

Improve Your Reference Photographs using Photoshop. by Sheila Hogge Published in 'the Artist' November 2004

Part 1. Increasing the Tonal Range and Deciding on Composition.

Photographs taken for a painting reference can often appear disappointing. The scene was more vibrant than the processed photograph illustrates. This can be due to indifferent processing of prints or just the fact that we have experienced the scene, but the camera just recorded it without emotion.

With a computer (preferably with 128 RAM or more) and Adobe Photoshop or Photoshop Elements you can often restore the vibrance that inspired you to take the photograph.

If using a traditional camera scanning the negative or slide with a transparency adaptor at 2400 dpi. or the highest available will give the best results. However, a processed print can also be improved. Scan this on RGB colour at 600 dpi to give a good A4 sized print or for reasonable enlargement on screen.

Photos can be recorded on CD by the film processor, but ask for the resolution of the scans to be high enough to enlarge satisfactorily without breaking into pixels whether you intend to print a photo or just refer to it on the computer screen. Digital photographs just need downloading.

The photographic print in this example needed an increase in tonal range and the composition needed to be considered. (Photo 1)



Photo 1. The original photographic print has a limited tonal range and a poor composition.

I scanned my 35 mm colour negatives on a UMAX 4000U flatbed scanner with transparency adapter at 2400 dpi to import my image.

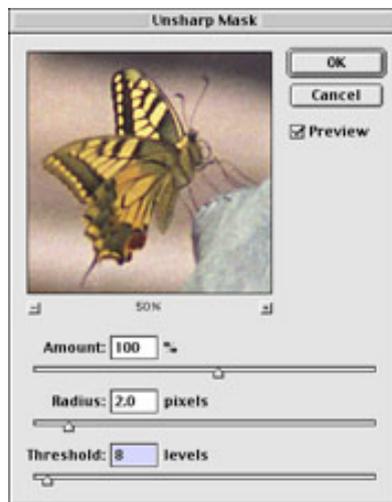
Open the image into Photoshop from its present file using:

Apple Command and 'O' (letter O) for Macs., [Control (Ctrl) and 'O' for PC's.]

Title and save this in Format: Photoshop (psd).

Size your image to fill the screen using:

Apple Command and 'o' (zero) for Macs., [Control and 'o' for PC's.]



Sharpening the image will give immediate improvement.

To do this go to Filter in the menu > Sharpen > Unsharp Mask.

Useful values are: Amount: 100 - 150%, Radius: 0.7 - 4.0 pixels and Threshold: 2 - 20 levels.

The values for the fish and butterfly negative were Amount: 100%, Radius: 2.0 pixels and

Threshold: 8 levels. (Figure 1.)

Experiment to see what different values will do for your photographic subject.

For instance, an increase in Amount % will make the image look more grainy. A higher Radius value, say 20, will enhance the highlights - extremely useful to the artist, but too much and edges can also appear double.

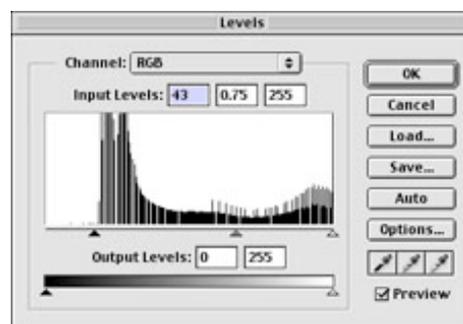
To select a particular area for comparison move the cursor - that will convert to a square within the image, and click on the chosen area. This will then appear in the dialogue box. Click the hand symbol to view the changes of the adjustments in this selected area. To see the overall changes uncheck, then check, the Preview box.

If it looks good click O.K. or readjust values.

To increase the tonal range use the Levels histogram. (Figure 2)

The keys Apple Command and 'L', [Control 'L' for PC's], will bring up Levels.

The adjustment for dark tones is on the left, mid tones in the middle and highlights on the right. Make sure the Preview box is checked. Drag each



slider under the histogram gently to see the possible changes.

In this example, I moved the dark tone slider (left) to where the histogram started and this gave an Input Level of 43. The mid tones (central) slider was moved to 0.75. Light tones were left unchanged. Generally this is the case as adjustment of the light tones will lose highlight detail.

To see the effect of changes uncheck and then check the Preview box.

These adjustments gave the livelier image I wanted as the tonal range had been increased. So I clicked 'O.K.'

Now there are dark tones within the image that were absent before and stronger mid tones.

When taking a reference photograph I usually I like to compose my potential painting, as far as I can, through the camera lens. But in this case there was only time to focus. Therefore, I cropped the frame to give the swallowtail butterfly and fish equal importance. (Photo 2)

The 'C' key - will bring up the Crop Tool.

This is very useful in deciding your composition.

Experimentation with horizontal and vertical compositions can give new or different ideas on how to compose a subject.

To adjust the size of the selected area click and hold down at the square box at the centre of the dotted edge lines when the double arrows appear.

To crop the image, double click in the selected area, but not at the centre. Save separately if you want to refer to the whole image again.



Photo 2. Photograph after sharpening, adjustments in Levels to increase the tonal range and cropping to the chosen composition.

The watercolours used were aureolin, brown madder, viridian and cerulean blue together with indigo for the darks in the butterfly's wings. (All Winsor & Newton Artists' Colours). The paper was stretched Fabriano Artistico 300 gsm rough.

The body and wings of the butterfly and the highlights on the fish were covered by masking fluid. I wanted the background to be abstract but give the impression of distant foliage in shadow allowing the overhead sunlight to focus attention on the butterfly. This was done with a wet in wet variegated wash of all the main colours using plenty of water. The board was tilted from side to side to help spread and mix the colours but left flat to dry. This allowed the mix of viridian and cerulean blue, (with brown madder) in the dark areas to granulate into the paper texture. When dry, these darker areas were dampened again and the tone strengthened, again using a lot of water with the pigments.

The fish was started wet in wet and then tightened up on dry paper. When enough detail had been built up, the masking fluid was removed. The edges of the highlights left were softened after dampening the paper. The butterfly was painted last onto dry paper. (Photo 3.)



Photo 3. Swallowtail and Fish. Watercolour on Fabriano Artistico 300 gsm rough paper. Size 34 x 24 cm