HIGHLIGHTS, MIDTONES, AND SHADOWS

AT HEART, Photoshop is an image cobbler. Its primary mission is to take a worn photograph, with the pixel-based equivalent of sagging arches and holes in its heels, and make it better. As with shoes, not all images can be repaired; some are hopelessly defective from the moment they leave the factory. But most images have more life left in them than you might suspect. And if anyone can fix them, you and Photoshop can (see Figure 2-1).

Over the course of the next several lessons, we'll examine the many different ways to correct a photograph *in the order that these corrections are best applied*. Pardon my prolonged use of italics, but this last part is important. In addition to telling you how to use Photoshop CS3's tools and commands to their utmost capability, I'll answer a rarely addressed question: When should you do what? Because every change you make to an image builds on the previous adjustment, sequence makes a difference.

In this lesson, you'll learn how to correct the brightness and contrast of an image. In the next lesson, we'll fix the colors. Later, we'll move on to straightening, cropping, sharpening, and so on. Amend each attribute of your troubled photograph in the order suggested by these lessons, and I swear to you, the results will look as good as they possibly can. This is how the pros do it.

Figure 2-1.

Project Files

Before beginning the exercises, make sure you've installed the lesson files from the DVD, as explained in Step 3 on page xvii of the Preface. This should result in a folder called *Lesson Files-PsCS3 1on1* on your desktop. We'll be working with the files inside the *Lesson 02* subfolder.

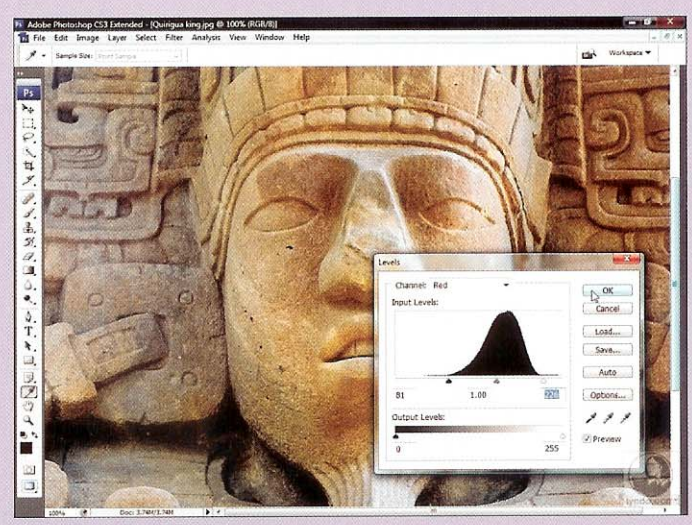
ABOUT THIS LESSON

In this lesson, we examine Photoshop's best brightness and contrast correction commands: Levels, Curves, and Shadow/Highlight. We'll examine Photoshop's automatic color fixers, which are the three Auto commands. You'll learn how to:

Video Lesson 2: Introducing Levels

The once destructive Brightness/Contrast command has been fixed in Photoshop CS3, but you would hardly call it a professional-grade tool. If you want your images to look their very best, you're better off using more complex commands that give you precise control over highlights, shadows, and midtones.

To see one such command in action, watch the second video lesson included on the DVD. Insert the DVD and double-click the file *PsCS3 Videos.html*. Then click **Lesson 2: Introducing Levels** under **Navigation and Color Correction**. In 10 minutes and 58 seconds, you'll see Brightness/Contrast, the three Auto commands, and the best of the bunch, Levels. I also mention these shortcuts:



Command or operation	Windows shortcut	Macintosh shortcut
Hide or show right-hand palettes	Shift+Tab	Shift-Tab
Auto Levels	Ctrl+Shift+L	⌘-Shift-L
Undo an adjustment	Ctrl+Z	⌘-Z
Auto Contrast	Ctrl+Shift+Alt+L	⌘-Shift-Option-L
Auto Color	Ctrl+Shift+B	⌘-Shift-B
Levels	Ctrl+L	⌘-L
Apply an adjustment	Enter	Return

Brightness, Contrast, and Levels

If you've ever done any weight training, you know that you start by exercising your major muscle groups and then work your way down to the small stuff. Not that I'm a fitness expert—in fact, I'm pretty much of the opinion that lugging a pint of ice cream out of the freezer is enough physical labor to justify eating the entire thing—but as I understand it, you start with squats and leg presses and end by contracting your forehead with very small weights tied to your eyebrows.

Something similar can be said for editing images. You start with the major changes and then work your way down to more detailed adjustments. The biggest changes recruit the most pixels; therefore, they have a tendency to exaggerate any minor changes that precede them. Perhaps more important, big changes quickly reveal flaws in the image, so you can see what other changes need to be made.

The biggest changes tend to revolve around issues of *luminosity*—that is, light colors compared with dark ones. You most often hear this expressed as "brightness and contrast," where *brightness* is the lightness or darkness of a group of colors and *contrast* is the degree of difference between light and dark colors, as illustrated in Figure 2-2.

Photoshop pays lip service to this colloquialism with its Brightness/Contrast command. Although exceedingly easy to use—and vastly improved in Photoshop CS3—it lacks the control of Photoshop's more capable functions such as Levels, Curves, and Shadow/Highlight. These tools analyze an image according to three basic attributes—*highlights*, *shadows*, and *midtones*, or what the uninitiated might call light colors, dark colors, and everything in between. Figure 2-3 provides some examples.

Such distinctions not only let you adjust brightness and contrast but also provide you with *selective control* over an image. You can make the shadows darker,

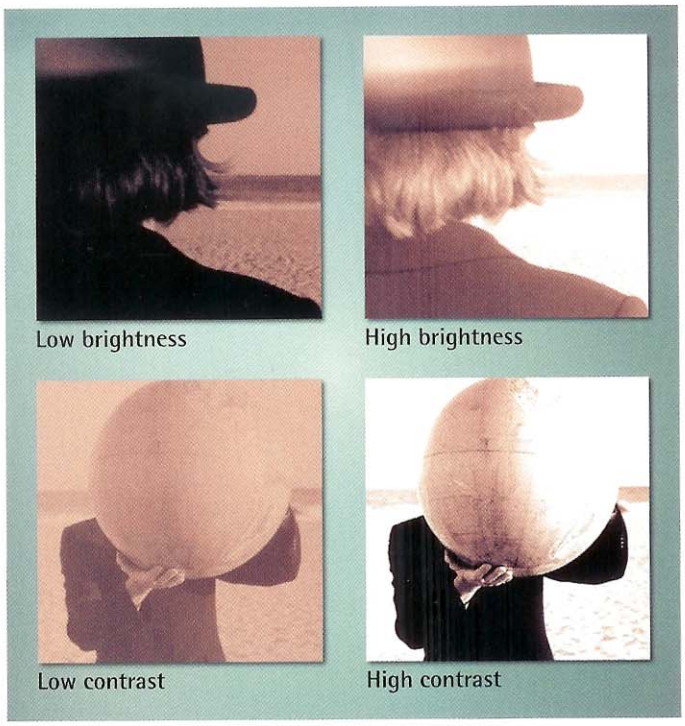


Figure 2-2.

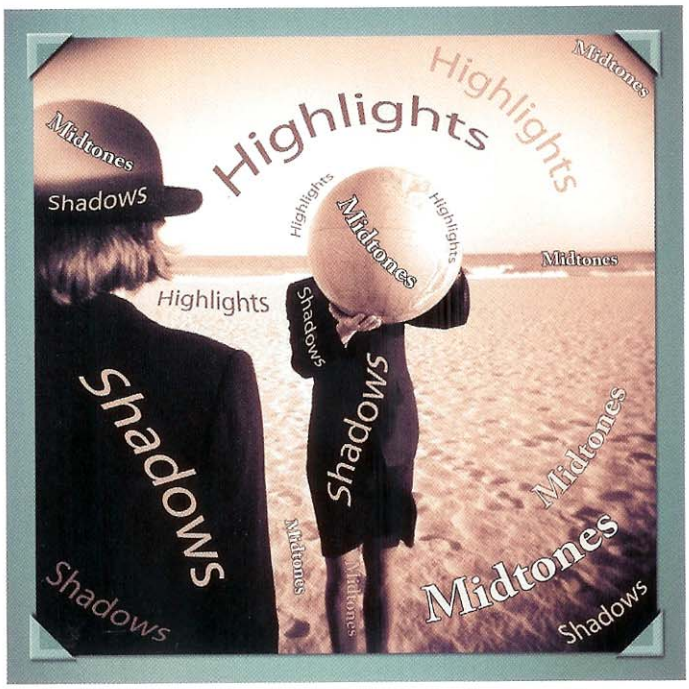


Figure 2-3.

make the midtones lighter, and leave the highlights unchanged. And you can make these changes without upsetting the color balance one iota; or you can adjust luminosity and color values together. Be it red or blue, night or day, the sky's the limit.