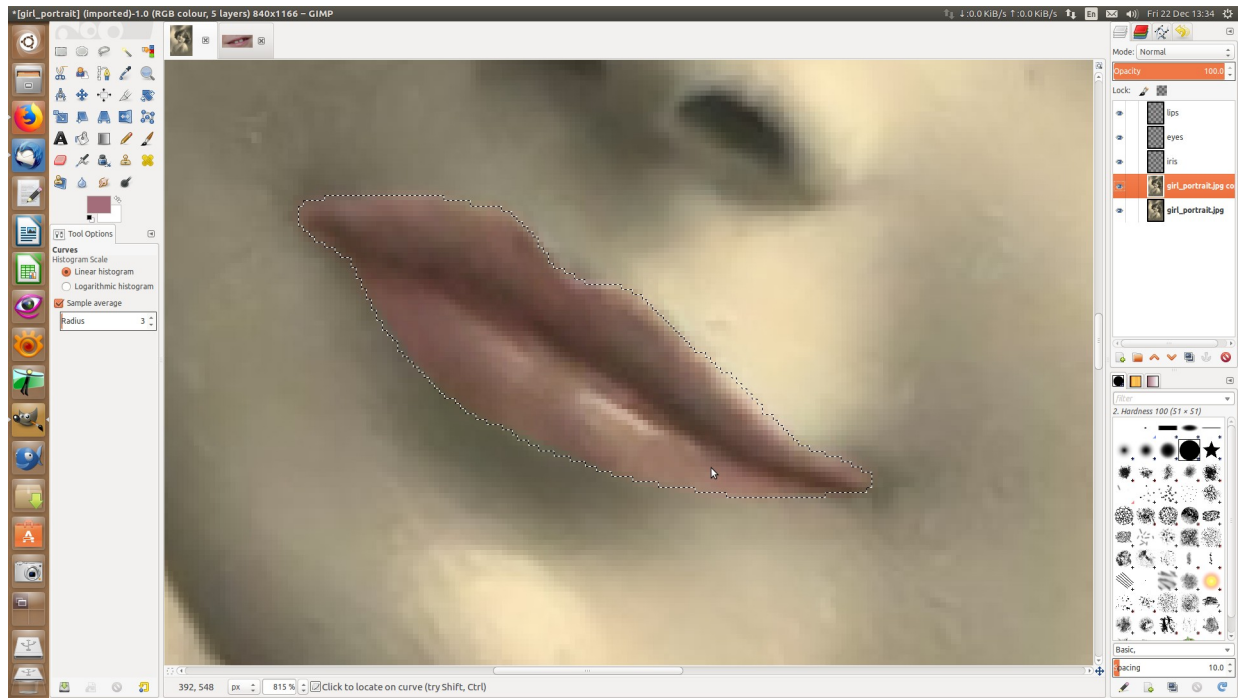
With your large brush, paint on your eyes layer with the sampled colour, which will be restricted to the selection and merge smoothly with the previously coloured iris layer.



Eyes coloured

Next we select the lips and save the selection to a suitably named channel. (If the teeth had been visible they would have been coloured before the lips with an appropriately named channel and layer.)

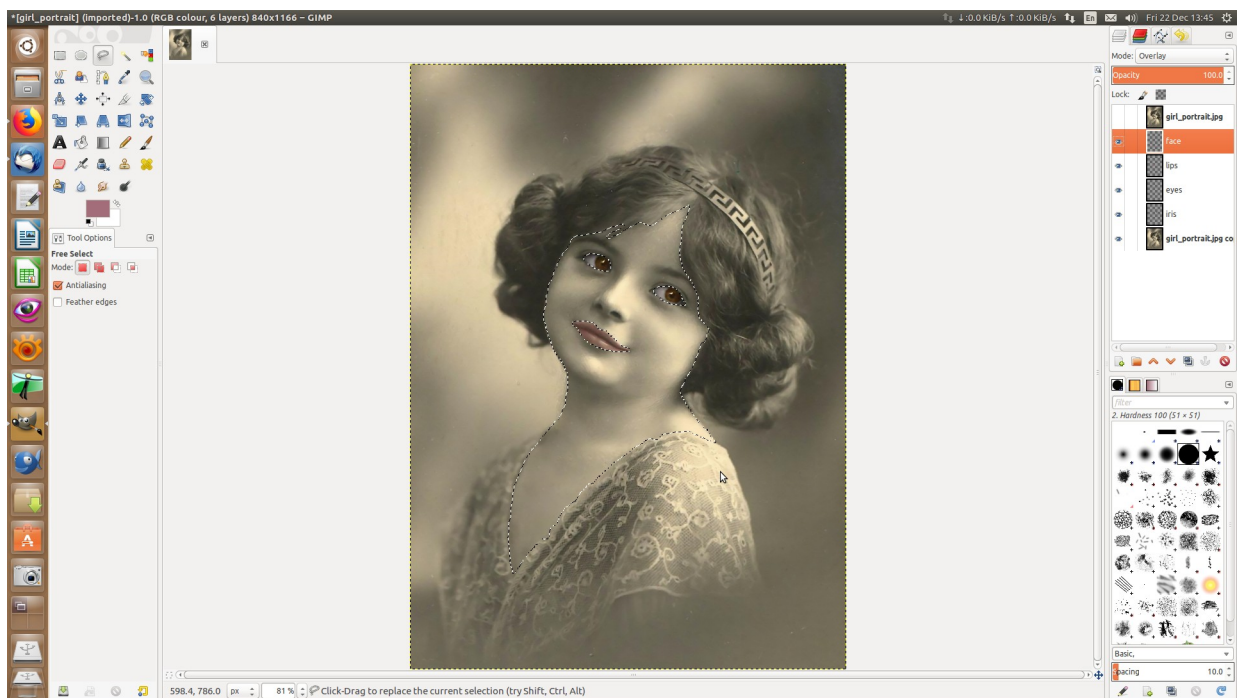
A new transparent layer, (again in soft-light mode) named lips, is added and the selection feathered. A sample for lip colour is saved from the internet, opened in GIMP, sampled with the eyedropper and then painted onto the lips layer.



Lips coloured

The whole of the face is selected next and saved to a channel. From this selection subtract the iris, eyes and lips channels. This leaves the face selected and the previously coloured channels protected.

Feather the selection and create a new transparent layer for colouring the face.



Face selected

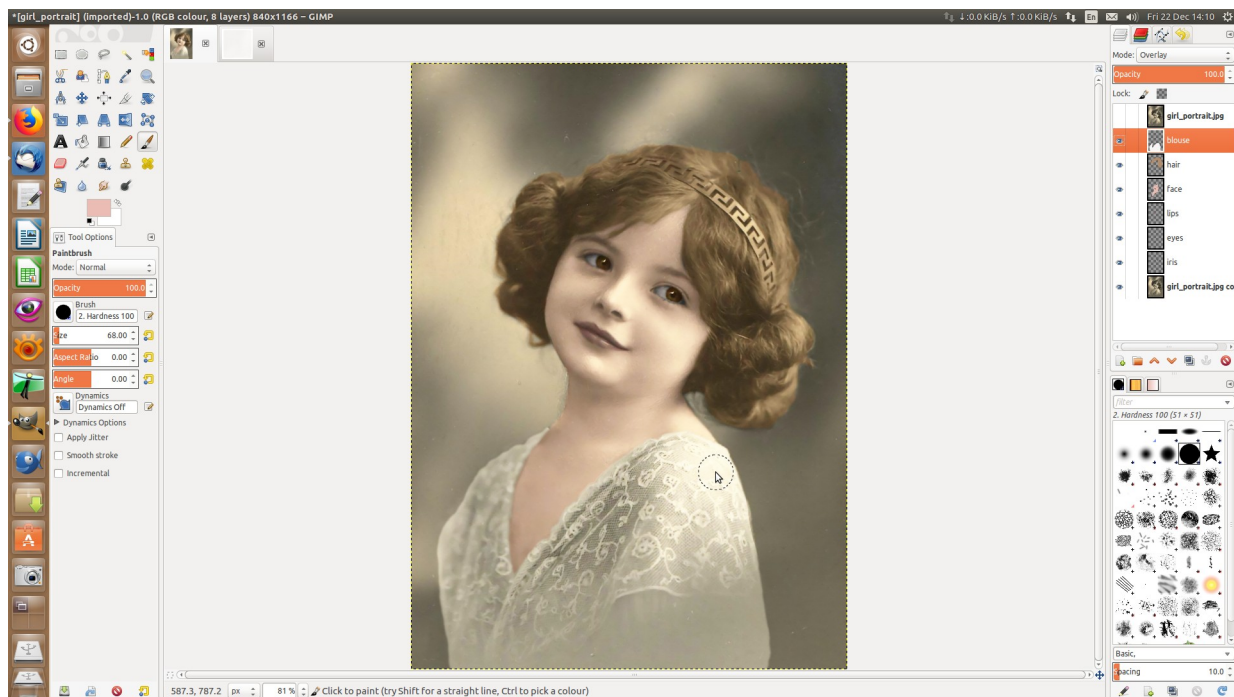
Skin colour is obtained from a suitable sample image and the layer is painted.

Now we can select the hair. It is necessary only to select the outside line of the hair and where it meets the neck we can make the selection go straight across, because by subtracting the face channel we define accurately the line between the hair and the face. Feathering the selection before painting again creates a smooth transition.

As previously we create a channel and a new layer. Paint the layer with a sampled colour.

Before colouring the hair, the headband could have been selected and painted, but the hair-colour gave it a nice bronze colour.

The process is repeated for the blouse. When making the selection, we can go from one shoulder to the other, because subtracting the face selection will define the upper edge.



Blouse painted

Finally, select-all and subtract the face, hair and blouse selections. Feather the selection. The background is the only part selected and you can apply a colour wash on another new layer in soft-light mode.

By creating individual selections and layer for each colour, it enables precise control of the result. Adjustments to the brightness and contrast of each selection on the original image can alter the impact of the photograph. For instance, an increase in contrast of the iris, combined with an adjustment to brightness (usually best done with colours/curves) can add life to a portrait.

Changing the opacity of the coloured layers will alter the density of the added colours to achieve a stronger or more subtle effect.

The selections and channels make it possible to make changes very quickly afterwards.

Whilst I have suggested using the soft-light blend mode, many of the blend modes in GIMP may also be used.

If it is difficult to decide where the dividing line of selections should be, perhaps because of very little difference of brightness, it can sometimes be helpful to make a copy of the original image and make extreme changes to the contrast and brightness just for the drawing of the selections.



The end result