

Before you grab the Clone Stamp tool or run the Gaussian Blur filter, take a moment to recognize that each portrait represents a unique person to be handled with care and respect.

BY KATRIN EISMANN

# Portrait retouching

THE SUBTLE ART OF ENHANCEMENT

*This tutorial is a condensed excerpt from “Photoshop Restoration & Retouching” 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, by Katrin Eismann (New Riders Press). Photos ©2005 Phil Pool Omni Photography*

Good retouching requires a careful eye, an empathetic heart, and a patient mouse. The best retouching is never done when you're pressed for time, tired, or distracted. Believe me, a little bit of careful retouching is always better than a lot of poor retouching.

Your role as a portrait retoucher is to accentuate the person's natural features while minimizing the distractions and blemishes that can detract from a pleasing portrait. Most important, you want to maintain the subject's individuality. Not every person will have a Hollywood ingénue's flawless skin or a lion's head of hair, so study the character of the person and decide which attributes to accentuate and which to minimize before you begin to click your mouse.

## DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

Start each portrait retouch by looking at the entire image—too often I've seen people dive into a retouch by randomly removing blemishes or whitening teeth without first understanding the overall image. Mapping out a portrait retouch strategy will make your retouching time more efficient and effective. Before



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

beginning, use the following five steps to plan out and complete a successful retouch:

**Assess the person** and determine which facial features you can accentuate or minimize to help that person shine through the picture. Imagine that you had to retouch three portraits: an athletic student, a corporate executive, and a senior judge. Each of these people has different personalities and characteristics you need to recognize and enhance. The teenager's skin might need to be cleaned up, whereas the executive's focus and alertness need to be emphasized—no matter how tired he or she was from traveling the day the portrait was taken. In the judge's portrait, you wouldn't want to take out every wrinkle or gray hair because these are signifiers of wisdom and experience.

**Identify and remove distractions** that draw the viewer's eye away from the portrait. Look at the portrait while squinting or defocusing your eyes and notice what your eyes register. Distractions include irrelevant background elements, light areas by the image edges, and unattractive folds of clothing.

**Refine contours** of the body, hair, face, and neck to be smooth and flattering. Let your eye follow the contours of the person to find anything that breaks up the smooth flow. Bulges caused by awkward posing, body position, weight, or age should be carefully reduced or smoothed out. Watch for flyaway hair, uncomfortable arm or shoulder angles, unsightly bulges in clothing, wide heads, unflattering body contours, double chins, and the folds of skin in an older person's neck.

**Enhance facial features**, including the eyes, lips, teeth, nose, and skin. The eyes are the most important facial attribute to emphasize. Refine the skin, but not so much that it looks like plastic wrap. The goal is to reduce wrinkles, remove blemishes, and smooth the skin to make the person look like a well-rested and well-lit version of him- or herself.

**Refine lighting and focus** to draw the viewer's eye to the face. Vignetting or darkening the background emphasizes the portrait. This simple yet essential step should be applied subtly so as to mimic what a photographer would do with studio lighting or soft-focus filters.

**Evaluate the results**, which is best done after taking a break from the image or getting a second opinion. After spending an hour with a file or when working under a tight deadline it is easy to overlook details or colorcasts to which you've grown accustomed. Asking someone you trust for a second opinion can be a lifesaver. If you're working by yourself, make a work print, study it, and mark it up. Often, the print reveals details you overlooked when the image was on screen.



Figure 5: Select a representative dark tone.

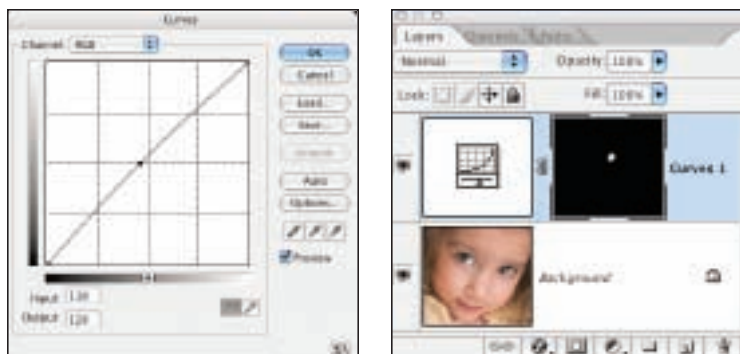


Figure 6: Gently nudge up the tonal value to match the face.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SKIN

Retouching skin requires concealing blemishes, balancing skin tones, and reducing wrinkles, without making the skin look like it's made of plastic. A person's skin should be appropriate to his or her age—the younger the person the smoother the skin should be, and the older the person the more appropriate it is to let some of the signifiers of experience (wrinkles) remain.

Many people are self-conscious about their skin. Perhaps we suffered through the teenage years of acne, we're older and can see the first crow's feet, or we didn't get enough sleep and look puffy and pale. It's a wonder we even get out of bed at all! Improving the appearance of skin in a portrait can be as simple as covering a few blemishes or as global as softening the entire portrait and then using a layer mask to paint back areas of selective focus.

## EVENING-OUT AND SOFTENING SKIN

Creating perfectly soft skin is a three-step process: remove obvious blemishes, balance tones, and minimize texture.

**Figure 1** is a wonderful portrait by Phil Pool. To perfect the portrait, Phil refined the skin, eyes, lips, and lighting to create the final version, **Figure 2**.

Evening-out the skin tones can have a remarkable effect without changing the skin's texture. Darker tones appear near eyes, next to noses, and under mouths—if left in the picture, the person may look bruised. To effectively remove darkness without changing image structure, as in **Figures 3** and **4**, use the following method.

1. Use a 10-pixel feathered Lasso to select a darker area (*Figure 5*).
2. Add a Curves adjustment layer and cmd/ctrl-click the dark spot to add a handle to the curve. Use the up arrow key to gently nudge up the tonal values and balance the darker area with the rest of the face (*Figure 6*).
3. If you see a defined edge between the lightened area and the rest of the skin, run the Gaussian Blur filter on the layer mask with a setting of 3-8 pixels to soften the transitions.
4. Use a large, soft white brush at 50% opacity to paint over other dark areas with repeated brushing, adding additional lightness, as in **Figure 7**.
5. For additional refinement, add a new layer and use the Healing Brush with Use All Layers selected in the options bar, **Figure 8**, to refine the transitions and textures.
6. Photoshop has a number of blur filters you can experiment with to create soft-focus effects, but to smooth and



soften skin, try the Reduce Noise filter. It adds a beautiful soft sheen to skin. Press cmd/ctrl-opt/alt-shift-E to merge the layers and select Filter > Noise > Reduce Noise. Using a high Strength setting and a low Preserve Details value softens the skin, while the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and hair remain crisp, as in **Figure 9**.

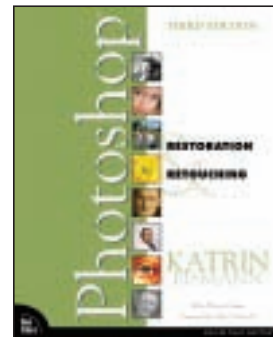


**Figure 9:** Use the Noise Reduction filter to soften skin beautifully.

7. To refine the softening effect, adjust the layer opacity or add a layer mask and paint over it with a soft black brush to conceal areas that were unnecessarily softened.

*Tip: To increase the skin-softening effect, rerun the Reduce Noise filter two to five more times. If a noticeable color shift occurs (usually in the highlights), change the filtered layer blending mode to Luminosity.*

I'd like to give you one last hint: When you're retouching a person's face, keep his or her mother in mind. Try to see the retouching as she would. If the changes were too obvious, most likely she would not like it. If Mom can see the retouching, then she can't see her child; and if her child isn't in the picture, then you've overworked the portrait. ■

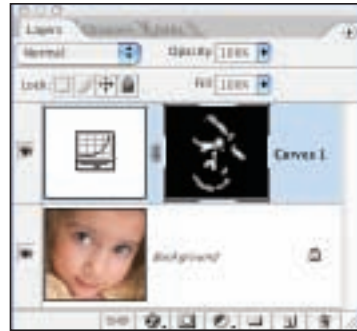


*Katrin Eismann, author of "Photoshop Restoration & Retouching" and "Photoshop Masking & Compositing," is an internationally recognized artist, author, and educator. She was recently inducted into the Photoshop Hall of Fame. Check out her specialized Web sites at [www.katrineismann.com](http://www.katrineismann.com).*

Don't miss Katrin Eismann's "Professional Retouching Techniques," at Imaging USA 2006 in Austin, Texas, January 22-24. For more information on PPA's conference and expo, call 800-786-6277 or visit [www.imagingusa.org](http://www.imagingusa.org).



**Figure 7:** Painting with a soft white brush lightens darker values without changing skin texture.



**Figure 8:** Working on an empty layer allows greater flexibility.

