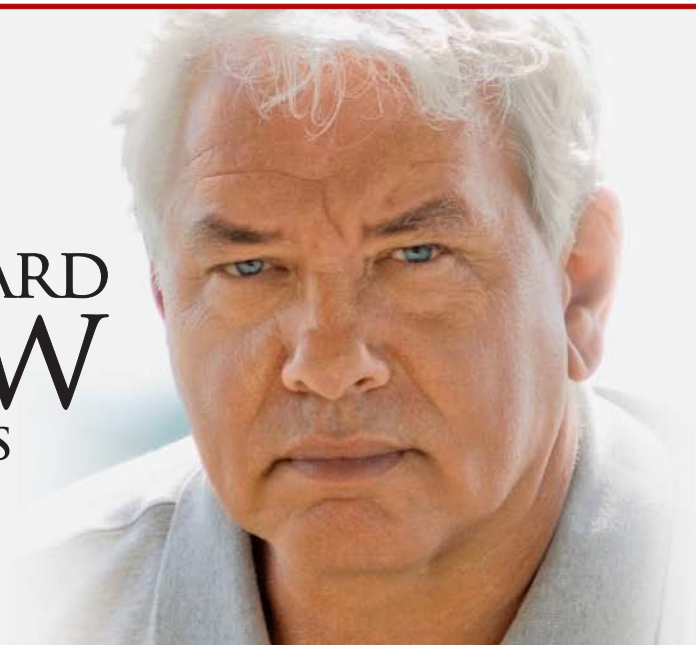


THE PICTURE POSTCARD WORKFLOW

BY DAN MARGULIS



THREE MINUTES TO A PICTURE POSTCARD

Suggested Workflow, revised October 2014

Preflight: The Power of Automation

The Picture Postcard Workflow made its debut in April, 2007 and has been updated frequently since then. Some of its techniques and most of its concepts are simple, but sometimes their execution is complicated. Many sequences, some quite lengthy, are repeated image after image. Automation is the only practical way to apply them. In 2007, that implied Photoshop actions.

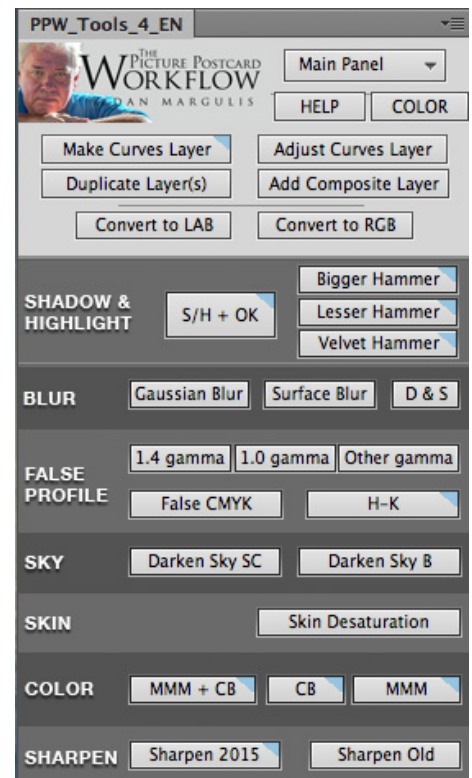
Accordingly, I made several actions available, revising them as improvements were found. By early 2008 the superiority of PPW over traditional methods was clear enough to make me redo my Applied Color Theory class curriculum to accommodate it. The actions played a big role.

Later that year, Adobe's introduction of Configurator made an action-based workflow even more attractive. Configurator, now sadly defunct, enabled us to organize everything into a panel that allowed us to access each action by a single click. As the actions matured, I began using a simple antecedent of today's PPW Tools panel in my classes in 2010. By simple, I mean that it arranged the actions in a more organized and accessible way than the Actions palette could, and I added some commonly used commands so that everything would be in one convenient place. It saved time, but did not offer anything that couldn't be done without it.

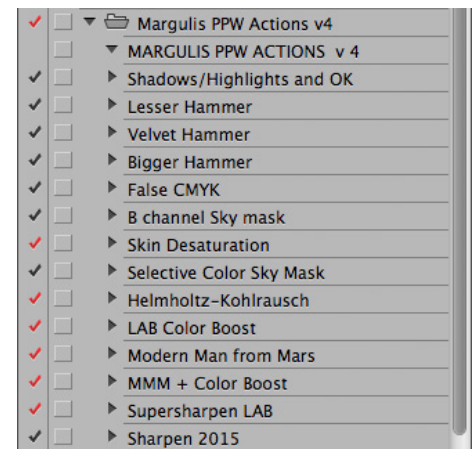
The potential of making something more out of the panel was so clear that many people volunteered to work on it. I enlisted the help and energy of three Italian colleagues, who agreed that a more sophisticated variant was possible and desirable. The complicated scripting was done by Giuliana Abbiati. Most of the documentation was by me, but there were also important articles by Alessandro Bernardi and Marco Olivotto. Feedback of students in my ACT classes and members of my Applied Color Theory mailing list led to improvements in the actions.

In Fall, 2011, we released the fruits of the efforts: a scripted PPW Tools panel for Photoshop CS5 that contained everything needed: an installer to load everything, on-board documentation, various options and bonuses, such as the ability to see each action as a single history state that could be canceled as opposed to a long series of steps that would wipe out the image's history.

In March 2012, we released panel version 2.0, with certain improved actions, support for Photoshop CS6, and many new user-definable options. Version 3.0 came out in March 2013 with some spectacular new options that made some of the actions much more flexible and enabled their use in many more images. Version 3.3, in October 2013, added support for Photoshop CC. Now comes version 4.0, compatible with CC2014, adding major new actions for highlight and shadow enhancement and even more power to the sharpening routine.



Today's PPW Tools panel, above, and the actions that it accesses and modifies as needed.



The panel remains freeware. It contains extensive documentation of each action and online help about how to find LAB equivalents of common colors. The action set is available as a separate download for those whose Photoshop version isn't compatible with the PPW Tools panel. These actions are usable, as far as is known, in any version of Photoshop released in this century, and in any language. They do not, however, include many of the important scripted features of the panel. Similarly, the hundreds of pages of PDF documentation that reside in the panel can also be downloaded separately. Everything can be found at <http://www.ledet.com/margulis/ppw> or <http://www.moderncolorworkflow.com/free-resources>.

The Picture Postcard Workflow is a concept, the actions and the panel merely one way of implementing it. The underlying idea is that both quality and speed improve if color and contrast are adjusted separately, and in fact the color is adjusted both at the start and end of the process. The corollary is that the speed and power suggest a drastic change in thinking even for high-quality work. Excellent corrections are possible in an average of three minutes. If that's all the time you can afford, fine. But if the image is worth more time, don't just slow down and take more care. Work as if you had only the three minutes, then save your work and start again from scratch. Doing so will produce an alternate version that likely will have certain strong points that can be blended advantageously into the first, with a greater gain in quality than a painstaking approach to the first version.

My 2013 book *Modern Photoshop Color Workflow* offers 450 pages of theoretical background, exercises, and comparisons of approach. It is intended for an expert audience, although each chapter has a section that requires little knowledge of Photoshop. What follows here is a capsule view of the entire process.

—Dan Margulis

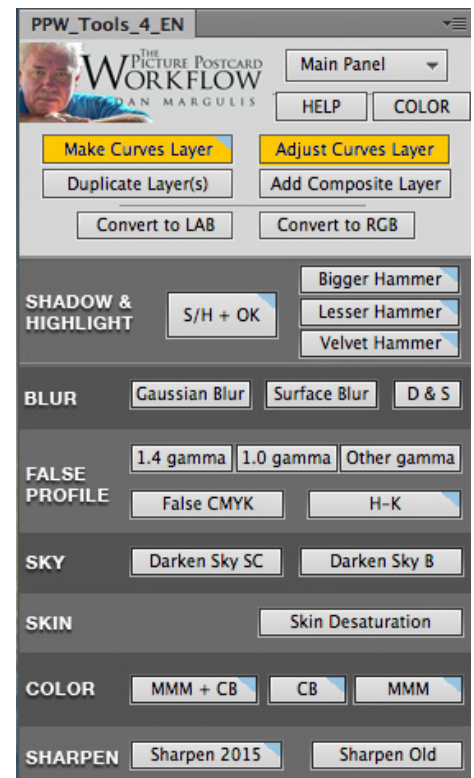


The PPW Tools panel contains hundreds of pages of built-in PDF documentation.

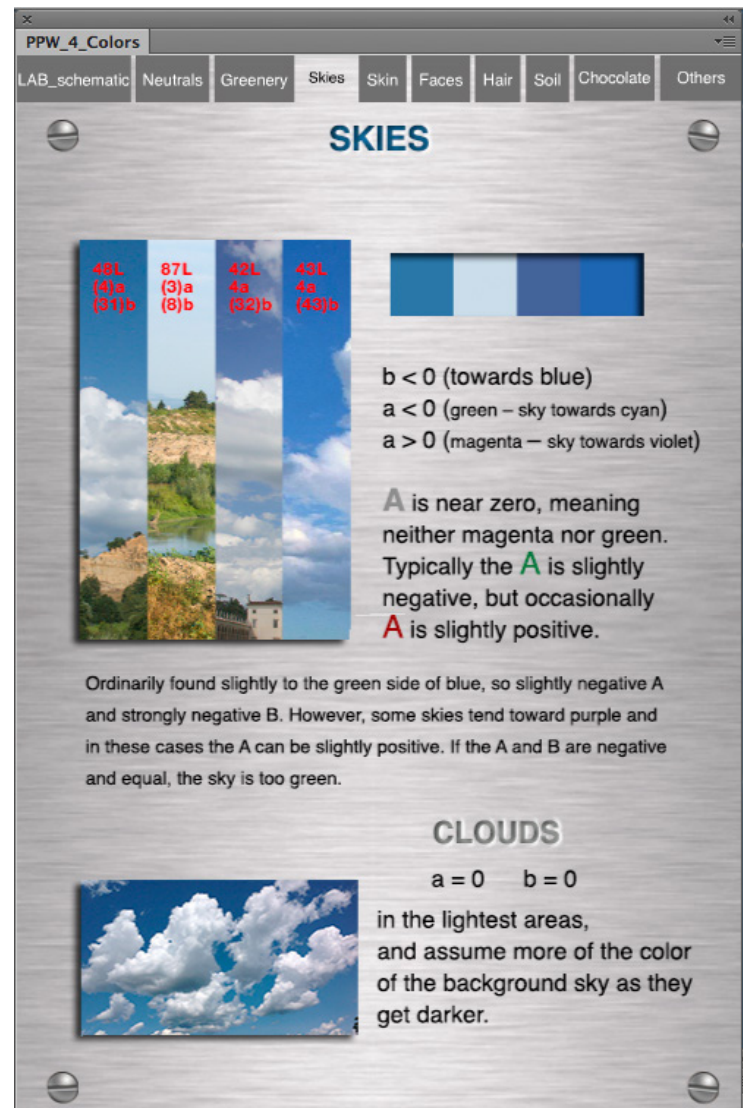
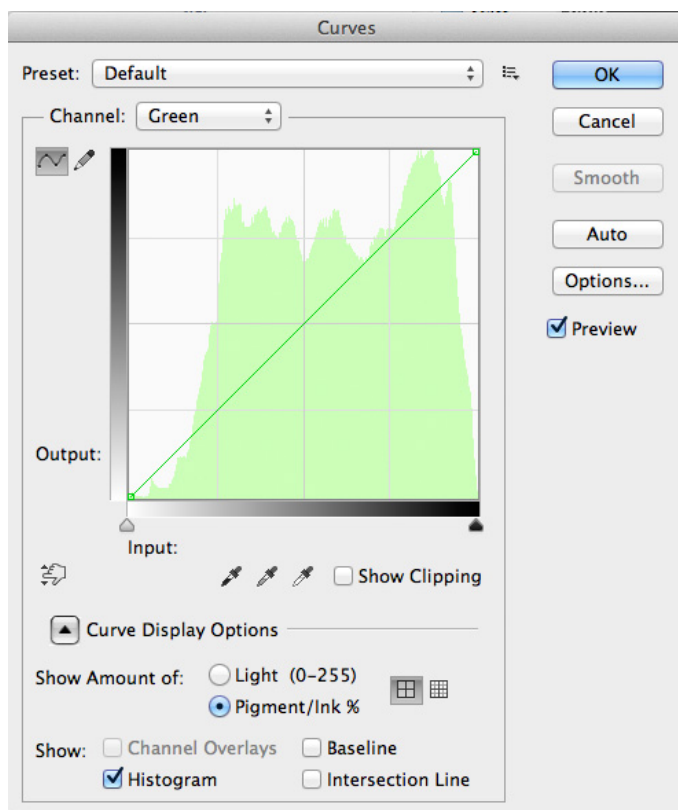
Step One: Correct Color Problems (RGB)

Use a Threshold adjustment layer, if needed, to identify the lightest and darkest significant areas—not the areas that are literally lightest and darkest. Place a color sampler point in each for later use. Discard the Threshold layer. *Note:* this step is easier if you set the Threshold layer opacity to about 50%.

Using the Info palette, examine the image for any colors that cannot possibly be correct. If none can be found, proceed to Step Two. Otherwise, establish a curves adjustment layer to remove the objectionable colors. Although you have, in the previous paragraph, identified the highlight and shadow points, do not concern yourself with them yet unless you are certain that they should actually be white or black. In that case, neutralize them, but do not attempt to force them to their proper darkness values.



Below left, clicking either of the two adjustment layer curves buttons in the PPW Tools panel accesses the traditional Photoshop curves dialog, and not the smaller and less straightforward version introduced in Photoshop CS4. Below right, a series of mouseover sub-panels (accessed by the Color button in the top right of the main panel) give guidance for LAB equivalents for many common objects, such as skies.



Recommendation: Although this step takes place in RGB, it goes much faster if you think in terms of LAB equivalents. Set the right-hand side of the Info palette to read LAB, and you'll only have to evaluate two channels for color, rather than three. If you aren't familiar with LAB numbering, learning it would be an excellent investment of time even if this time saving were its only advantage.

Additional step: Unless you are an expert in this workflow, always change the mode for the curves layer from Normal to Color—even if that makes the image look flatter, worse. Since these curves are not intended to augment contrast, there is no point in pre-empting better contrast curves later.

Action(s) provided: None, although the PPW panel accesses scripts that make adjustment layers using the traditional curves dialog and not the one introduced for adjustment layers in Photoshop CS4. Also, the panel contains a useful series of slides with recommendations for appropriate LAB values for various common objects.

How often is this step used? Studio photographers generally get good color off the bat and rarely have to do anything major at this point. People who shoot in difficult lighting conditions have to do it frequently. I work with images from many different sources; my experience is that around 50 percent need this step and, even if a move is made, it may be an insignificant one. But the remaining 25-40 percent of the time the move is critical.

Differences from previous recommendations: This step is the one that might be most familiar to retouchers of 25 years ago. It has therefore changed less than any other part of the workflow. If the original file is very flat, writing curves may be easier if Steps One and Two of the workflow are taken in reverse order.

Step Two: Improve Contrast

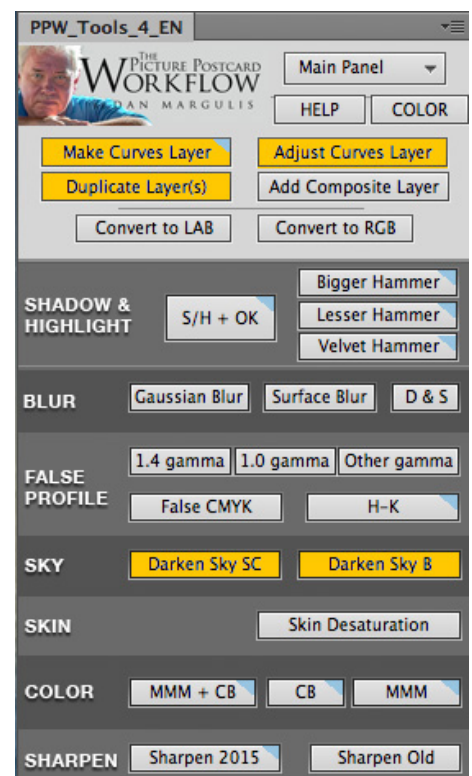
a) Flatten the image if necessary. Establish a duplicate layer.

b) Examine the red, green, and blue channels to see if any is clearly superior to one or both others. If it is, replace the bad channel(s) with the good one, using Lighten or Darken mode if appropriate. The RGB composite, which is a grayscale conversion, can also be used as a blend source.

c) When finished with blending, if there is any, examine the red and green channels again (the blue contributes so little to contrast that you may as well ignore it.) If any curve is available that increases detail in the critical areas of the red and/or green, go for it.

d) Set layer mode to Luminosity. *Note:* often there is more opportunity for improvement in the green channel than in the red. If this is the case, consider running *two* luminosity layers, or, more commonly, a straight luminosity layer with a curves adjustment layer, also set to Luminosity mode. While the first layer is still in Normal mode (before setting it to Luminosity) adjust the green to be as light as possible consistent with holding highlight detail—normally a value of around 250g. When the layer is set to Luminosity mode, this number will be recalculated because the other channels are currently darker, so the new green value will be lower (darker). It is now possible, with a curves adjustment layer, to re-lighten the green, again in Luminosity mode.

At the end of this step, save a copy for possible future use in blending.



Additional option (skies): The blue areas of certain skies seem too light for the rest of the picture. If your sense of aesthetics calls for darkening them, two similar actions are supplied. Both create an alpha channel for skies and leave you with a multiply layer with that channel as a layer mask. The primary action is called Sky Mask SC. If the sky is complex, with lots of subtle interaction between clouds and blue, use Sky Mask B instead.

Action(s) provided: The two Sky Mask actions described above.

How often is Step Two used? Over 90 percent of images benefit from luminosity moves, either blending, curves, or both.

Differences from previous recommendations: I have sometimes recommended different orders for the first few steps. For example, if the original image is very flat I usually prefer to execute Step Two before Step One, it makes curvewriting easier.

Step Three: Hammers of Three Different Sizes

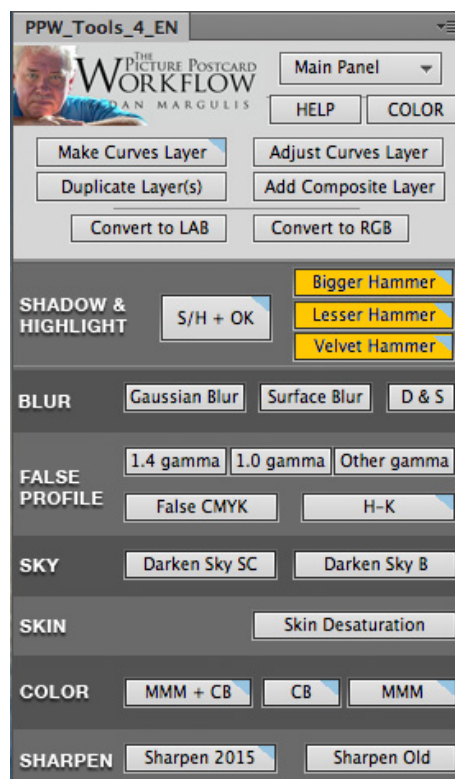
This step pertains to cases where more detail in the highlights and/or shadows is desired. Photoshop's Shadows/Highlights command (and the Highlights and Shadows sliders in its raw modules) do this to a certain extent, but better ideas are needed. For many years, an action called Bigger Hammer filled this void, but it has its limitations, too. In PPW panel version 4, two new actions that greatly alter things at this point are being released.

In certain images, such as waterfalls, highlight detail is so critical that the image can be considered a failure if it isn't brought out. Bigger Hammer was designed for this case. It is based on an inverted blurred overlay, and has become more powerful over the years with the introduction of many options within the PPW panel options window. When it works well, the results are spectacular, but sometimes its strength is its own worst enemy. It can leave nasty halos in certain images.

Although sometimes a big reduction in opacity can keep the halos acceptable, it also takes away the power of the action. Therefore, in early 2014 I released a beta action called Lesser Hammer, more complicated and less prone to haloing, while being only slightly less effective than Bigger Hammer in bringing out detail.

Experimentation showed that Lesser Hammer often works striking improvement in portraits. On the other hand, it sometimes damages them. Because of the importance of this image category, I then came up with a third action, Velvet Hammer, that once again traded some potency for a lower failure rate.

With three somewhat related actions it is hard to choose the right one for each category. Sometimes they are predictable. For example, the Lesser Hammer short-changes midtones, so if that range is important, the Velvet Hammer is the better option. On the other hand, both new actions do exceptionally well with flowers, so if the picture is important, it's best to give each a try before deciding on a winner.



And there are still other options: a combination of more than one of these, or Shadows/Highlights, or the false profile/multiply method of Step Five. Again, some things are predictable. Shadows/Highlights only acts when all channels are light or all are dark; the three Hammers work when *any* is light or any is dark. The translation is that the Hammers do well with flower images and Shadows/Highlights does not.

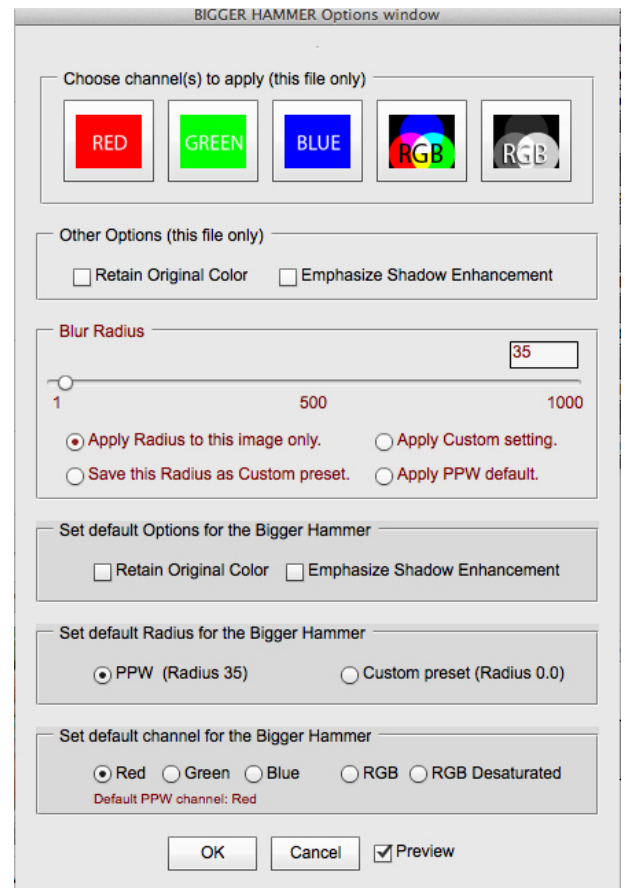
The multiplication procedure, for its part, is a pleasant way of bringing the two halves of the image closer together. It does not boost highlight and shadow contrast the way the Hammers do, but then again you may not want it to, as doing so might divert attention from more important areas.

To summarize, much depends on how much time you are willing to allot to a conceivably crucial step. If time is of the essence Shadows/Highlights does a competent job of enhancing light and dark neutrals. For more important work the Velvet Hammer often does better and never does worse, but Shadows/Highlights may be needed afterward. And for high-value images that need highlight and/or shadow detail time should be allowed for experimentation at this point.

Action(s) provided: Bigger Hammer, Lesser Hammer, Velvet Hammer. Bigger Hammer is also installed in the Photoshop Filter menu.

How often is Step Three used? In principle, whenever we wish to enhance highlights or shadows and have more than a couple of seconds to do it.

Differences from previous recommendations: The introduction of the actions; the downplaying of the use of Shadows/Highlights; and the extended previewing options for Bigger Hammer introduced in version 3 of the PPW panel (2013).



A blue triangle in the upper corner of each action's name (CS5/CS6/CC version) or the name of the action in blue type (CC2014 version) indicates that scripted options are available. Above, the dialog that appears when the user Option-clicks the Bigger Hammer action (or Option-clicks it in the Photoshop Filter menu).

Step Four: The Shadows/Highlights Command

The role of this step has changed with the introduction of two new Hammer actions.

The Photoshop default settings for this command are stronger than I recommend. At the more sedate settings found in the action, S/H won't harm the image, unless you're using it inappropriately by applying it to an image that has no significant detail to enhance or where it would be counterproductive to do so because it would distract attention from more important things.

Accordingly, the recommendation used to be that S/H should be used on most images, the exceptions being those in which highlights and shadows are totally unimportant, and where they are of critical importance. In short, whenever enhancing them would be nice but not essential.

The point of that recommendation was that if enhancement was vital, we would use the Bigger Hammer action, which is great for such images but opens a can of worms when applied to less worthy ones. Thus, the innocuous Shadows/Highlights as the main tool.

PPW panel version 4, however, introduces two actions that are more powerful than S/H, yet not as dangerous as Bigger Hammer. Unlike S/H, they enhance detail in all highlights, including the weak channels of strongly colored objects like flowers. They take longer to run, but tend to get better results when the highlight and/or shadow enhancement is even moderately important and we can spare the extra seconds. S/H, because of its speed and simplicity, remains the choice when the enhancement is more of an afterthought.

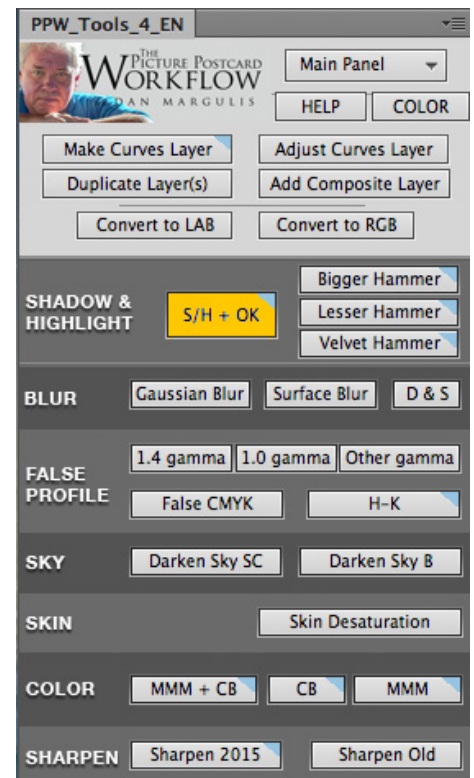
There is, however, a new use for it. The Shadows/Highlights default, both Photoshop's and the one used in our action, establishes good endpoints by automatically blowing out a few stray pixels in the lightest and darkest parts of the image. The Hammer actions don't do that, so applying S/H after them can make sense.

The question is, when to do it. If you are intending to do some multiplying (Step Five) then the time to apply S/H is now, while the file is still in RGB. If not, in a full PPW process, wait until the file enters LAB prior to Step Six, as there is a mild technical advantage to using that color-space for S/H.

Action(s) provided: S/H + OK is a two-step action that applies the default settings without opening a dialog. Using the PPW panel substitutes one click for the two steps, hardly a big deal.

How often is Step Four used? Used to be about two-thirds of the time. Too early to estimate its current role.

Differences from previous recommendations: The use as a supplement to the Hammer actions, and the possible move into LAB. Further changes explained in the commentary on Step Three.



Step Five, Preflight: Is Multiplying Appropriate?

When a picture is partly in sun and partly in shade, the camera does not provide a starting point that we consider natural. A human observer tries to balance the two halves more.

If you do not find that the image divides into separate light and dark areas, forget Step Five and skip to Step Six. If you do see a light and a dark half, however, choose one of the following three approaches.

Variant One: The light half is too light and the dark half approximately correct, and unlikely to plug if a good mask is used.

Variant Two: There is a danger of plugging the shadows by multiplying, with or without a mask.

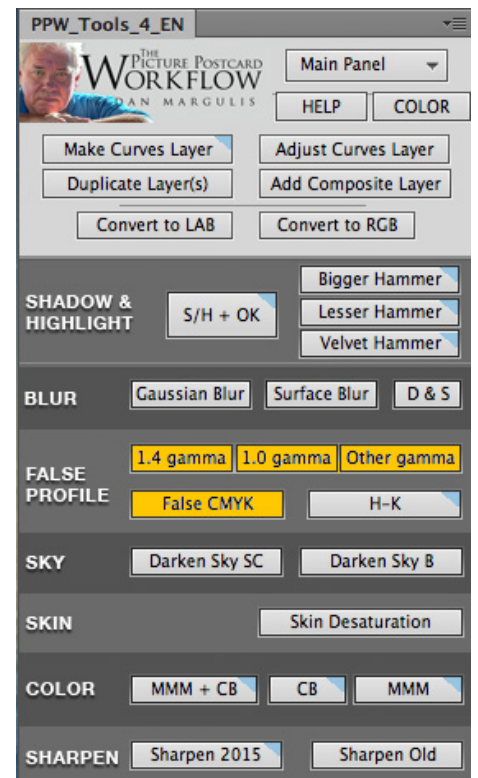
Variant Three: The image may or may not be of the correct weight. Your main goal is not just to make brighter colors generally, but to call attention to subtle distinctions.

Action(s) provided: The PPW panel assigns false profiles automatically. Additionally, a False CMYK action produces a file with a black especially designed for color correction, not printing.

How often is Step Five used? It's not just for sun and shade, but any image that can clearly be divided into light and dark components. However, the advent of two new Hammer actions has substituted for the technique in certain cases. I would say that one of the three variants of Step Five is appropriate in around a quarter of all images.

Differences from previous recommendations: Originally I recommended that the multiplication be done in LAB because it boosted colors attractively. Experience, though, convinces me that an RGB multiplication is better. At the moment after the multiplication, an LAB file looks better—but the RGB multiplication leaves more room for the superior color techniques of Steps Six and Seven.

In deciding whether to emphasize this method or one of the Hammer actions, ask yourself whether you are really trying to gain detail in the lighter half of the image or just bring it more into harmony with the whole. The Hammers add more detail, but sometimes that isn't what's desired.



Step Five, Variant One: The Straight Multiply

If you don't think that there is much danger of plugged shadows and you feel that the light parts are distinctly too light, make a duplicate layer (or blank adjustment layer) set to Multiply mode. Load one of the RGB channels as a layer mask; if you don't have a preference for any one channel, load the RGB composite as the mask.

Blur the layer mask heavily. For files in the neighborhood of 15-30 mb, a Gaussian blur Radius of about 30 pixels is appropriate.

Step Five, Variant Two: Multiplication with False Profile

If the image already seems to be of the correct weight, and/or you are worried about plugged shadows, you need to lighten the file before proceeding. The best way to do so is by assigning a false profile. The image must be in RGB to do so.

If you ordinarily use Adobe RGB or sRGB, both have a 2.2 gamma. For this step, you will want something between around 1.0 and 1.8. The PPW panel supplies 1.0- and 1.4-gamma variants, with many more available as free downloadable options. The panel senses your workspace and chooses the correct false profile to match it.

If you are not comfortable with false profiles, a reasonable alternative is to apply Image: Adjustments>Exposure>Gamma Correction at a value of around 1.50.

After lightening the file in either of these two fashions, multiply through a blurred layer mask as in Variant One.

If you are using a false profile, remember that an eventual conversion to some other colorspace, such as LAB (or to your normal RGB workspace), is required. That conversion makes the lighter look permanent and the file can then be reconverted safely to RGB.

Action(s) provided: The PPW panel automatically permits you to assign profiles of 1.4 or 1.0 gamma and generates a convenient multiply layer. The primary RGB values of your current workspace are detected and retained. Also, a supplementary free download permits you to specify almost any gamma you like.

Step Five, Variant Three: The CMYK Detour

If you are looking to accentuate the difference between colors, brightening some dramatically while holding more neutral ones in check, flatten the image if necessary, remaining in RGB.

- a) Apply a false profile as in Variant Two.
- b) Convert to Profile using a Custom CMYK setting with Medium GCR, or better yet, use the provided action. Either way “locks in” the false profile that was assigned in the last step. You now have a CMYK file that looks very light.
- c) Apply a sharp curve to the black channel only to establish a full shadow. If desirable, increase the quartertone setting for a stronger impact in near-neutral colors. The image now looks very strange. It seems too light, but the weight of its shadows is correct. The image also looks too gray due to the addition of so much black.
- d) Re-convert the file to RGB. Then follow the instructions for Step Five, Variant One.

Action(s) provided: The False CMYK action generates a custom separation with a black that will not plug shadows if adjusted.

Additional option: Sharpen the black channel before converting to LAB.

Interlude: The H-K Action

Many pictures benefit if near-neutral midtones are darkened. This is suggested by an anomaly of the human visual system known as the Helmholtz-Kohlrausch Effect. Other pictures benefit if near-neutrals are pushed even more toward gray, because this protects them against color shifting during later enhancement, without restricting the ability to emphasize brighter colors.

If you'd like to give either of these concepts a try, an action called H-K does it. It leaves you with a four-layered document. One layer darkens near-neutrals without changing their color, the other makes them grayer without any darkening. As customary in the PPW actions, they are also grouped so that they can be adjusted together as well as separately.

H-K is one of the younger additions to the PPW, having been introduced in version 3 of the panel. It leaves strongly colored areas more or less alone and tries to downplay areas with less color. It does this in two ways, each on its own layer so that they can be adjusted independently. It runs in RGB. The principle, however, derives from CMYK. An artificial black channel is generated and used to modify the RGB channels.

The H-K Effect layer darkens quartertone and midtone in less saturated colors, without desaturating them. Often this gives a pleasing sense of overall depth that is difficult to achieve in other ways. Either you will like what this layer does, or you won't; there's little danger in using it if the effect is pleasing.

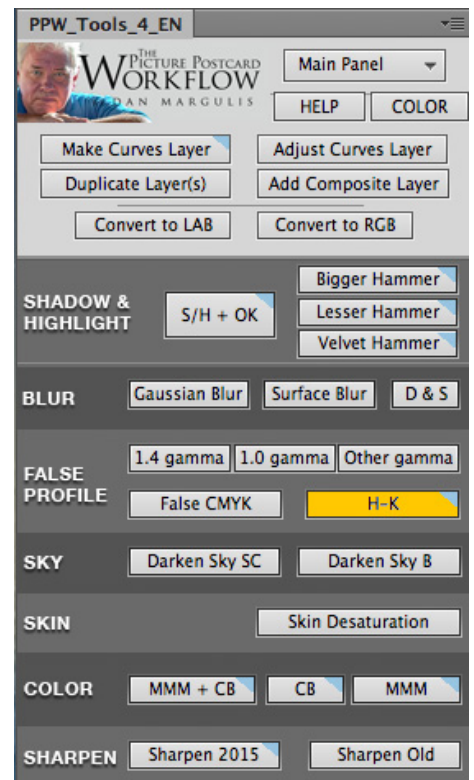
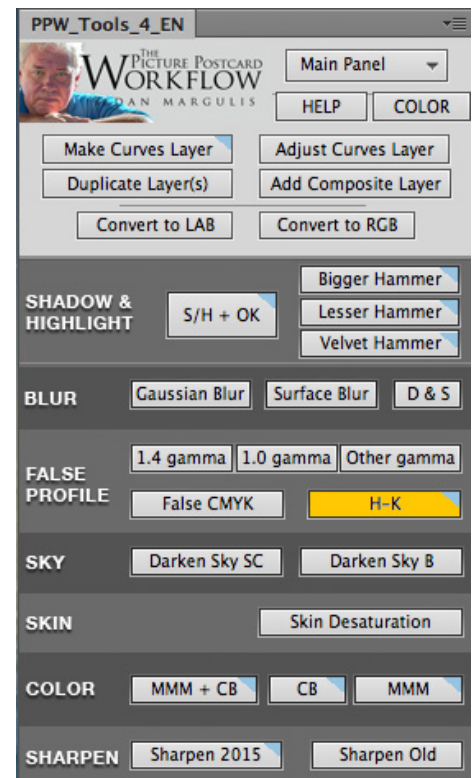
The Color Only layer poisons all color, but the more saturated the original color, the less it is affected. This is helpful in images dominated by a single color, such as landscape shots that are dominated by greens. It is also somewhat helpful in fleshtones. Generally the file will look worse, temporarily, when this layer is active. However, the idea is that it will make the subsequent color boost more effective by reducing competition to the brightest areas. Note: the default setting is rather strong; when in doubt, reduce its opacity.

The H-K action's basic tool is an artificial black channel, which gets discarded by default. As such channels have many other applications, the user has the option of retaining it, case by case or as a general preference.

Action(s) provided: H-K, which leaves two layers, one affecting darkness only and the other desaturating color. By default, the action discards an intermediate channel that it uses. This can be overridden file-by-file or as a general preference.

How often is it used? The H-K Effect layer should be avoided in portraits and other images where fleshtone is important, because it tends to age the subject. Otherwise, it is worth a look in many cases—if you don't like what you see, turn it off.

Differences from previous recommendations: The action has some similarity to the CMYK detour of Step Five, Variant Three. H-K is more controllable, but the CMYK detour will give better shadow detail, if that's desired.



Interlude: Skin Desaturation

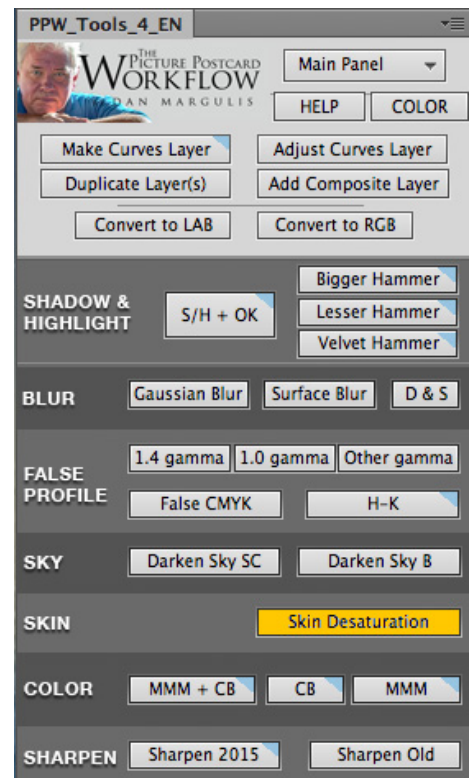
The PPW emphasizes bright, vivid, happy colors. Most of the time, this is what viewers and clients like, with one notorious exception. We are willing to accept landscapes with greens more vivid than those found in nature, but we reject skintones that are even slightly too red.

Acknowledging the probability that fleshtones will get too red as the result of Steps Six and Seven, I now advocate desaturating them as a matter of course at this point. The simple action runs in LAB.

Action(s) provided: Skin Desaturation, which converts the file to LAB and desaturates tones normally found in skin.

How often is it used? On all images with significant fleshtone areas.

Differences from previous recommendations: I originally recommended that fleshtones be treated like anything else: if Steps Six and Seven made them too intense, use layer masks to control the effect. I thank Stephen Marsh for suggesting that it makes more sense to desaturate them first as a matter of course.



Step Six: The Modern Man from Mars

Experienced users of PPW combine Steps Six and Seven into a single action. Since, however, they are two different animals, we will discuss them separately.

MMM is aimed at creating believable variation in color. It is complex, containing more than 50 steps, and offers many options, as can be seen in its lengthy documentation. However, it can also be used simply. It requires that you make a loose selection indicating the most important tonal/color ranges.

This selection is not actually used when the image is altered, but only for planning purposes, for guidance as to what's important. The final correction is applied to the entire file.

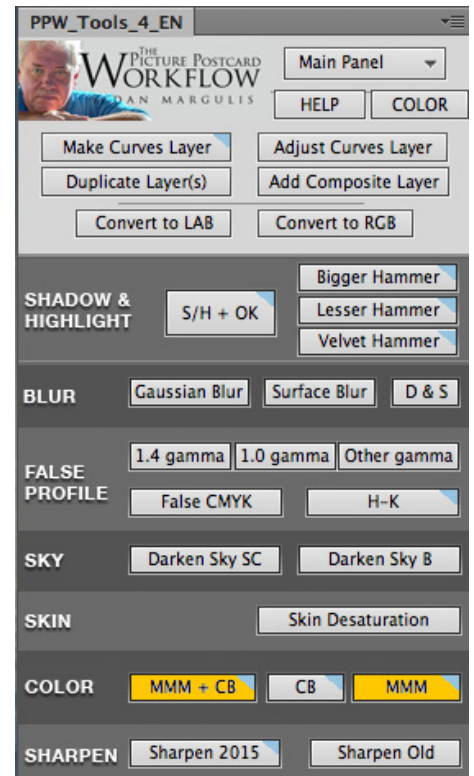
The action delivers separate layers for luminosity and color changes, plus an extra copy of the original for comparison. You can increase or decrease opacities to taste, or even discard a layer altogether. Optionally, you can add a third variable, a layer for saturation changes. This is often valuable in fleshtone images where subtle effects are in order.

MMM is most effective when color variation is more important than accurate gray balance. It works in tandem with the Color Boost action of Step Seven. The panel provides three different actions: one each for MMM and Color Boost, and one that combines them. That final action yields four separate correcting layers plus a copy of the pre-action file on top for comparison. It is somewhat confusing the first time. However, it's what I recommend for folk not just beginning with PPW.

Action(s) provided: MMM runs this procedure alone; MMM+CB combines it with Step Seven. **Note:** A selection is required. If you want the action to consider all parts of the image rather than just a defined area, do Select: Select All. If you are using the PPW panel, and you click MMM or MMM+CB without having first made a selection, you will get a prompt asking if you wish to use Select All. If you are instead operating out of the Actions panel and attempt to run without a selection, you will get an immediate error saying a command is not available. Click Stop when this happens to leave an unaltered file.

How often is Step Six used? If the question is how often does it make a significant difference, at least half the time for color, slightly less for luminosity. However, it is hard to predict in advance what will happen. Especially if you have the MMM+CB action, I would use it on every image. It takes only seconds to find out whether it is helpful. If it isn't, one or both of the two layers can be disabled.

Differences from previous recommendations: The original Man from Mars Method was introduced in the early 2000s. It was based on curves and required an accurate choice of pivot point. It also did not separate contrast from color changes. The action was introduced in 2010 and has been improved substantially since then. I now recommend that experienced PPW practitioners combine MMM and Color Boost within a single action. Also, version 3 of the PPW panel introduced important new options, such as the ability to compare the results of different MMM selections while previewing the action. I now recommend that most PPW users avail themselves of the MMM+CB action. Those using it who wish maximum flexibility have the option of implementing, either case by case or as a general preference, a third MMM layer, this one based on saturation. This MMM Saturation layer is not available except in MMM+CB.



Step Seven: The Color Boost and Endpoint Adjustment

Experienced users of PPW combine Steps Six and Seven into a single action. Since, however, they are two different animals, we will discuss them separately.

Prior to mid-2009 I had recommended using Overlay-mode blends at this stage to increase color intensity. The following action is a better way. It involves deliberately making an overly colorful image and then deciding how to back off. The action runs in LAB. There is also a separate curves adjustment layer for altering the L channel if desired.

The action is simple, only a few steps as opposed to more than 50 for MMM—but the curves have to be exceedingly accurate. That's why an action is needed: it has to be tested to be sure that the curves are precise enough. Its steps are:

- a) Starting with an LAB file, add a curves adjustment layer.
- b) Leave the L curve alone. Switch to the A curve and bring both the top right and bottom left points in toward the center, around two-thirds of the way. Each endpoint must be brought in by precisely an equal amount, so that the resulting curve still crosses the original center point.
- c) Before clicking OK, switch to the B curve. Bring the endpoints in around half the way—that is, a steep curve, but not quite as steep as the A.
- d) Close the B curve. Set the opacity of this layer to 75%.
- e) Add a second curves adjustment layer, but just click OK to the default curves, meaning that temporarily the adjustment layer does nothing. That closes the action.

The extreme steepness of the AB curves on the top layer rules out applying this type of correction without an action. They must pass directly through the center points; otherwise neutral objects will take on casts. With curves so nearly vertical, it's impossible to judge from the dialog whether they've done so. We've tested these actions carefully, and they do.

The action intentionally makes the image *too* colorful. Changing the top layer is optional. It's there in case you want to make some adjustment to the L channel, such as establishing endpoints or altering the weight of the picture slightly.

The real fun is in deciding how to tone down the excessive color imparted by the middle layer. The obvious solution is to reduce the opacity, but that isn't always the *best* way. Applying the L channel as a layer mask sometimes does just about the same thing, but often enough is decidedly better. *Note:* if you use a mask, you may have to consider increasing the layer's opacity so that more of its color can show through. Alternatively, you can establish the layer mask by applying the L at something less than 100% opacity. Experience over a couple of years suggests that this should be the default method, the one most likely to get the best result on a series of pictures (but not necessarily on each one of them!)



Many other masking options present themselves in special cases. Particularly, the A and B channels are mask candidates, sometimes in combination with the L or one of the RGB channels.

Make sure, though, that you have proper highlight and shadow values—having gone to all this trouble to add drama, why settle for flatness? Also, make a final decision as to whether you like the overall weight of the image and if not, correct it.

After setting the endpoints, sharpen the image, if you wish, using whatever method you're comfortable with.

I recommend the joint MMM+CB action to those experienced with the PPW—others may find it challenging the first few times.

In 2012, functionality was added to the PPW

panel enabling the user to quickly compare the impact of two different selections on the action. Also, as an option, the action now allows a third color adjustment layer, one that is a copy of the MMM Color layer (including its mask) but that affects saturation only. This is a more conservative move, because although it adds variation, it cannot change hue.

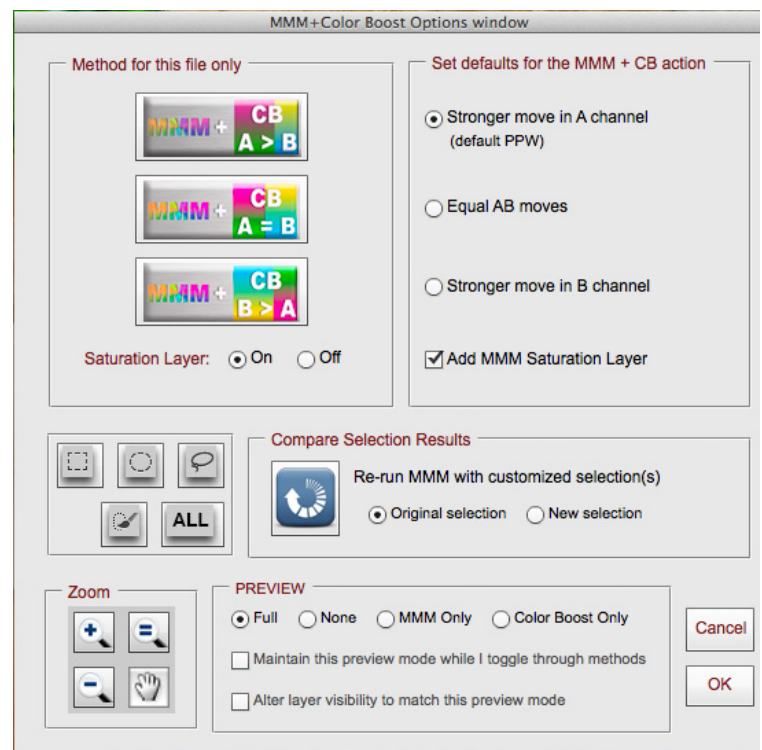
Always compare your version not just to the original, but to the conservatively corrected image you saved at Step Three. You may decide that your new version is too loud. If you, blend part of the conservative image into it, usually in Color mode.

Enjoy your picture postcard!

Action(s) provided: Color Boost runs this procedure alone; MMM + Color Boost combines it with Step Six. **Note:** A selection is required or the MMM + Color Boost. If you are working with the PPW panel and attempt to operate without a selection, you will get an alert and an offer to use Select All. If you are running from the Actions palette instead, you will get an immediate error saying a command is not available. Click Stop when this happens to leave you an unaltered file.

How often is this step used? I use MMM + Color Boost action on every file.

Differences from previous recommendations: Version 3 of the PPW action incorporated the useful ability to test and toggle between the results of several different MMM selections before making a final choice. The option of a Saturation layer was also added. There are no significant changes in version 4.



The Options window of the MMM+CB action.

With Preserve Transparency

Curves
Preset Kind: Custom
Adjustment: curves adjustment list
curves adjustment
Channel: current channel
Curve: point list
point: 0, 0
point: 150, 233
point: 255, 255

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: channel "Hiraloam Dark USM"
Opacity: 50%
With Preserve Transparency
Select channel "For hiraloam light"

Median
Radius: 40 pixels

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: channel "Copy of L"
Calculation: darken
With Preserve Transparency

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: channel "Copy of L"
Calculation: difference
With Preserve Transparency

Curves
Preset Kind: Custom
Adjustment: curves adjustment list
curves adjustment
Channel: current channel
Curve: point list
point: 0, 0
point: 79, 226
point: 255, 255
Select lightness channel

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: channel "For hiraloam dark"
With Invert Source
With Preserve Transparency

Set current layer
To: layer
Name: "Hiraloam Darken"

Set current layer
To: layer
Mode: multiply

Duplicate current layer

Set current layer
To: layer
Mode: screen

Set current layer
To: layer
Opacity: 18%
Select lightness channel

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: channel "For hiraloam light"
With Preserve Transparency
Delete channel "For hiraloam light", ch

Set current layer
To: layer
Without Layer Mask Enabled

Select layer "Hiraloam Color"

Set current layer

Select mask channel of layer "Light Hal

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: Lab channel of merged layer
Calculation: darken
Opacity: 50%
With Preserve Transparency

Gaussian Blur

Apply Image

Select mask channel of layer "Dark Hal

Apply Image

Gaussian Blur

Duplicate layer "Hiraloam Darken"

Set current layer
To: layer
Name: "For Screening"
Delete mask channel

Gaussian Blur

Select layer "Hiraloam Darken"
Without Make Visible

Apply Image
With: calculation
Source: Lab channel of layer "For Scree
Calculation: screen
Opacity: 90%

Step Eight: Sharpening

All workflows require sharpening at or near the end of the correction process. Nothing in the PPW requires the use of one sharpening method rather than another. Nevertheless, two actions are provided for those interested. The purpose is to offer a solution both to those who need maximum flexibility in controlling the sharpen, and to those who are intent on getting a high-quality sharpen out of the way as quickly as possible. The Sharpen 2015 action, as you can see at left, contains about 150 separate steps, so it isn't practical to duplicate it manually. For that matter it wouldn't have been practical five or ten years ago, as it would have run too slowly on existing computers.

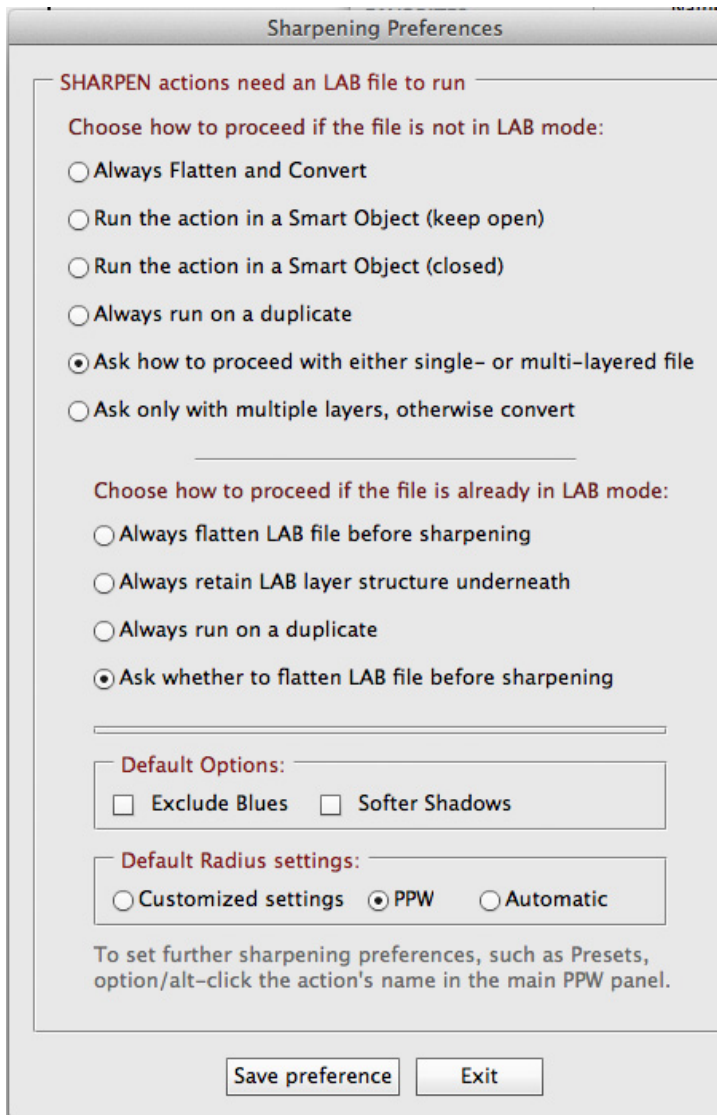
If speed is the priority, the Sharpen 2015 action's defaults work well. If you feel they are too much for a certain image but do not wish to spend time experimenting, everything is combined into a single layer group, and you reduce opacity to your taste. If you have the time and inclination to fine-tune the settings, the action separates the sharpen onto at least five and, at your discretion, up to seven layers: light and dark halos at a low radius, light, dark, and color halos at a high one, plus optional layers to prevent the sharpening of blues and to soften shadows. Since the layers are halo maps that do not contain image detail, they can be modified with curves, opacity reduction, layer masks, or even by erasing offending halos manually. Curving the halo maps can, for example, compensate for images that have previously been sharpened in-camera or upon acquisition in a raw module.

Four of the six sharpening layers use masks that are specifically designed to minimize shortcomings of the particular method; two others use a Blend If. Also, the amount of light conventional (narrow halo) sharpening is much less than dark conventional sharpening.

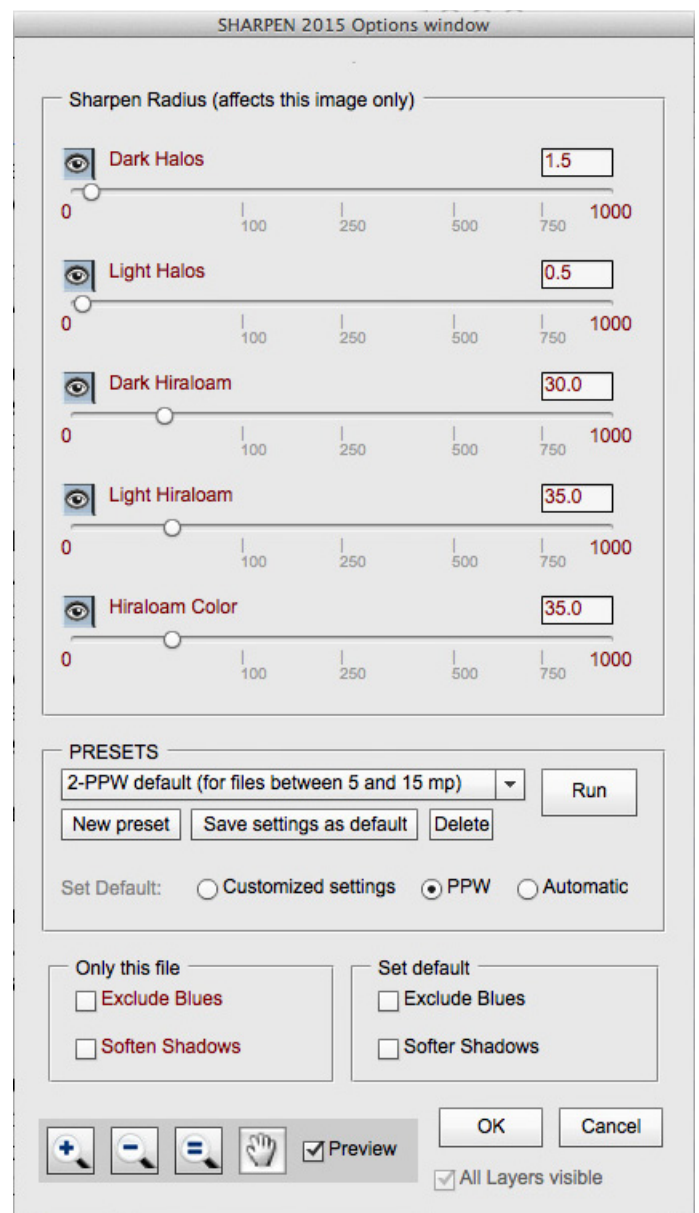
PPW panel version 3 added the important new option of changing Radius in any or all of the five sharpening layers, either on a file-by-file basis or as a new default. Sharpen 2015 goes further, allowing saving of presets. Furthermore, four presets are provided, and the action can be set up to choose one automatically based on file size.

Action(s) provided: Sharpen 2015 and Sharpen Old. On rare images Sharpen 2015 produces nasty artifacts that can't be reduced by simply changing opacities; in these cases one can revert to the older, less up-to-date action. The installation process also permits access of Sharpen 2015 through the Photoshop Filter menu.





The complex Sharpen 2015 action offers many different preferences and options.



How often is it used? Images that require no sharpening at all are rare. Again, however, the workflow doesn't require this specific method of sharpening; feel free to substitute your own.

Differences from previous recommendations: As computers have become more powerful, there is more of a case for retaining the previous layer structure and adding the sharpening layers on top, permitting color and contrast adjustments without altering the sharpen. This capability was also added in version 3.

Also, the automatic selection of sharpening preset introduced in version 4 is recommended, as is activating the Exclude Blues layer as a default. Some users also indicate that they add the Softer Shadows as a default and disable the layer if they don't need it. These changes all must be made by the user, as we have decided that it's best to have the out-of-the-box defaults be unchanged from version 3.

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<http://www.ledet.com/margulis>