



VISION & VOICE

REFINING YOUR VISION IN
ADOBE PHOTOSHOP LIGHTROOM

David duChemin

Vision & Voice: Refining Your Vision in Adobe Photoshop Lightroom

David duChemin

New Riders

1249 Eighth Street

Berkeley, CA 94710

510/524-2178

510/524-2221 (fax)

Find us on the Web at www.newriders.com

To report errors, please send a note to errata@peachpit.com

New Riders is an imprint of Peachpit, a division of Pearson Education

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Editor: Ted Waitt

Production Editor: Hilal Sala

Cover and Interior Design: Charlene Charles-Will

Layout and Composition: Kim Scott, Bumpy Design

Color Production Consultant: Marco Ugolini

Additional Image Conversion: Mimi Vitetta

Indexer: James Minkin

Cover Image: David duChemin

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ISBN-13 978-0-321-67009-0

ISBN-10 0-321-67009-4

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Contents

Introduction.	x
CHAPTER ONE	
Vision in Focus	2
CHAPTER TWO	
Vision & Process.	6
The Process of Vision	8
Vision in Process.	9
CHAPTER THREE	
Vision & Style	14
Adapt vs. Adopt	16
Horses and Carts	17
CHAPTER FOUR	
A Vision-Driven Workflow.	18
What Is a Vision-Driven Workflow?	20
What Are the Principles of a Vision-Driven Workflow?	21
Intention	22
Aesthetics.	22
Process	22





CHAPTER FIVE

Voice Training.....28

The Craft of Voice 30

Make Your Blacks Black. 30

Histograms 32

Give and Take 35

Shooting RAW 36

Visual Literacy 38

 Visual Mass, or Pull. 38

 Mood. 43



CHAPTER SIX

The Means of Expression46

The Develop Module 49

The Tools of Expression. 50

 Histogram 50

Basic. 52

 White Balance (WB) 52

 Tone 54

 Presence 62

Tone Curve 66

HSL/Color/B&W 70

 About Hue/Saturation/Luminance 70

 HSL 71

 Color 73

 B&W 73

 So What? 75

Split Toning. 76

Detail 77

 Sharpening 78

 Noise Reduction 80

Lens Corrections. 81

 Lens Vignetting. 81

 Chromatic Aberration 82



Effects.	83
Post-Crop Vignetting.	83
Grain	84
Camera Calibration	86
Develop Tools	86
Crop Overlay	87
Spot Removal	88
Red Eye Correction.	89
Graduated Filter	90
Adjustment Brush	93
Moving On	94

CHAPTER SEVEN

20 Visions, 20 Voices96

Pink Umbrella	100
The Blacksmith.	106
Winnowing in Lamayuru.	112
Bound	120
You Go Your Way.	128
Nizamuddin Chai.	134
Judy	142
Toward Lamayuru	148
Green Bike/Yellow Wall	156
Brothers at Dawn, Bangladesh.	164
Tepees and Rice #1	172
Tepees and Rice #2	180
Spire over Leh	190
Waiting on Allah	198
Nizamuddin Elder	206
Harvest Road.	212
Rays on Sapa.	218
Through the Paddies	226
Lone Tree, Lone Buffalo.	234
Grandson	242
Conclusion	250
Index	254



Introduction

A COUPLE YEARS AGO my friend Matt Brandon and I lectured at the Himalaya Club in New Delhi, India. I remember it more clearly than similar lectures I've given, for two reasons. The first is that Delhi was rocked by a series of bomb blasts before the lecture began, but things went ahead as planned, with only a delay of a few minutes to accommodate people stuck in the resulting traffic chaos. Business as usual. Mildly unsettling, to say the least. The second reason I remember it so clearly is the Q&A period afterwards that threatened, if briefly, to go dangerously off the tracks. The rogue question was twofold. One: "Do you do any post-processing to your images?" to which I answered, "Yes." Two: "So how do I know it really looked like that?" It went downhill from

► Canon 1Ds Mark III, 58mm, 1/160 @ f/8, ISO 800

Goree, Dakar, Senegal, 2010.





“We’ve grown up being fed the lie that the camera never lies.”

there and finally got lost in a quagmire of ethical assertions with no authority to which anyone could appeal and settle things once and for all.

The seeds of this book were conceived that evening.

“So how do I know it really looked like that?” For what it’s worth, I think this touches the heart of the matter, though I’d rephrase it slightly. Without changing a word of it, the answer, of course, is, “You don’t.” Simultaneously, the answer is, “Trust me.” And in some ways, the answer is always, “It didn’t.”

We’ve grown up being fed the lie that the camera never lies. So if “the camera never lies,” is our starting point for objectivity that any manipulation of the negative can only introduce corruption into the process? But that’s the problem, isn’t it? The camera tells any lie we ask of it. Or any truth, for that matter. It’s a tool, no more objective, really, than a microphone. Wielded by Martin Luther King, Jr., it’s a tool of truth and justice; wielded by a corrupt politician, it’s a tool of spin and propaganda. A tool. No more. No less.

We are beginning with a fallible, corrupted product. The moment you consciously choose one focal point over another, you change how the picture is taken, and how it is perceived. When you change the medium, you change the message. Always.

Every setting we choose has an effect on the aesthetics of the image. If I choose an aperture of f/1.2 to take advantage of a softer depth of field, am I not changing the so-called objective reality of the scene? Surely it didn’t “look that way.” Or did it? I’m near-sighted, I wear glasses. If I take my glasses off I see my foreground sharp and my background blurred. I see perpetually in f/2.8. So when I set my aperture to f/22 and create an image with limitless focus, is that the way the scene “really looked”? Not to me.

The same is true of shutter speeds and their ability to imply time’s passage in a frame. I’ve never seen a waterfall with sharply frozen water, as though time has stood still, have you? What about cropping? Do you look at the world through a cardboard box, limiting your field of view? I don’t. The moment we include certain things, we exclude others.

By its very nature, photography is subjective. A tool. How do you know it looked like that? You don’t. The best you can do is trust me to show you what it looked

like to me. In fact, I'll go you one better. The very best you can hope for is that as a photographer I get over my need to be completely objective and instead take the time to create a photograph that makes you see, and feel, the scene the way I saw it. Did it look like that? It did to me. And if part of my process to bring the image closer to my vision is to use a postcapture tool rather than my camera, I think that's okay. It's hair-splitting to say that a magenta filter on a lens is okay while the same applied in post is not.

Have painters ever dealt with this? Monet paints in permanent blur-o-vision and no one ever asks where he was painting that the lilies looked so blurry. Painters are free of the burden of this objectivity. Perhaps these are the birth pangs of our craft, a phase we need to go through to get to the good stuff—the expression of our vision through the voice of digital capture and refinement in the digital darkroom.

I'm aware that photography is also a tool of reportage, and the needs and ethics of the journalist are different than those of the artist. But if I can venture an opinion, I think even then it's just a different line drawn on a different patch of sand. The best we have is a corrupt product, and that's why a photojournalist's integrity is as important—more important—than his other skills and assets. The camera will still lie. The moment that journalist decides to take sides or spin the story, his camera will fall in line. But this book isn't about that.

So why start off on this foot, with all this philosophical navel-gazing? Because the question is important. Did it look like that? That's just another way of asking, "How did it look? How did it feel? What are you trying to show me?" This book is about using your voice to express your vision so you can answer those questions.

Did it look like that? Did it feel like that?

It did to me.

The deeper my forays into digital photography, the more I am sure that there are three images that make a final photograph: the one you envision, the one you shoot, and the one you develop. The better you are at the last two, the closer you can come to the first. This book is about that third image that goes into the final photograph—the one that is refined in the digital darkroom. In this case, it's

“Every setting we choose has an effect on the aesthetics of the image.”

“My vision for this book is that readers learn to approach digital development as a craft in service of their vision.”

the specific digital darkroom of Adobe Photoshop Lightroom. But I like to think that any photographer, using any program, like Photoshop or Apple's Aperture, could apply these principles to their workflow with equal success. The sliders are different, but the way we refine and polish an image to bring it back into alignment with our vision remains the same. It's a poor singer who can only sing through a microphone of a particular brand.

Lastly, this book is not a book about the entire workflow process from import and organization to printing, web presentation, and redundant backup.

It's not about digital asset management.

It's not really even about Lightroom, though it's Lightroom I use here. How we do this is less important than why. Use Aperture or Camera Raw. Use Photoshop Elements. The best creatives use the tools they have and don't spend time convincing themselves or others that their tools are better than someone else's. The process and the print matter; the tool doesn't.

It is not a book of tips and tricks, not a book of tutorials. Though there are both in here. It's really, really not a book of recipes to make images look “better.”

It is a book about bringing your vision to the digital darkroom. In this case, the digital darkroom is Adobe Photoshop Lightroom 3 because that's the tool I, and most of the photographers I know, use on a daily basis, in a way that supports the vision you had when you created the digital negative. This book really has one goal in the same way that most of my images have one intent, one mood, or one emotion to convey. My vision for this book is that readers learn to approach digital development as a craft in service of their vision. Sure, you'll learn some cool tips and techniques, and ways in which your voice can be refined, but it's more than that.

Let's go back to the metaphor of voice. In this book, it means the tools with which you give your digital image—the song—its fullest and best expression, and all the voice training in the world without a powerful song to sing is just unsung noise. I hope this book brings you another step closer to identifying and expressing your intent—or vision—for your photography, and that it also makes your work stronger when you have the camera in hand.

Image Downloads

The final chapter of this book is a collection of tutorials based on some of my own images. I'm making my original RAW files (in DNG format) available for you to download and follow along with. I've never had much luck reading along with technical writing—much less being able to absorb or recall the information—without also doing the steps described.

To download the images, register your book at peachpit.com/visionandvoice by signing in (it's free) and entering the ISBN. After you register the book, a link to the images will be listed on your Account page, under Registered Products.

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A Vision-Driven Workflow

THERE'S A SCENE in the movie *Planes, Trains & Automobiles* where John Candy and Steve Martin accidentally drive down the highway heading the wrong way, against traffic. Oncoming traffic swerves out of the way. Other drivers yell at them, "You're going the wrong way! You're going the wrong way!" Candy's character shrugs it off. "How do they know where we're going?"

Indeed.

► Canon 5D, 17mm, 1/60 @ f/22, ISO 200
Giza, Egypt, 2009.



“Calling this whole thing a vision-driven workflow (VDW) makes it sound like a system or a program. It isn’t.”

Many of the books out there that teach digital processing allow you to learn some skills you can use to address the question “How do I make my image look better?” But this is essentially an act of putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Until you define what it means for the image to “look better,” you have only learned how to read a map without having learned how to choose a destination. You’re driving toward, well, who knows? And if you don’t know where you’re driving, how do you know whether turning left or right is the correct decision? I don’t at all mean to imply that those other books aren’t needed—they are. In fact, the more technique you pull from those books, the more you can pull from this one. This is a contribution to a larger discussion, but I think an important one—or one that’s been conspicuously absent.

Enter a workflow that is determined by your destination, driven by your vision.

What Is a Vision-Driven Workflow?

First, a caveat. Calling this whole thing a vision-driven workflow (VDW) makes it sound like a system or a program. It isn’t. It’s just the handle I’ve put onto what is essentially a holistic approach to image creation. Second, it encompasses the whole process, from conception to capture to development to output, but this book covers only development. When I speak of workflow here, I’m referring only to the steps of refining an image in Lightroom’s Develop module, not the broader sense of the word that includes importing images, backing them up, rating them, and so on.

I used to spend hours in the darkroom. Mr. Harris, my high school photography teacher, knew full well that I was taking his class only for the free darkroom access it gave me. I would spend hours in that room, playing, waiting for images to appear in the red light. Smelling the chemicals, listening to the tick and buzz of the timer, completely unconscious of the hours slipping away. Ruining hundreds of pieces of otherwise perfectly good Ilford paper as I learned my craft. And craft it was. I miss those days. Spend hours now in front of a Wacom tablet and a cinema display and you’re more likely to be accused of geekery, not craftsmanship. I don’t mind telling you that really chafes me. But there could be a reason for this. Could it be we’ve developed a reputation for doing things because we can—because the technology allows us to—rather than because our vision demands it?

It's time our geekery became craft, and we do that by assigning it its rightful place—in service of our vision. So let's get to it. Let's consider the foundation laid. I'll stop bellowing into the microphone, take down the revivalist tent, and stop looking for converts. But just to make sure we're more or less on the same page as our starting point, I'll say the following.

A vision-driven workflow is a process of creating images, specifically in the digital darkroom, that begins at the point of conception and ends upon output of the image. VDW is guided by the intent of the photographer, and it is the means by which we bring the image conceived, the image captured, and the image developed into one photograph. More simply, VDW is a series of decisions about the aesthetics of an image that are made based on 1) your vision, or intention, for that image, and 2) your voice, the tools at your disposal.

Of course we know that the realms of craft and art are messy, full of ambiguities, failed experiments, and works in progress. Sometimes the camera imperfectly captures what the eye sees; that may be a failure or limitation of the technology, or it may be a failure or limitation of the one who wields it. As you grow in your craft, if you need to occasionally use more paint to cover a flaw in the canvas, then do so. You'll learn more about your own process, and your ability to capture better images will grow as you become tired of repeatedly fixing problems you might have avoided in the first place with a more intentional capture.

I'm pretty sure that digital photography hasn't been around long enough for the so-called purists to be speaking with much authority yet. So go ahead, play and experiment. What's the worst that can happen? You mess up a digital file; it's a canvas that's easily wiped cleaned and you can start over again.

What Are the Principles of a Vision-Driven Workflow?

VDW is the continuation of the creation of an image that began when you thought, “Aha!” and captured a moment. It is the acknowledgment that your vision for this photograph informs the tools you use to refine it in the digital darkroom. Your vision determines your voice. But how well you use your voice determines how well you can express that vision. VDW is a process that begins not with the question “How do I make my image look better?” but with the following groups of questions as guides.

“Every aesthetic change within the image will change the way the image is read and experienced.”

Intention

What do I want my image to communicate? What is this image about? What mood, thought, or emotion do I want my image to carry? Intention is where you begin with the image, and it's the place from which you decide where you are going with the image (aesthetics) and how you are getting there (process). Intention is your vision for this image made conscious.

Aesthetics

What does that mood or emotion look like? What does my image need to look like in order to communicate that mood, thought, or emotion? What do I want my viewers to look at, to see? What am I pointing at with this image? I don't mean this pedantically or in broad strokes; I mean it very specifically. Really, what do you want them to look at? Write it down if you have to. Draw circles and arrows on the image if that works for you. Moving from your intention to its expression through the aesthetics of the photograph is an act of interpretation and is by no means a simple process. Between the act of seeing and the act of expressing that vision is a world of your own unique preferences and the growing expertise required to communicate that vision to others in an understandable way. It's a topic for a book of its own, but here's what's important. Every aesthetic change within the image will change the way the image is read and experienced in much the same way as changing words and sentences in a novel will change the sense of it. Be conscious that you are playing with elements of visual language and communication. This is no trivial thing if you're hoping to create images that resonate with others. But it must first resonate with you.

Process

What digital darkroom tools are at my disposal? Which processes (sliders, curves, global and local adjustments) can best make my image look the way I want it to?

VDW is an intentional and somewhat introspective process. It is not a magic wand. You must keep in mind that the digital darkroom is not a set of tools for fixing a photograph that was poorly imagined or created in the first place. It is, in a perfect world, a smooth transition from seeing, to capturing, and finally to refining. From eye, heart, and mind to the camera and through the digital darkroom to the print.

Remember, this is not a canonical process. This craft, digital photography, is too young to have things set in anything but wet cement. What matters is that you pursue a process that works best for you. Here's how I approach it.

Identify Intention

I begin with a conscious understanding of what drew my eye and my attention at the moment of capture. You should know what your image is about, how you feel about it—and, therefore, how you want others to feel about it—and where you want to direct the eyes of the reader. You should know this before you touch a single slider, and I mean “you should” in the sense that this is something you should on some level already have understood at the moment you pressed the shutter. How, without knowing this already, will you have made decisions about your optics, your point of view, your aperture, your shutter? When you get to the darkroom you're already well into the process; the tracks have been laid and your work is one of refinement. Now is not the time to question your intention; it's the time to recognize the intention you've already burned into the RAW file, and to make decisions about how to best reveal that intention, how to interpret it and present it to your audience. It's not easy, and sometimes we create images so instinctively and subconsciously that uncovering our own intention is difficult, but it's something we need to be in touch with on some level before we can hope to communicate it.

As we discuss this process, it might be helpful to walk and talk at the same time, so to speak. I shot the image we'll use for this example (on the following pages) in Kathmandu in January 2009; it appeared in *Within the Frame* and is still one of my favorite photographs. Several things drew my eye and moved me in this image, and it's those things I want to draw out as I develop this shot. The first was the gesture of the image: the gaze of the girl toward the butter lamp. The second was the color depth of this image: the warm yellows leaping out of the surrounding darkness, and the bluish background.

It's important to remember that I'm presenting a simple example here. It's not meant to walk you through how I do things but to familiarize you with my process—and that's more about thinking, not how many tools you use to get the job done. Less is usually better. The zeroed image is at the top left on page 25.

“In my own mind it seems that the global adjustments made to an image affect the mood of the image, whereas the local adjustments, which I deal with last, are about where the eye is drawn and in what order.”

Minimize Distractions

I look for and fix any weaknesses present in the image: dust spots, misaligned horizons, and other issues that distract. I fix them from the beginning so I'm not distracted from the look and feel of the image as I develop it. Of course, the great benefit of doing all this work in Adobe Photoshop Lightroom is that the nondestructive nature of the fixes means I can undo them or tweak them later. If a change or refinement in the crop is obviously needed at the beginning, I do it here as well, knowing I can undo or redo it later. My goal at this point is not refinement but the removal of elements that will distract me from the process—a dust spot in the sky will continue to pull my eye and frustrate me if I don't deal with it first. Few of us do our best creative work when we're distracted or frustrated.

The flaws in this image, aside from a little noise that has never bothered me, are few. What I want to do is crop the image to bring the girl to the right of center and make the diagonal gaze of her eye to the candle more prominent. So I've cropped this as my first adjustment in order to bring balance to the frame (opposite page, top right).

Maximize Mood

Once I've gotten in touch with the intention of the image and fixed the obvious weaknesses, I turn my attention to the biggest possible adjustments. In my own mind it seems that the global adjustments made to an image affect the mood of the image, whereas the local adjustments, which I deal with last, are about where the eye is drawn and in what order. So I refine the mood or feel of the image first. Color temperature (how warm or cool the image is), exposure (how dark or light it is), and whether the image is presented in bright saturated colors or in cool-toned black and white—these are all decisions made at this point.

In the case of “Prayers at Boudhanath,” the first thing I did was make the blacks black by pushing the Blacks slider to 10. That darkened the background, which I further pulled in with a vignette (Amount: 100, Midpoint: 50). Finally, I pushed the Brightness slider to +40 to bring back the glow and warmth of the candles, and set the Clarity value to +30 to pop the details a little (opposite page, bottom left).



Zeroed image.



Minimize distractions.



Maximize mood.



Draw the eye.

Draw the Eye

Finally, I turn my attention from the macro to the micro. By this point I have an image that feels the way I want it to feel. Moving from global to local gives me a process that my brain can work with—a continued refining that gets closer and closer to the intention I identified at the beginning. Here is where I make the small tweaks that draw the eye to one area with greater pull in order to say, “Look at this,” or to draw the eye away from certain areas by downplaying them in order to give other areas greater pull. If it’s a portrait, I will often dodge (lighten) the eyes a little, or burn (darken) peripheral areas with the Adjustment Brush and a little negative Exposure and Brightness. If it’s a landscape where I want the eye to follow a particular path through the image, I might do the same. I’ll delve more into this topic in the next chapter, but for now just know that brightness pulls the eye and darkness pushes it. Saturation pulls, desaturation pushes away. Sharpness pulls, less sharpness pushes. Being familiar with these principles and using them allows the photographer to manage the attention of the viewer.

Returning to our image, I did two final things. I pulled a Graduated Filter with a –1 Exposure setting up from the bottom (to pull back the exposure on the table and lamps themselves) and in from the left side (to darken the shadows where a vignette couldn’t really reach). Then I used the Adjustment Brush with a little bump in the Exposure and the Brightness to add some spark to the girl’s face (previous page, bottom right).

Prepare for Output

I then size and sharpen my image. I leave this process for last and it’s done specifically for the image’s final output. A large print on one medium requires different sharpening than a small image being uploaded to a website. Output-specific sharpening is a subject well covered in other books and videos. For now, just understand the sharpening process is dependent on your output and is a task best left to last. I sharpen my prints in Photoshop because it allows me to sharpen the image on a duplicated layer so that, using a layer mask, I can paint away areas of sharpness. Sharpness draws the eye and since I don’t want the eye drawn with the same strength of pull to all areas, I prefer to do it a) in Photoshop; b) selectively; c) last; and d) based on my output. For those reasons, we won’t be talking about sharpness much.



◀ Canon 5D, 85mm,
1/125 @ f/1.2, ISO 400

Boudhanath, Kathmandu,
Nepal, 2009.

What's important to remember about this process—particularly the way I describe it here—is that a) I knew what I wanted the image to feel like and what I wanted the viewer to look at before I started, and b) it's not always that simple. This is an organic process—for some of us much more than others. What I've described here makes it sound like I know the numbers going into it, but I don't. I push the sliders I think will give me the aesthetic I want, I see what it looks like, then I pull them back, undo them, try something else. Intention, as far as the end result, is important, but so is remaining open to surprises and doing this work with a light touch and an open mind.

Index

A

Adams, Ansel, 16, 31, 148, 179
Adjustment Brush, 93–94
 Auto Mask option, 94, 95
 complex images and, 177–178, 184–185
 example of using, 95
 landscapes and, 223–224, 232
 portraits and, 109–110, 139–140, 146, 202–203, 210, 248
 wildlife photos and, 239
Adobe Photoshop. *See* Photoshop
Adobe Photoshop Lightroom. *See* Lightroom
Adobe Photoshop Lightroom Book for Digital Photographers, *The* (Kelby), 50
aesthetics, 22
Aged Photo preset, 188
Agra, India, 42–43
Angle tool, 230
Aperture Priority mode, 166
Auto Mask option
 description of, 94
 examples of using, 95, 178–179, 196
 turning off, 177, 196
Auto Tone option
 description of, 54, 56
 examples of using, 102, 122

B

B&W panel
 description of, 73
 examples of using, 74, 123–124, 152
 See also black-and-white images
Bangkok, Thailand, 96–97
Bangladesh, Northern, 164–171

Basic panel, 52–65
 Presence controls, 62–65
 Tone controls, 54–61
 White Balance controls, 52–54
Bergmeier, Peter, 206
black blacks, 30–31
black-and-white images
 converting color images to, 123–124, 136–137, 152, 183, 236
 histograms for, 51
 mood created in, 43
 plug-in for creating, 248
 tone adjustments, 73–74, 76
 See also B&W panel
Blacks slider
 description of, 58
 examples of using, 59, 114, 136, 200
“The Blacksmith” photo, 106–111
blinkies, 34
Boudhanath stupa, 27
“Bound” photo, 120–127
Brandon, Matt, 134, 198, 242
Brightness slider
 description of, 60
 examples of using, 61, 108, 158
“Brothers at Dawn, Bangladesh” photo, 164–171
brushed effects, 93–94
burning images, 178, 202, 232
 See also dodging images

C

Cairo, Egypt, 28–29
Camera Calibration panel, 86
cameras. *See* digital cameras
Caponigro, John Paul, 253

capture sharpening, 78
Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi, 101, 106
Chiang Rai, Thailand, 6–7, 172–189, 226–233
children
 portrait portrayal of, 242–249
 silhouetted images of, 164–171
Chromatic Aberration controls, 82
Clarity slider
 description of, 62
 examples of using, 63, 103, 130, 185, 203, 217
clipping indicators, 50–51
Clone spot removal option, 193, 245
color
 psychology of, 43
 qualities of, 70
color noise reduction, 80, 119
Color panel, 73
communication, 38
contrast adjustments
 black-and-white images and, 236
 directing the eye using, 137–138
 landscapes and, 150–151, 194, 220–221, 228
 loss of detail in, 102, 200
 portraits and, 145, 208, 209
 silhouettes and, 166–167, 214–215
Contrast slider, 60, 61
Crop Overlay tool
 description of, 87–88
 examples of using, 122, 174, 182, 240
CTO gel, 106
Cuba, Old Havana, 44–45
Curve adjustments, 66

D

Dah Hanu, Ladakh, India, 242–249
Delhi, India, 120–127, 134–141, 206–211
Detail panel, 77–80
 Noise Reduction tool, 80
 Sharpening controls, 78–79
Develop module, 49–50
 Basic panel, 52–65
 Camera Calibration panel, 86
 Detail panel, 77–80
 Develop Tools panel, 51, 86–94
 Effects panel, 83–85
 Histogram panel, 50–51
 HSL/Color/B&W panel, 70–75
 Lens Corrections panel, 81–82
 Split Toning panel, 76–77
 Tone Curve panel, 66–69
Develop Tools panel, 51, 86–94
 Adjustment Brush, 93–94, 95
 Crop Overlay tool, 87–88
 Graduated Filter, 90–92
 Red Eye Correction tool, 89
 Spot Removal tool, 88–89
digital cameras
 calibration tool for, 86
 histogram on, 33–34
 RAW formats and, 36–37
digital noise, 35, 80, 119
digital processing
 nondestructive, 35
 vision-driven workflow for, 20–27
distractions, minimizing, 24
DNG (Digital Negative) format, 37
dodging images, 109–110, 154, 178, 184, 203, 246–247
 See also burning images
drawing the eye, 26, 38–43
dropper tool, 52–53
Duggan, Sean, 35
duotone images, 43

E

Effects panel, 83–85
 Grain tool, 84–85
 Post-Crop Vignetting tool, 83–84
Effects preset menu, 92
Egypt
 Cairo, 28–29
 Giza, 18–19

Eismann, Katrin, 35, 253
EV compensation, 166
Evening, Martin, 35, 78
Exposure slider
 description of, 56
 examples of using, 57, 102, 114, 158, 200
expression, 38, 252

F

facial retouching, 203–204, 248
Fill Light slider
 description of, 58
 examples of using, 59, 200, 209
Fraser, Bruce, 78

G

Genuine Fractals plug-in, 252
Giza, Egypt, 18–19
Gold-N-Blue polarizer, 190–191, 194
Graduated Filter, 90–92
 enhancing a mood using, 184, 195, 217, 222, 230, 239
 guiding the eye using, 118, 168–169, 201–202, 246
 recovering highlights using, 152
Grain tool
 description of, 84
 examples of using, 85, 186–187
“Grandson” photo, 242–249
“Green Bike/Yellow Wall” photo, 156–163
Greenberg, Jill, 17

H

Hanoi, Vietnam, 156–163
“Harvest Road” photo, 212–217
HDR (High Dynamic Range) images, 176
Heal spot removal option, 193, 245
highlights
 adjusting tones in, 160, 167, 229
 clipping indicator for, 50–51
 selectively recovering, 139, 152
Histogram panel, 50–51
histograms, 32–34, 50–51
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 11
HSL panel, 71–72

Hue slider adjustments, 159–160, 170, 229
Luminance slider adjustments, 144–145, 176
Saturation slider adjustments, 132, 144, 176, 200–201, 210, 215, 221
Targeted Adjustment tool, 71, 72, 132, 144
HSL/Color/B&W panel, 70–75
 B&W panel, 73–74
 Color panel, 73
 HSL panel, 71–72
hue
 adjusting, 159–160, 170, 229
 explained, 70
Hue sliders
 HSL panel, 71
 Split Toning panel, 76

I

India
 Agra, 42–43
 Delhi, 120–127, 134–141, 206–211
 Jodhpur, 46–47
 Ladakh, 112–119, 148–155, 190–197, 212–217, 242–249
 Old Delhi, 31, 101, 106, 198–205
intention, 22, 23
interpreting images, 98

J

Jodhpur, India, 46–47
JPEG files
 printing to, 104
 RAW files vs., 36
“Judy” portrait, 142–147

K

Kairouan, Tunisia, 128–133
Karen Blixen Camp, Kenya, 250–251
Kathmandu, Nepal, 14–15, 27
Kelby, Scott, 35, 50, 253
Kenya, 234–241, 250–251
Ko Samet, Thailand, 2–3

L

Ladakh, India, 112–119, 190–197, 212–217, 242–249
Ladakh Range, India, 148–155
Lamayuru, Ladakh, India, 112–119, 212–217
landscapes
 “Rays on Sapa,” 218–225
 “Spire over Leh,” 190–197
 “Through the Paddies,” 226–233
 “Toward Lamayuru,” 148–155
Leh, Ladakh, India, 190–197
Leibovitz, Annie, 17
Lens Corrections panel, 81–82
 Chromatic Aberration controls, 82
 Lens Vignetting tool, 81–82
Lens Vignetting tool, 81–82
 adding vignettes using, 103, 109, 140, 146, 161, 176–177, 230, 244–245
 brightening corners using, 216, 237
 removing vignettes using, 170–171
Lightroom
 Basic panel, 52–65
 Camera Calibration panel, 86
 Detail panel, 77–80
 Develop module, 49–50
 Develop Tools panel, 51, 86–94
 Effects panel, 83–85
 Histogram panel, 50–51
 HSL/Color/B&W panel, 70–75
 learning to use, 46, 48
 Lens Corrections panel, 81–82
 nondestructive editing in, 35
 playing with features in, 94
 plug-ins for, 252
 Print module, 104
 Split Toning panel, 76–77
 Tone Curve panel, 66–69
Lights Out mode, 88
Linear Point Curve, 194, 200, 209
“Lone Tree, Lone Buffalo” photo, 234–241
luminance
 adjusting, 144–145, 176
 explained, 70
luminance noise reduction, 80
Luminance sliders
 HSL panel, 71, 144–145
 Noise Reduction tool, 80

M

mass, visual, 38–43
McCurry, Steve, 244
Medium Contrast Point Curve, 136, 151, 244
mood, 24, 43–45
N
Nepal, Kathmandu, 14–15, 27
Nik Software, 248, 252
Nizamuddin Darga, Delhi
 “Bound” photo, 120–127
 “Nizamuddin Chai” photo, 134–141
 “Nizamuddin Elder” photo, 206–211
Noise Reduction tool
 description of, 80
 examples of using, 110, 119, 161
nondestructive editing, 35

O

Old Delhi, India, 31, 101, 106, 198–205
Old Hanoi, Vietnam, 156–163
Old Havana, Cuba, 44–45
one-liners, 12
onOne Plug-In Suite, 252
Opacity settings, 247
output
 preparing images for, 26–27
 sharpening for, 26, 78

P

painted effects, 93–94
“painterly” images, 220–221
Pashupatinath temple, 14–15
patience, 206
photography process, 8
Photoshop, 26, 35, 49, 66, 88, 93, 252
Photoshop Lightroom. *See* Lightroom
“Pink Umbrella” photo, 100–105
Planes, Trains & Automobiles (movie), 18
plug-ins, 252
Point Curve options, 69
 Linear Point Curve, 194, 200, 209
 Medium Contrast Point Curve, 136, 151, 244
 Strong Contrast Point Curve, 123, 145, 167, 183, 215, 220, 236

polarizer filter, 190–191, 194
portraits
 “The Blacksmith,” 106–111
 “Grandson,” 242–249
 “Judy,” 142–147
 “Nizamuddin Elder,” 206–211
 “Waiting on Allah,” 198–205
Post-Crop Vignetting tool
 description of, 83
 examples of using, 84, 117
practice, 30
Presence controls, 62–65
 Clarity slider, 62–63
 Saturation slider, 64, 65
 Vibrance slider, 64, 65
presets, 252
Print module, 104
Print Sharpening option, 104
pulling the eye, 26, 38–43
Punch preset, 175

R

RAW files, 36–37, 158
“Rays on Sapa” photo, 218–225
Recovery slider
 description of, 56
 examples of using, 57, 102, 130, 200
Red Eye Correction tool, 89
reflections, 226, 232

S

Sapa, Vietnam, 218–225
saturation
 adjusting, 132, 144, 176, 200–201, 210, 215, 221
 explained, 70
Saturation sliders
 Basic panel, 64, 65
 HSL panel, 71, 72
 Split Toning panel, 76
sepia tone images, 135
serendipity, 9
serene scenes, 199
shadows
 adjusting tones in, 160, 167, 216, 222, 229
 clipping indicator for, 50–51
Sharpener Pro plug-in, 252

- sharpening
 - examples of, 79, 161
 - hints for applying, 78
 - output-specific, 26, 78, 104
 - sliders used for, 78
- Sharpening controls, 78–79
- sidecar files, 37
- silhouettes, 164–171, 196
- Silver Efex Pro plug-in, 248, 252
- skies, adjusting, 152, 184, 195, 222, 224
- skin-softening technique, 248
- “Spire over Leh” photo, 190–197
- split points, 68
- Split Toning panel
 - description of, 76–77
 - examples of using, 126, 138, 160, 167, 216, 222, 229, 237
- Spot Removal tool
 - description of, 88
 - examples of using, 114, 186, 193, 245
- S-shaped tone curve, 175, 183, 194, 215, 236
- Straighten tool, 122, 192
- Strong Contrast Point Curve, 123, 145, 167, 183, 215, 220, 236
- style, 14, 16–17

T

- Targeted Adjustment tool
 - HSL panel, 71, 72, 132, 144
 - Tone Curve panel, 67
- Temp slider
 - description of, 54
 - examples of using, 55, 108, 158, 170, 192, 214
- “Tepees and Rice” photos
 - variation #1, 172–179
 - variation #2, 180–189
- Thailand
 - Bangkok, 96–97
 - Chiang Rai, 6–7, 172–189, 226–233
 - Ko Samet, 2–3
- “Through the Paddies” photo, 226–233
- Tint slider
 - description of, 54
 - examples of using, 55, 158, 170, 192, 214

- Tone controls, 54–61
 - Auto Tone option, 54, 56
 - Blacks slider, 58, 59
 - Brightness slider, 60, 61
 - Contrast slider, 60, 61
 - Exposure slider, 56, 57
 - Fill Light slider, 58, 59
 - Recovery slider, 56, 57
- Tone Curve panel, 66–69
 - landscapes and, 150–151, 194, 220–221, 228
 - Point Curve presets in, 69, 123, 136, 145, 215
 - portraits and, 108, 145, 209, 244
 - S-shaped curves in, 116, 175, 183, 194, 215, 236
 - steepening curves in, 108, 116, 159, 200, 209
- Tone Range split points, 68
- “Toward Lamayuru” photo, 148–155
- Tunisia, Kairouan, 128–133

V

- Versace, Vincent, 253
- Vibrance slider
 - description of, 64
 - examples of using, 65, 117, 130
- Vietnam
 - Old Hanoi, 156–163
 - Sapa, 218–225
- vignettes
 - adding, 103, 109, 140, 146, 161, 176–177, 230, 244–245
 - removing, 170–171
 - reversing effect of, 216, 237
- vignetting tools
 - Lens Vignetting tool, 81–82
 - Post-Crop Vignetting tool, 84–85
- Virtual Copies feature, 188
- vision
 - definitions of, 4
 - discovery of, 9–10
 - process of, 8–9
 - style and, 14, 16–17
 - technique and, 5
- vision-driven workflow (VDW), 20–27
 - explanation of, 20–21
 - principles of, 21–27
- visual literacy, 38–45
 - mood and, 43–45
 - visual mass and, 38–43

- vocational photographers, 4
- voice
 - craft of, 30
 - definition of, 28

W

- Wacom tablets, 93, 253
- “Waiting on Allah” photo, 198–205
- White Balance controls, 52–54
 - dropper tool and, 52, 53
 - examples of using, 108, 158, 170, 192, 214
- Temp and Tint sliders, 54, 55
- white whites, 31
- wildlife photos, 234–241
- “Winnowing in Lamayuru” photo, 112–119
- workflow, vision-driven, 20–27
- writing process, 8

X

- XMP files, 37

Y

- “You Go Your Way” photo, 128–133

Z

- Zeroed preset, 98
- Zone System, 31