Enhancing an Image with Light
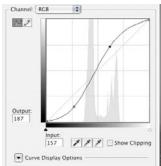
(excerpted from *The Creative Digital Darkroom*)
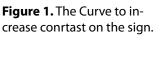
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My tool of choice for many tonal and color corrections is a Curves adjustment layer because it affords me so much precision and accuracy. When combined with the control of a layer mask, it is a formidable tonal correction and enhancement tool, especially for local corrections. In this example, we'll explore the use of selections, Curves, layer masks, and mask editing techniques to transform a photograph of Death Valley by lightening specific areas. Since this exercise is more about the possibilities of working with light and shadow to enhance an image and less about making selections, I have already created a path of the sign for you to use.
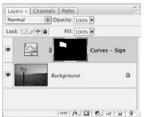
Before

After

1   In the Paths palette, Cmd/Ctrl-click the path of the sign to turn the path into a selection.

2   With the selection active, on the bottom of the Layers palette click the Add Adjustment Layer button and choose Curves. Move your mouse over the dark part of the sign and Cmd/Ctrl-click to place a control point on that area of the curve. Drag down on this point to darken those areas of the sign. Now Cmd/Ctrl-click the white letters in the sign to place a control point on the curve. Drag up on this point to brighten the letters. These adjustments create a strong S-curve, which brightens the letters and also boosts the contrast to better separate the sign from the sky (**Figure 1**). Click OK to exit Curves.

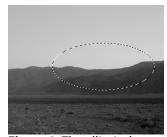**Figure 1.** The Curve to increase conrtast on the sign.

3   To add light to the horizon, use the Elliptical Marquee tool (it's nested under the Rectangular Marquee tool) to drag out an ellipse on the right side of the image over the light part of the sky and mountains. Approximately half the ellipse should cover the sky, while the other half covers the mountains (**Figure 2**).

4   Select the Quick Selection tool. In the Options Bar choose a brush size of about 50 pixels. Hold down Option/Alt and drag across the lower part of the elliptical selection that covers the mountains to subtract that area from the selection (you can also use the subtract modifier button in the Options Bar instead of using Option/Alt). **Figure 3** shows the resulting selection.

5   Add another Curves adjustment layer. Cmd/Ctrl-click in the light area of the sky to place a control point on that part of the sky. Raise this point until the sky is lightened significantly. Our input and output values are 190 and 230. Click OK (**Figure 4**).

6   The edge of the mask is too hard. To soften it, choose Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur. To see the edge of the mask in the filter preview, click the edge of the mask in the main image window. Enter a radius setting of 30 to blur (feather) the edges of the mask (**Figure 5**). Click OK.

7   To further enhance the image, we'll create an adjustment that suggests the last rays of light sweeping gently across the desert. Select the Lasso tool and in the Options Bar make sure the feather value is zero. Draw a loose diagonal selection on the flat area of the desert floor from the background to the foreground (**Figure 6**).
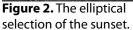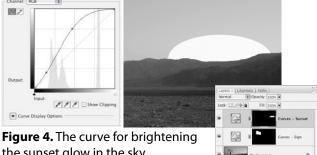
Figure 2. The elliptical selection of the sunset.

Figure 3. Terra firma subtracted from the selection.

Figure 4. The curve for brightening the sunset glow in the sky.

Figure 5. Blurrng the layer mask for the sunset.

Figure 6. The selection of the desert floor.

8 Add another Curves adjustment layer. Drag the lower part of the curve up to lighten the selected area. Our input and output values were 35 and 70 (**Figure 7**). Click OK, and then repeat the Gaussian Blur step and blur as needed to disguise the edges of the mask (**Figure 8**).

Figure 7. The curve to lighten the desert floor.

9 The top quarter of the signpost is a bit too dark in relationship to the lower part. To correct this, we need to modify the layer mask that we just created to lighten the desert floor. Click the Background layer to make it active. Select the Quick Selection tool and choose a brush size of about 25 pixels. Drag down vertically over the top part of the post to select it.

10 Click on the layer mask that lightens the desert floor. Press D to set the default colors. Press Option/Alt-Delete to fill the selection with the foreground color (**Figure 8**).

Figure 8. After applying the blur to the layer mask for the adjustment layer that lightens the desert floor.
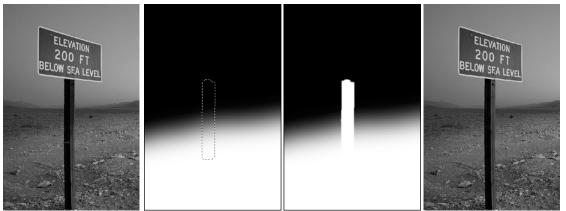

Figure 8. Selecting the signpost and using the selection to modify the layer mask for the desert floor adjustment layer.

11 As a final step, we added a Curves adjustment layer to the top of the layer stack and added an S-curve to increase the overall image contrast.

> **NOTE:** Any time you have masks, or portions of mask, that were created with selections, zoom in to 100% (View>Actual Pixels) and double-check the edges of the mask. In many cases, you may need to add a slight Gaussian Blur to the mask to soften hard edges or touch up areas with a small-tipped brush or the Blur tool.