ContrastMaster

$69.95; www.thepluginsite.com/products/photowiz/contrastmaster/

I had some misgivings about recommending this plug-in — not because it isn't great but because it's such a powerful and flexible way of altering print appearance that it's going to take a lot of practice to make most effective use of it. For many of you, it will be overkill; a simpler plug-in like PhotoLift (reviewed later in this chapter) is more appropriate for most users, I suspect.

Photoshop 's Shadow/Highlight tool and large-radius unsharp masking can bring out details and improve gradation without messing up the overall tonal scale . More powerful tools like the PhotoLift plug-in probably provide all the tonal control most of you will need.

But if you find yourself hankering for complete mastery over tone, texture, and contrast, then ContrastMaster goes way beyond those tools, with more controls and dramatic effects on a photograph than you can begin to imagine. What it does isn't central to the task of photo restoration; the purpose of ContrastMaster is to make the prints of your restorations look a lot better .

ContrastMaster includes three local and four global contrast adjustment methods as well as various masking, saturation, and brightness options. The three local adjustment methods allow you to dramatically improve contrast in small image details without blowing out highlights or damaging the image. You can apply these three methods separately or use various options to mix them together for even better results.

Complex? You betcha; there's a serious learning curve! ContrastMaster can create very dramatic, even bizarre effects. The real power in ContrastMaster comes from using it more thoughtfully, and that requires a lot of practice. The program's author doesn't provide a detailed explanation of what each of the contrast adjustment methods does, so plan to do considerable experimenting with different settings. I think it's worth it.

Figure 3-4 shows part of the control panel for ContrastMaster. A daunting array of sliders and pushbuttons bring up different sets of contrast controls in combination with a Mode menu at the top that selects the overall approach you're taking. The default setting is Novice. That typically produces awful-looking results at 100% strength; I think of it more as Tutorial mode. It lets you play with the various adjustment methods and is an extremely good place to learn what the different contrast adjustment methods do.

I'm not even going to try to explain my settings in Figure 3-4; that would require a whole article in itself. Figure 3-5 shows you what ContrastMaster did with those settings. The top illustration is the original photograph. The middle illustration shows the improvements to highlight and shadow tonalityand enhancement of detail achieved by Photoshop's Shadow/Highlight tool and large-radius unsharp masking. The bottom illustration shows what ContrastMaster could do with the original photograph. I've made the effect

a bit stronger here than I would find attractive so that it will show up well in reproduction. Dial it back in your head by about 25%. In all three photographs the extreme highlight and shadow points and overall contrast grade of the photograph haven't changed very much. The difference is in the details — literally.

I have a few quibbles with the interface. I can't scroll and pan within split view, and repositioning the " focus point " didn't work properly (in the Mac version, anyway). Mostly I stayed in the single-image view and clicked on the image to switch between before and after versions. Also, it would be nice to have the " info " box displayed at all times and show both the before and after channel values. Still, this is one great plug-in; if I hadn't gotten a reviewer's copy, I'd buy it.
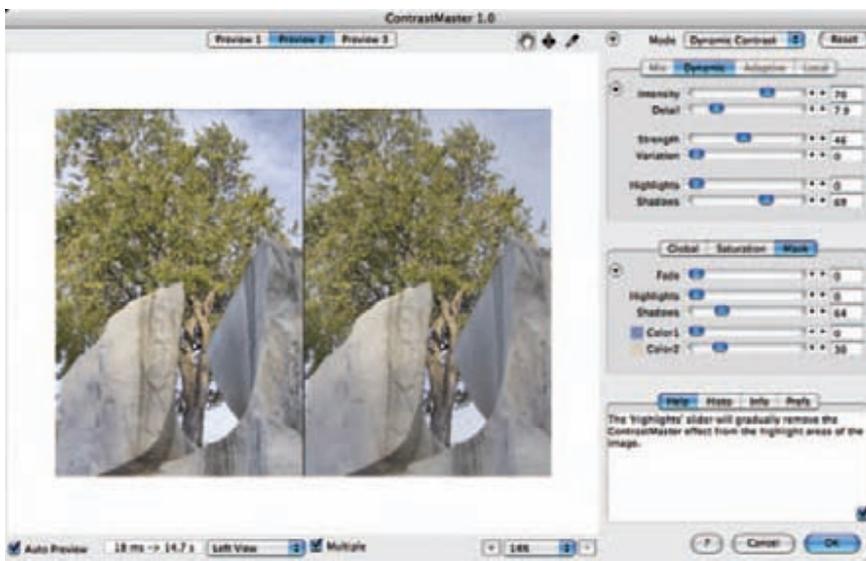
Fig. 3-4 ContrastMaster lets the photographer make elaborate adjustments to local tone, contrast, and detail in a photograph, far beyond Photoshop's abilities.

In this split view, the modified photograph on the left shows much more total detail and fine gradation than the original on the right.

Fig. 3-5   A three-way comparison between the original photograph, the photograph enhanced with Photoshop's Shadow/Highlight tool and wide-radius Unsharp Masking, and the photograph enhanced with ContrastMaster.