

## Layer Masking in Photoshop Elements by Sandro V Cuccia

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*Photoshop Elements* is very powerful image editing application, but is missing an important feature that comes standard in Photoshop CS3. What's missing are fully functioning LAYER MASKS. However, we've discovered a hidden, indirect way to access some masking functionality in Elements -- not as flexible, but there nonetheless!

### WHAT IS LAYER MASKING?

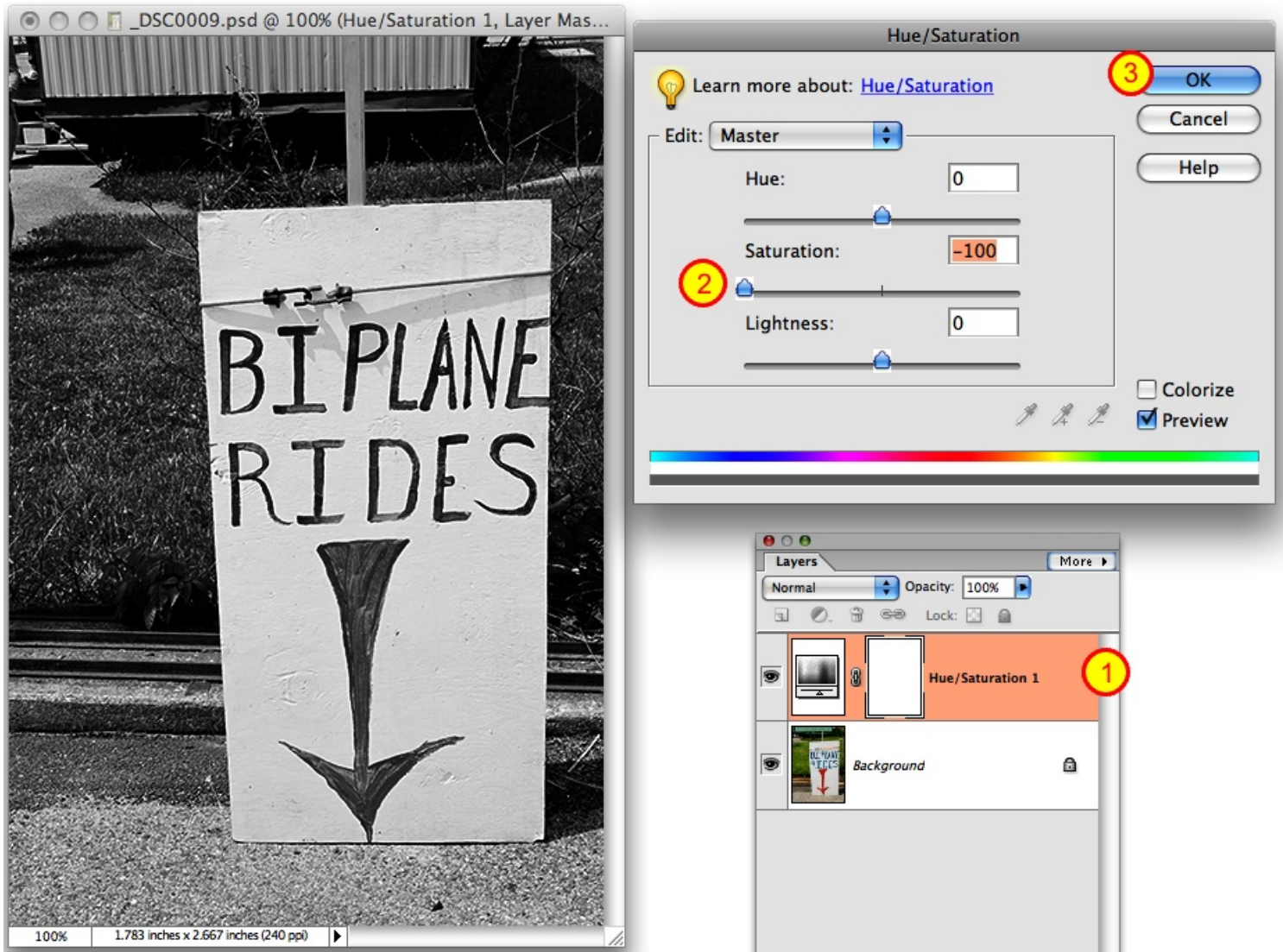
Simply - Layer Masking is a method for hiding (masking) image pixels without eliminating them (think *PIXEL PRESERVATION!*).

Think of how you utilize masking tape when painting a room in your home. You can use the tape to protect your wall trim from sloppy painting or overspray. The surface beneath the masking tape is protected from the paint and will therefore remain unaltered. This is exactly what happens when you mask in Photoshop - you protect pixels from being altered.

In *Photoshop CS3* there are easy ways to very specifically perform masking. However, in *Elements* you need to do masking indirectly. There are actually two ways to mask in *Elements* -- 1. by taking advantage of the mask that *Elements* generates when you use an ADJUSTMENT LAYER, and 2. by using the GROUP WITH PREVIOUS command, where an image layer becomes a mask for another layer.

In this article, we'll explore the first method. Let's look at one example of a Layer Mask in action!

**Example: Converting a Color Photo to Black-and-White, Then Restoring Color to a Portion of the Photo.**

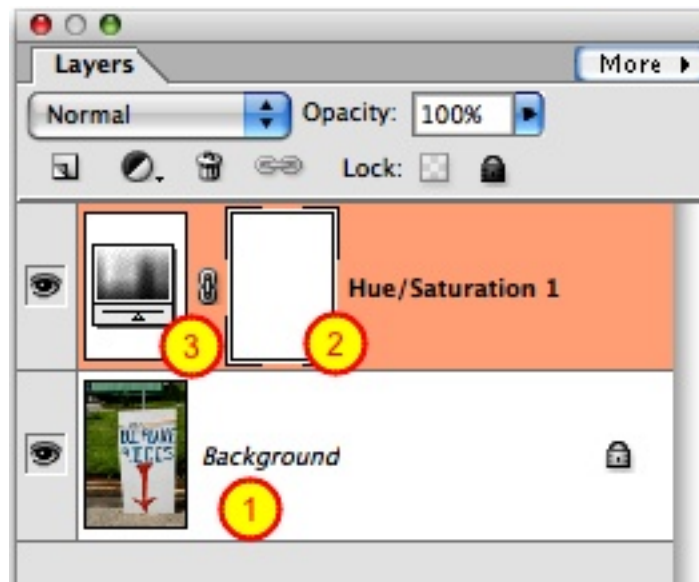


This is a technique frequently used by wedding photographers, but is good for any colorful image.

In this example I opened a color picture and created a Hue/Saturation **ADJUSTMENT LAYER** (1). This is important, because in *Elements*, the only way we can have a Layer Mask is via an Adjustment Layer.

In the Hue/Saturation dialog box, I next **DESATURATED** the photo by moving the Saturation slider all the way to the left -- resulting in a black-and-white photo. Finally, I clicked OK (3).

## Viewing the Layer Mask - And Understanding How It Works!



Let's take a closer look at the Layer Palette for our example above.

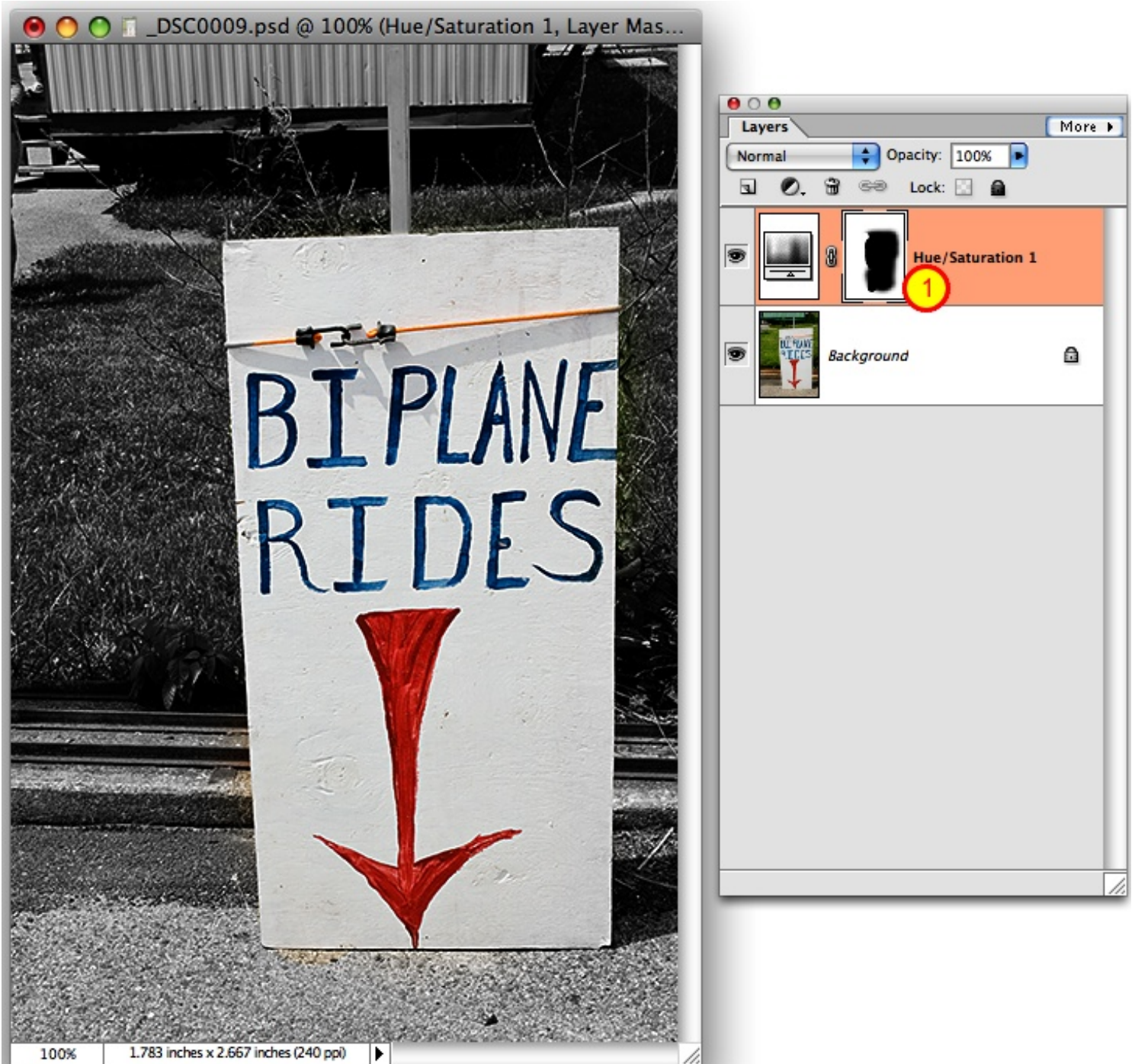
First, let's recap, in the previous steps we created a Hue/Saturation Adjustment Layer in order to produce our desired black-and-white conversion. Notice that the layer beneath the Hue/Saturation Adjustment Layer is the Background Layer (1), which happens to be the original color photograph.

When you create an Adjustment Layer, *Elements* places a mask on the layer. This is represented by a WHITE thumbnail (2) next to the adjustment control icon, in this case the Hue/Saturation control (3). Notice that the mask is WHITE. This means that it is currently NOT masking the change that we made in the Hue/Saturation control. Remember this Layer Mask Rule-of-Thumb: **WHITE REVEALS, BLACK CONCEALS**. That is, White **REVEALS** the changes made in the Hue/Saturation, Black **CONCEALS** or masks off any changes made in the Hue/Saturation.

Think back to the house-painting analogy. Instead of using the standard beige or blue masking tape you find at the hardware store, you will be using **BLACK** masking tape. In our example here, there is **no** black masking tape, therefore we are seeing the full effect of the Hue/Saturation change to a black-and-white image. The **white** thumbnail means that there is **no** masking going on - no black = no masking! The **white**, therefore, **REVEALS** the full effect of the Hue/Saturation change.

Next we will start to understand how applying the black masking tape will **conceal** the Hue/Saturation adjustment and allow the layer beneath (the color layer) to show through.

## Applying BLACK Masking Tape



Here's what I want to do with this picture: I would like to keep the overall picture as a black-and-white, but bring back just the color of the sign - the big red arrow, the blue text and the orange bungee cord. However, I want the pavement and grass and background to remain black and white.

In order to do this using the Layer Mask, we need to **MASK OFF** the sign so that the black-and-white conversion created by the Hue/Saturation adjustment will be **CONCEALED**. Since the Hue/Saturation adjustment becomes concealed where the masking occurs, we are able to see the original colors coming through from the Background Layer beneath. We do this concealing by covering the sign with **BLACK** (remember the rule-of-thumb: **WHITE REVEALS, BLACK CONCEALS?**)

The way we cover the sign with black is by using the Paint Brush Tool and painting over the sign with black, using a hard-edged brush. In effect, we are **PAINTING BLACK MASKING TAPE** over the area (the sign) that we don't want affected by the black-and-white conversion of the Hue/Saturation Adjustment Layer. We see the original colored sign. Everything else remains black-and-white, because it was **not masked**.

Look at the mask thumbnail now that we have finished "painting" the sign (1). You can see where I painted with black; the area corresponding to the location of the sign.

We're finished! I successfully masked-off the sign so that the original colors show through but keeping the rest of the photo black-and-white.

### TIP >>> Working with Layer Masks

When painting a masked area with black you may make a mistake at times by masking areas you did not intend to. To fix this, simply switch the foreground color from BLACK to WHITE and paint over the mistake with the brush. In effect, you are REMOVING the black masking tape you placed by mistake.

Photoshop professionals keep a finger of the **X** key to quickly switch back-and-forth between the black and the white foreground colors.

Another handy keyboard shortcut to remember is the **D** key for resetting your foreground/background color swatches to the **Default** black/white, in case they were set to different colors.

### Conclusion: The Power Of the Layer Mask

As you can probably understand by now, the Adjustment Layer, including its Mask, allows us to customize what we see from the layer beneath **without changing any of the pixels** of the original color picture. This is called **NON-DESTRUCTIVE EDITING**, and represents the true power of the Layer Mask.

It should always be your goal to edit your image pixels with the maximum amount of original pixel preservation possible. By doing so, you can easily revert back to the original states of your image or go back and easily edit your non-destructive adjustments. You can even hide or delete your adjustments and be able to view your unchanged, unharmed original image.

The Adjustment Layer is your most important tool to help you accomplish non-destructive photo editing; the Layer Mask gives you even more control over your adjustments, allowing you to apply those adjustments **selectively** to your image without actually changing or destroying original pixels.