

Enhancing Mattes

by Chris & Trish Meyer, CyberMotion

Taking advantage of stock footage collections that come with mattes.

In our previous article, we gave you a few ideas for how to convert stock footage into mattes. This resulted in the ability to create some unusual, often-mysterious composite imagery and picture-in-picture effects. If that seemed like a lot of work, fortunately a few collections come with pre-made mattes. We'll show you how to use these, and give you some ideas of how to customize them for your own tasks.

Filling a Matte

The Reticles collection from Artbeats features a folder of still images with alpha channels, which can be used as control panel elements straight out of the box. Many of them come as image pairs: a crosshair, and an aperture. The crosshair is a full screen graphic, usually designed to lead the viewer to the center of the frame. The corresponding aperture is a soft circular mask that is centered in the frame and can be used to crop the crosshair to a circular shape.

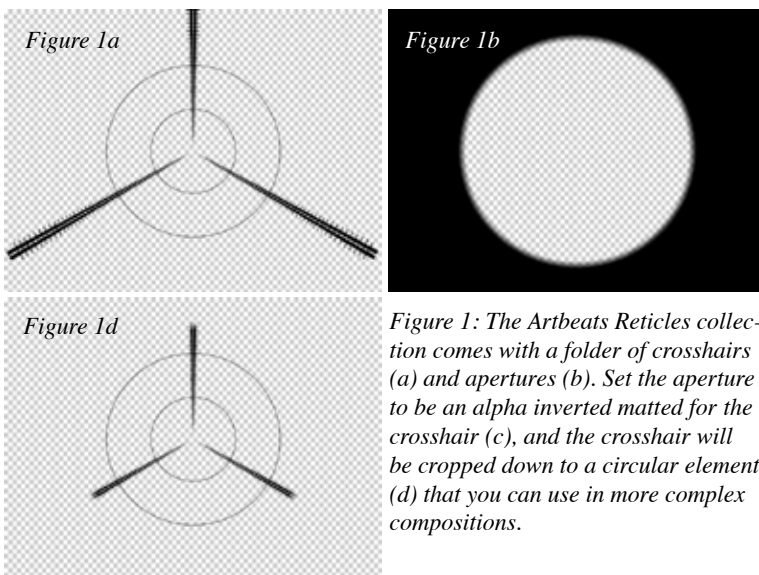
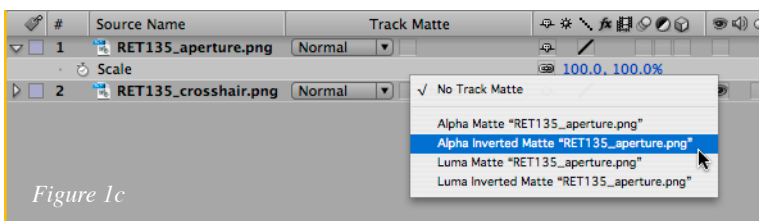


Figure 1: The Artbeats Reticles collection comes with a folder of crosshairs (a) and apertures (b). Set the aperture to be an alpha inverted matted for the crosshair (c), and the crosshair will be cropped down to a circular element (d) that you can use in more complex compositions.



To employ these images in an Adobe After Effects project, place both in the same composition with the aperture layer on top. Most of these images come from Artbeats filled with black, so they will be hard to see against a dark background; either enable the Comp panel's Toggle Transparency Grid button (it looks like a small check-board), or change the Composition > Background Color to something brighter. Next, reveal the Modes column in the Timeline panel; the keyboard shortcut is F4. Then set the TrkMat (Track Matte) popup for the crosshair (not the aperture!) layer to Alpha Inverted Matte. The video switch for the aperture will turn off automatically, and instead of seeing the aperture, its alpha will now be used to crop the crosshair layer underneath. Most other programs also provide a way to use one layer's alpha to crop another.

Keep in mind that you don't have to use the crosshair full-screen and centered. Once you've created this image module, you can use the result as a layer in another composition where you can then scale it down, rotate it, and position it to taste. These crosshair/aperture pairs are also easy to customize. You can apply a fill to the crosshair layer to change its color. You can also replace the aperture with any other layer that has an alpha channel, such as a solid with a circular mask or a shape layer (introduced in After Effects CS3).

More interesting is to use the result (or either of these layers on their own) as an alpha matte for moving footage. The footage then becomes a fill for the crosshair or aperture. As most of the crosshairs are centered, good candidates for fill clips include those that are symmetrical around the center of the frame, such as many in the Digidelic and Cyber Journeys collections as well as the kaleidoscope-based Centrifusion, Centristorm, and Tranquilosopes collections.

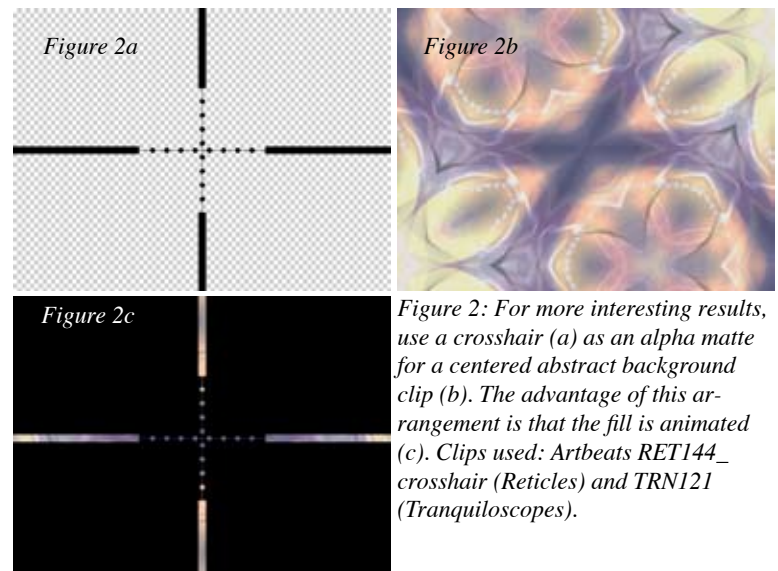


Figure 2: For more interesting results, use a crosshair (a) as an alpha matte for a centered abstract background clip (b). The advantage of this arrangement is that the fill is animated (c). Clips used: Artbeats RET144_crosshair (Reticles) and TRN121 (Tranquilosopes).

Tips N Tricks

More available at artbeats.com

ARTBEATS
FOOTAGE YOU CAN USE

Extending a Matte

Another intriguing Artbeats collection is Chromatica, as a couple of its clips come with mattes. These mattes are designed to allow you to play other footage inside specific regions of an otherwise abstract background. The way to use these is to create a three-layer stack: Place the background (CHR106, for example) on the bottom, the footage you want to inset in the middle, and the background's corresponding matte (in this case, CHR106M) on top. Reveal the Modes column, and set the TrkMat popup for the middle layer to Luma Matte. The matte layer will be turned off, and its grayscale pattern will be used as an alpha channel for the middle layer, revealing it as an inset.



Figure 3: To take advantage of the mattes provided with the Chromatica collection, create a 3-layer stack with the background (a) on the bottom, the footage to be inset in the middle (b), and the matte (c) on top. The inset layer uses the layer above as a luma matte (d). The result is a perfectly-cropped inset video (e). For a variation, use different blending modes for the inset, such as Hard Light (f). Inset is Artbeats clip BG113 (Business on the Go).

Things get more interesting when you don't let the inset remain completely opaque. If you reduce the opacity of the inset layer, part of the background underneath it will start to peak through. Far more interesting is to use blending modes for the inset layer, such as Hard Light.

There's nothing that says you have to use the provided mattes with their corresponding backgrounds; indeed, four of the clips that come with Chromatica (CHR126-129) are standalone animated grayscale mattes. Use them to cut out a footage layer, and place a different background underneath the resulting stack. Chromatica also comes with a special Artbeats Blender project file that uses mattes to combine the Chromatica clips in different ways.

There's nothing that says you have to use the mattes in their original, unaltered state. Feel free to rotate, stretch, and reposition them. Place them in their own composition and combine them with your own animated black and white shapes to create custom mattes. This is particularly handy if there is a region in the inset footage that you want to reveal, but which doesn't line up with a "hole" in the existing matte you're starting with.

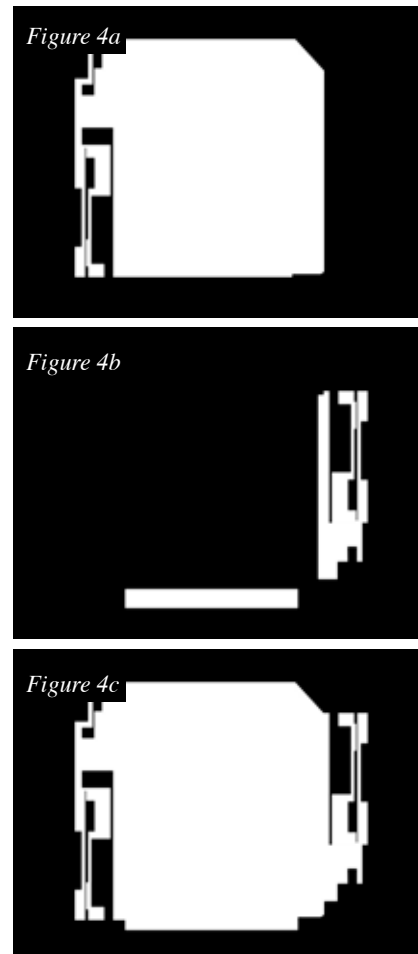


Figure 4: After you've chosen your channel or channel mix (a), use a Levels effect (b) to increase its contrast, leaving areas that are totally black or white (c).

You don't have to stop there. Nest your track matte composite into a new composite, and then you can apply other effects such as drop shadows to the result. Thinking like this is how you can personalize a stock footage library to become custom footage for your job.



Figure 5a

Figure 5: The track matte composite was nested into a final comp, where edge effects like Roughen Edges and Drop Shadow are applied (b).

Calculations

In the previous article, we suggested a couple of different After Effects plug-ins to convert footage into grayscale mattes, including Channel Combiner and Channel Mixer. Another easy plug-in to use is Channel > Calculations: Twirl open its Input section, and set the Input Channel popup to the desired color channel. You can also use Calculations to mix in a Second Source layer.

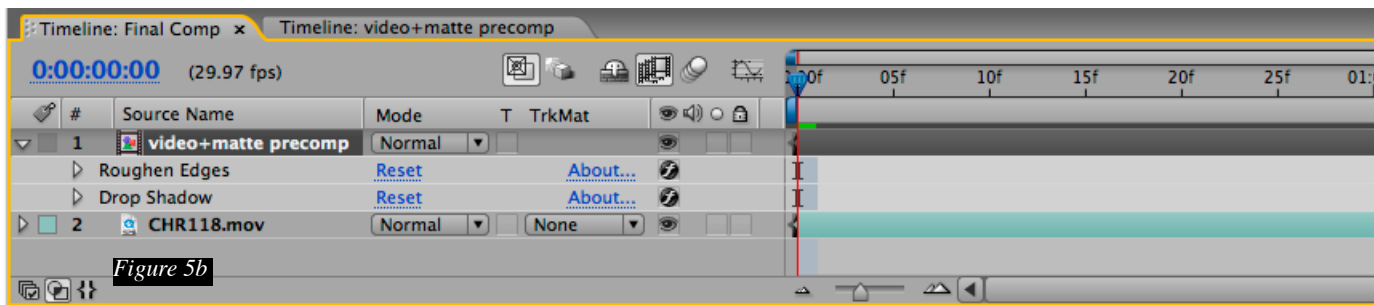


Figure 5b

Zooming Out

We hope this gave you some additional ideas for how to create more interesting composites of the footage you're working with. Keep an eye out for clips that have strong patterns of light and dark, or collections that come with mattes - they will open up more possibilities for future jobs.

###

Chris and Trish Meyer are the founders and owners of CyberMotion (www.cybmotion.com), an award-winning motion graphics studio in Los Angeles that has created a wide variety of work for film, broadcast, corporate events, and special venues. They were one of the original development sites for After Effects, wrote the highly-acclaimed books *Creating Motion Graphics* and *After Effects Apprentice* (2007), and are long-time Artbeats users.