

The Deep Shade Dilemma

Some prints I make with matte paper on my Epson 4800 emerge with muddy shaded areas because the "L" values are in the range of 3 to 20, where I would have preferred more light and better tonal separation, yet preserve the intended appearance of low light. While it sounds contradictory, it is achievable. The three-quarter-tone contrast enhancement technique shown below can be implemented in a manner that is far more targeted and powerful than achievable with curves alone or Photoshop's Shadow/Highlight filter. It combines a luminosity blend with a change of blending mode and a Curves clipping mask.

Take for example Figure 1 of people strolling at dusk down a narrow street in Tunxi, China, where I wished to preserve the evening glow of the buildings, but selectively enhance the foreground contrast and luminosity so that it would look like what I thought I saw when I was there (recall, our eyes and brains make mental adjustments for low light that the camera doesn't make).



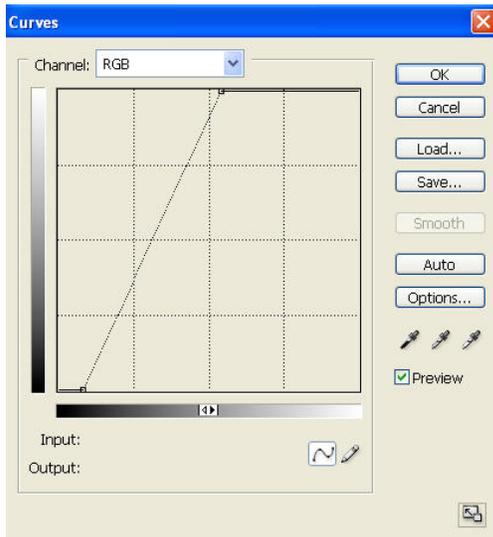
(Figure 1: Before Adjustment)



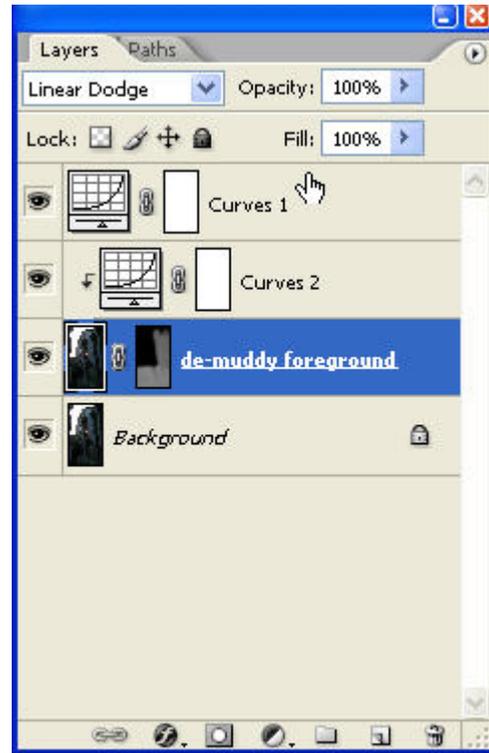
(Figure 2: Adjusted)

After playing with curves and Photoshop Shadow/Highlight without much success, I tried the following and liked it:

- (1) Duplicate the background layer.
- (2) Change its blend mode to "Linear Dodge". (This opens the quartertones a lot.)
- (3) Associate a Curves clipping mask to the Linear Dodge layer.
- (4) Increase the contrast to taste by adjusting the Master RGB Curve (Figure 3).
- (For this purpose only the effect on the quartertones matters – ignore the rest.)
- (5) Add a Hide-All Layer Mask to the Linear Dodge Layer (Figure 4).
- (6) Set the white paint brush to a low opacity value and gradually paint-in the extent of the quartertone area enhancement wanted, the result being more light and more contrast made-to-order. There is scope for much greater brightening and contrast than shown in Figure 2, which I kept very low key; the intention was to rid the muddiness.



(Figure 3. Contrast Enhancement Curve)



(Figure 4. Layer Structure)

There is much flexibility for shaping the effect:

- Change paint brush opacity and coverage;
- Change shape of the curve
- Change layer opacity.

For this image I varied the brush opacity differently according to the strength of the effect I needed on different portions of the foreground.

An illustration of a more radical implementation is shown overleaf and in Figure 5.

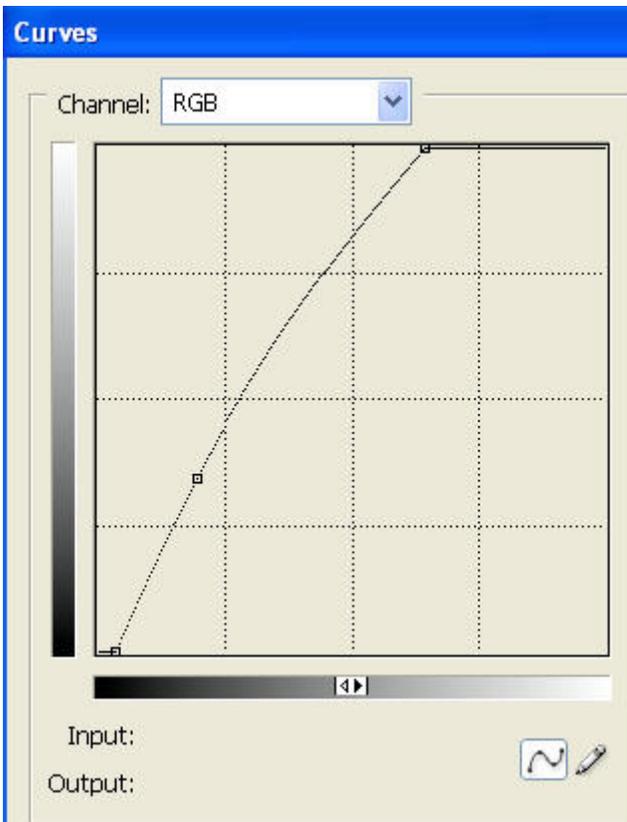
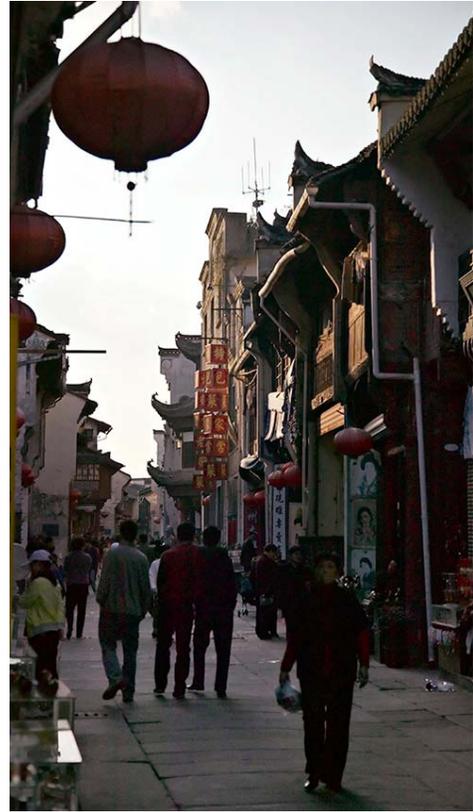
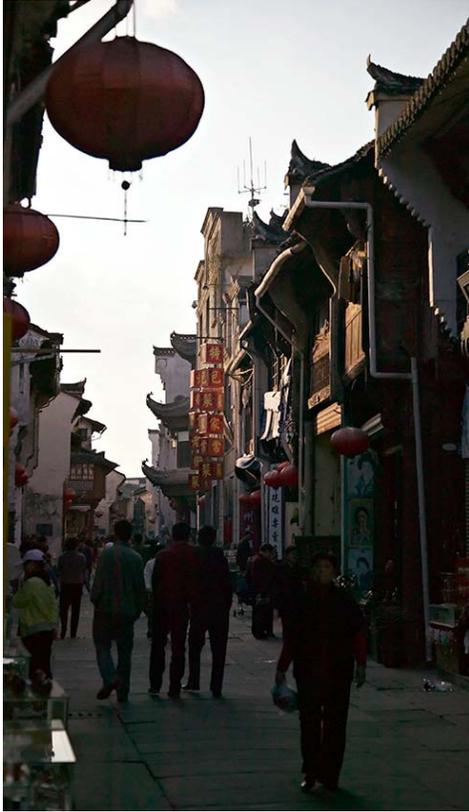


Figure 5. Radical curve

Instead of instruction (6) one can use “Blend if” in the Layer Style dialogue box (accessed by double clicking on the layer created in step (1). This is useful where the need for opening dark areas is spread in different places, is complex and needs to be carefully graduated so the image looks natural. Such a photograph, made inside a construction area of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, is shown below left.



The idea was to smoothly and gently open the shaded areas to reveal more detail and brighten the darker parts of the image while preserving the overall effect of the contrasting pillars.

Because the desired effect here is more subtle than that in the previous example, for Step (2) I used the Color Dodge blend mode instead of Linear Dodge. I was able to skip steps (3) and (4) for this image (not required). I also did not implement step (5) because a layer mask is not required when using “Blend if”.

Next, I double-clicked the “Color Dodge” layer to bring-up the Layer Style dialog box. I wanted to blend this layer into the Background heavily for the darker areas and more gently for the less dark areas. This is achieved by telling this Color Dodge layer to blend-into the Background (Underlying layer) only where there are ranges of dark tones in the Underlying layer and to do so gradually. This instruction is implemented in the Layer Style dialogue box by going to the Blend If section at the bottom and moving the white marker for the Underlying area to the left, so that the tonal range to be earmarked for

blending is contained between the black and the white marker. It is necessary to monitor the effect on the image as the white marker is slid leftward. This selection is then refined by “ALT-clicking” on the white marker to separate its right half from its left half, and gradually moving the right half rightward until the effect it produces in the image is a smooth blend between the darker tones being blended and the lighter tones not being blended. Figure 6 below shows this implementation in the Layer Style dialog.

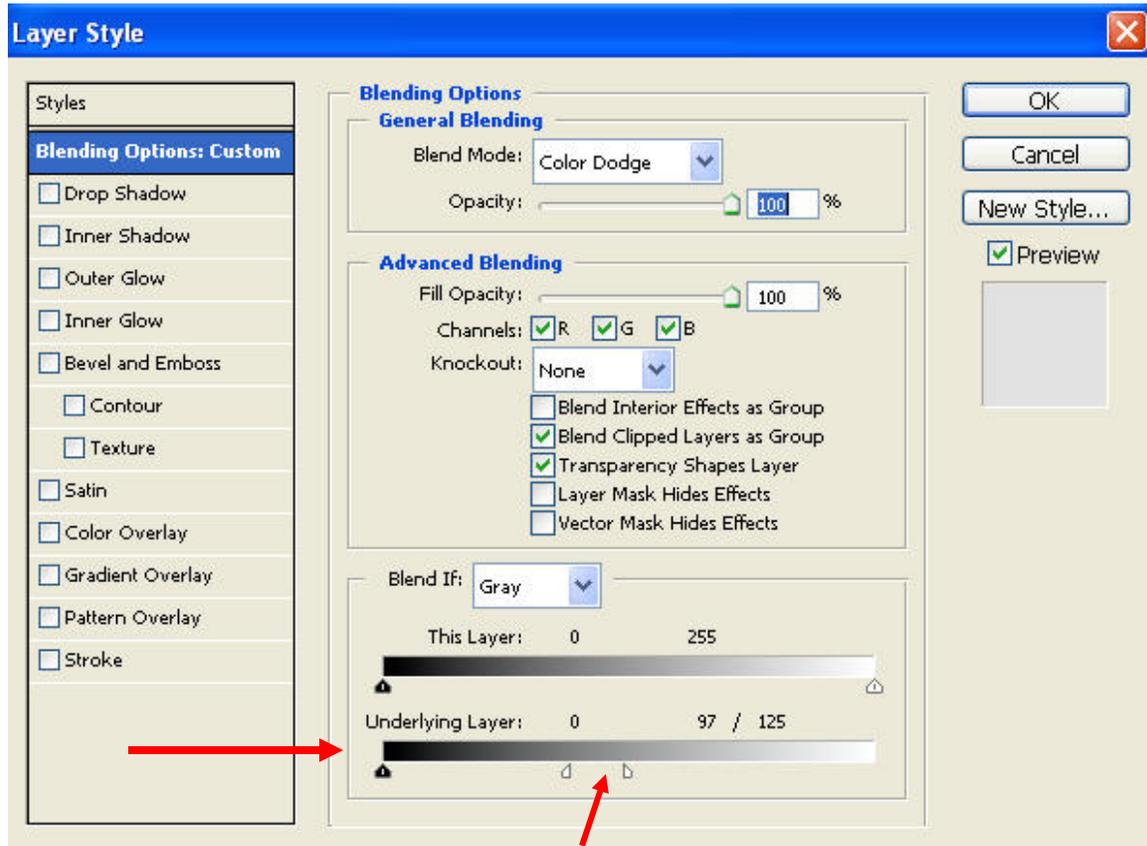


Figure 6. “Blend If” instructions for Sagrada Familia. (See red arrows.)

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