Lens Flare Overlays

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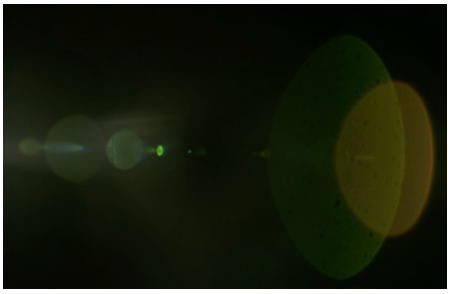
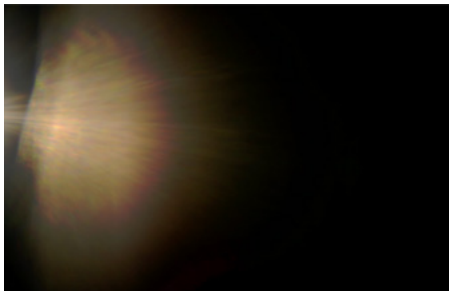
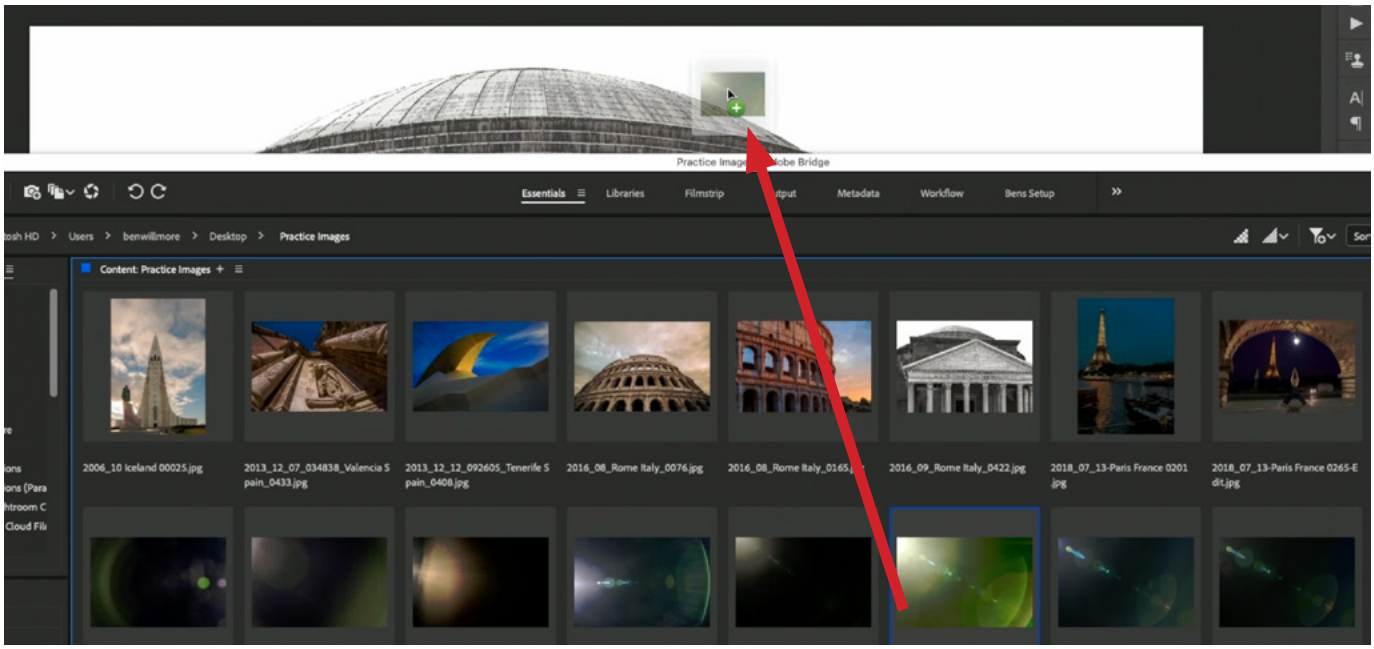
Before following along with this lesson, be sure to download the lens flare overlay files from the lesson page, as that's what we're going to learn to use here. I like to use these kinds of overlays for images that could use a bit of stylizing. In a separate lesson, we'll learn how to capture these types of images in case you want to extend your own library of overlay options.

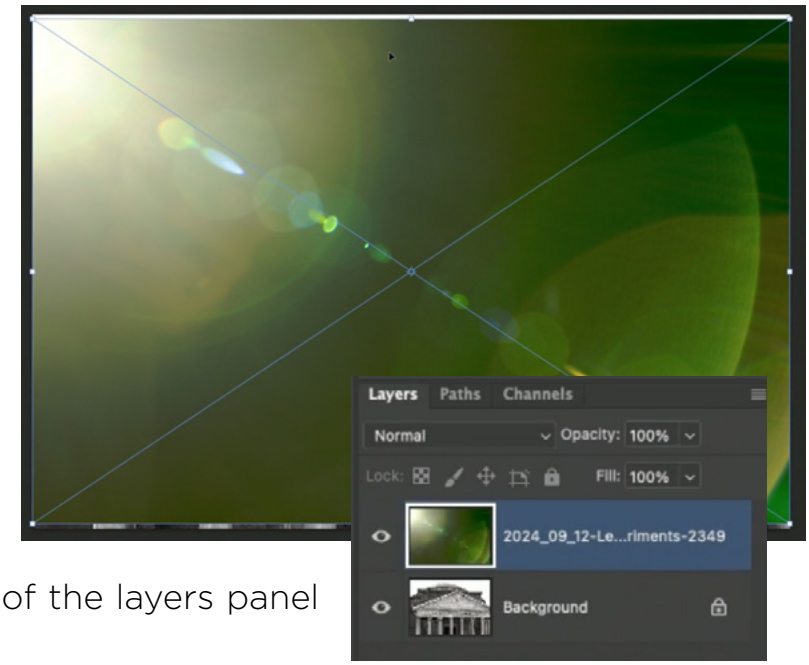




Placing the Overlay Image (Timestamp 1:45)

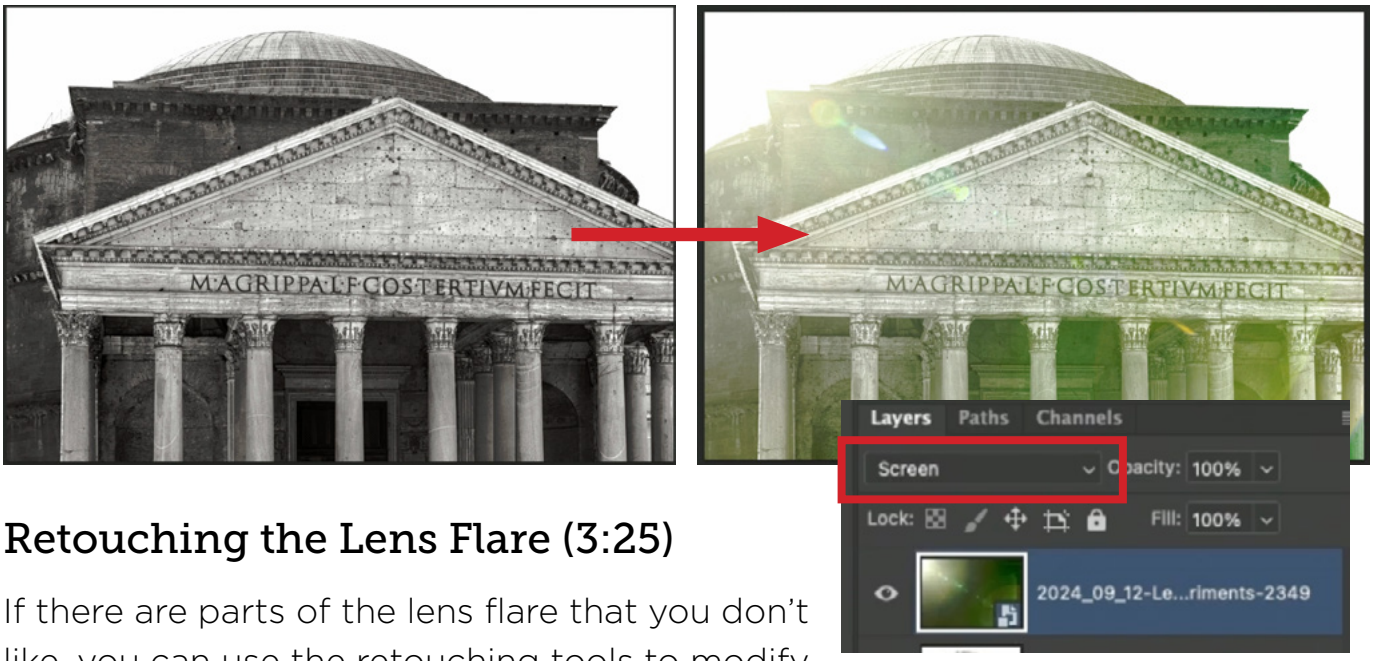
In the lesson example, I am using Bridge, but you could just as easily use Lightroom. In Photoshop, we'll open the image that will get the lens flare overlay. Then we'll open the folder of overlay images in Bridge. We'll position the app windows such that we can see some of the Photoshop window behind the Bridge interface and we will drag a lens flare thumbnail image directly into the Photoshop document window. This will place the image as a Smart Object layer.



The transform handles will be active around the layer so that you can rotate, resize and position the layer before tapping Return/Enter to lock in the transformation. In the lesson example, I wanted the lens flare image to cover the entire image layer.



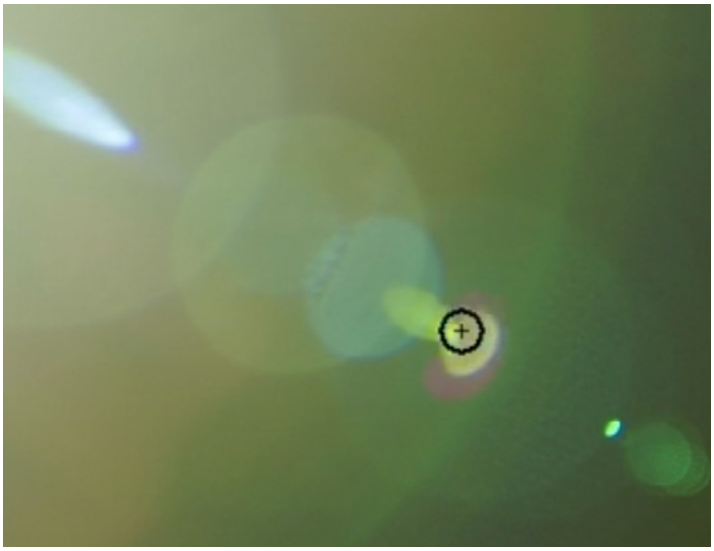
To actually apply the flare image as an overlay, we'll use the blending mode menu at the top of the layers panel and set the mode to Screen.

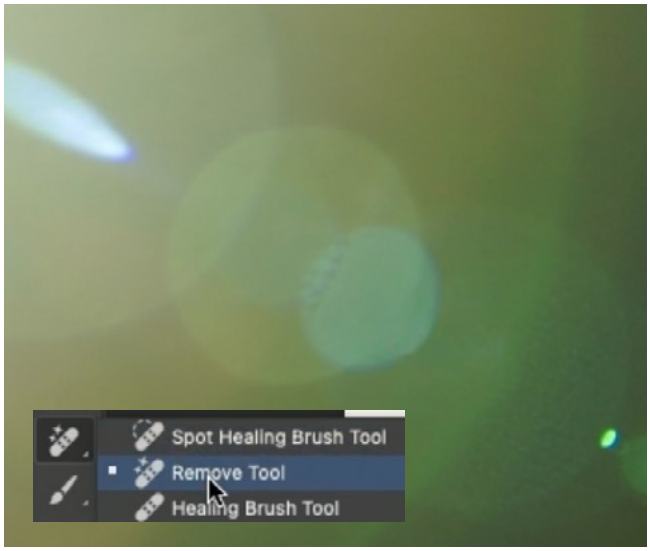


Retouching the Lens Flare (3:25)

If there are parts of the lens flare that you don't like, you can use the retouching tools to modify them. Turn off the visibility of the underlying image layer so that you are only viewing the lens flare. Create a new, empty layer above the flare image. This is where the retouching will go. With that empty layer active, choose one of the retouching tools. I like to use the Spot Healing Brush or the Remove Tool.

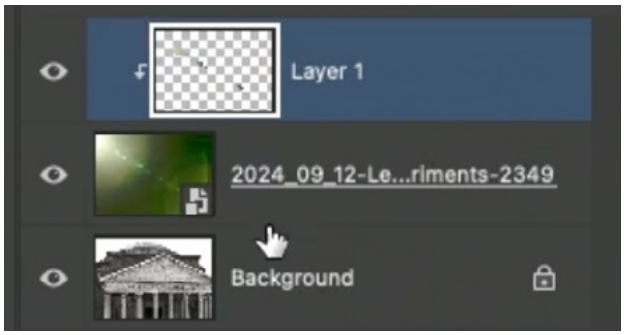
In the Options Bar (above the image window), make sure the “Sample All Layers” setting is turned on, as this will allow the tool to work on an empty layer. Then use the brush to paint over any parts of the flare you don’t like. Photoshop will look at the surrounding areas and try to remove the element you painted over.



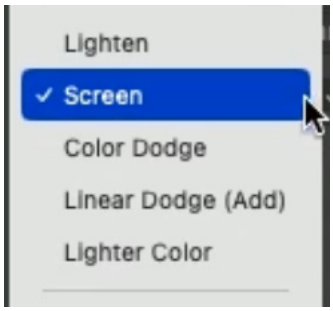


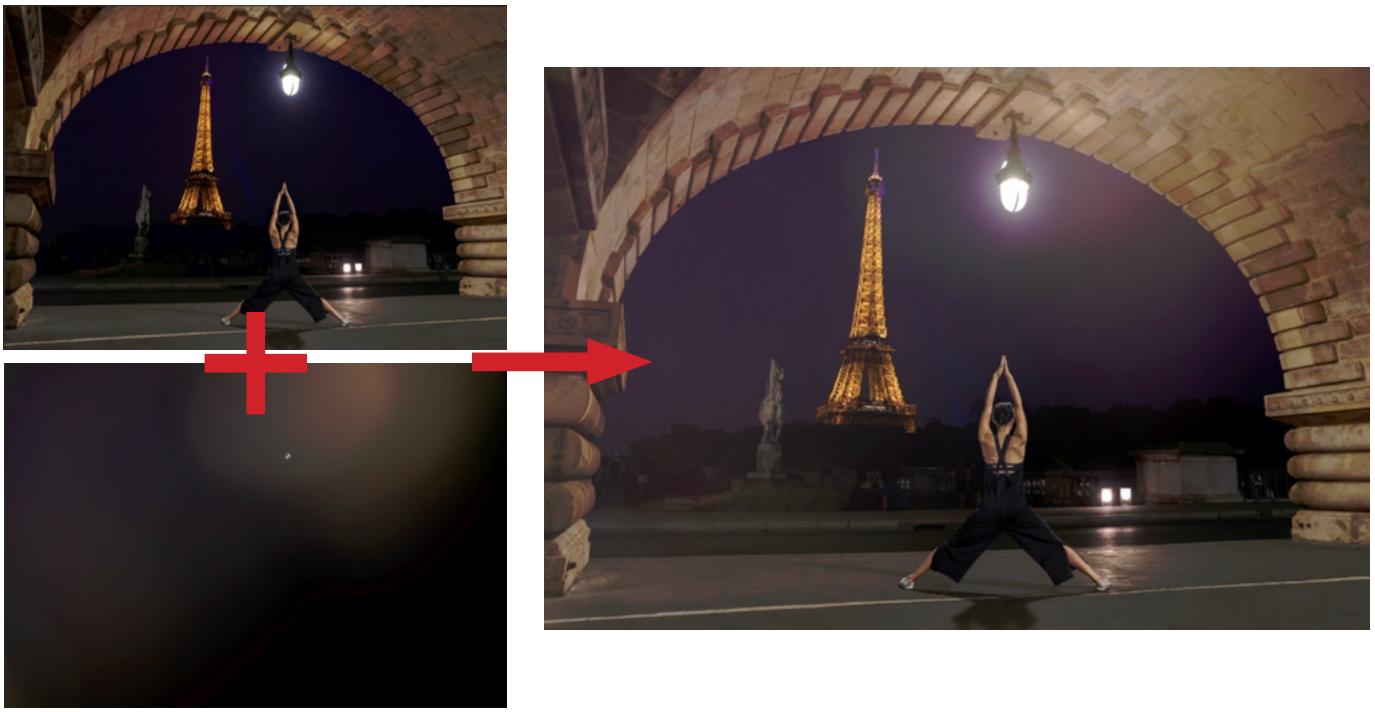
To test the results, you need to be careful. The flare image is in Screen mode, which causes the layer to act like light. The retouch layer is in the normal mode. If you turn on the visibility of both layers, you will see that the retouch area does not look right.

To correct this, you can clip the retouch layer to the flare layer. Hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the line that separates the two layers in the Layers Panel. You will see that the retouch layer becomes indented and a little down-pointing arrow will appear next to the thumbnail, indicating that it is clipped to the underlying layer. Because it is clipped to the flare layer, it will adopt the same blending mode as that layer (Screen). This will cause the retouching to look normal again.



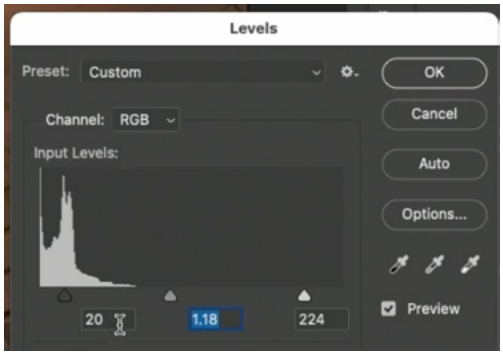
Other blending modes The Screen blending mode is most reliable when applying lens flare overlays, but the other modes in that same category may also work, so feel free to experiment. With some of the other modes, the effect may be too extreme, so you may need to lower the layer's opacity in order to make it look natural.

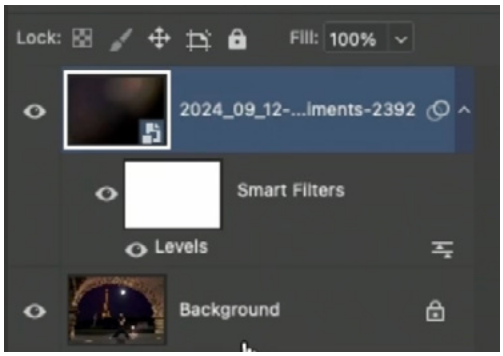




Adjusting the Lens Flare (7:00)

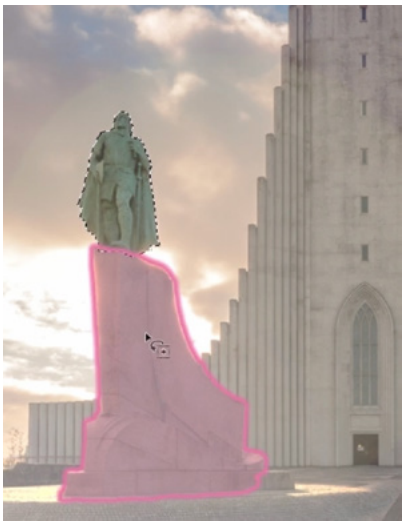
Because the lens flare image is a Smart Object, we can easily apply non-destructive adjustments. In the lesson example, I applied a Levels adjustment (Image menu > Adjustments > Levels). In the adjustment settings, I moved the black slider to the right just slightly. This forces more areas to become black. In Screen Mode, that just means more parts of the layer will disappear. You can make this adjustment if you want less of the flare to affect the image. I also moved the white slider to the left in order to force more parts of the layer to become white. The middle slider controls everything that's in between black and white. I moved this slider to the left in order to darken those mid-tones.



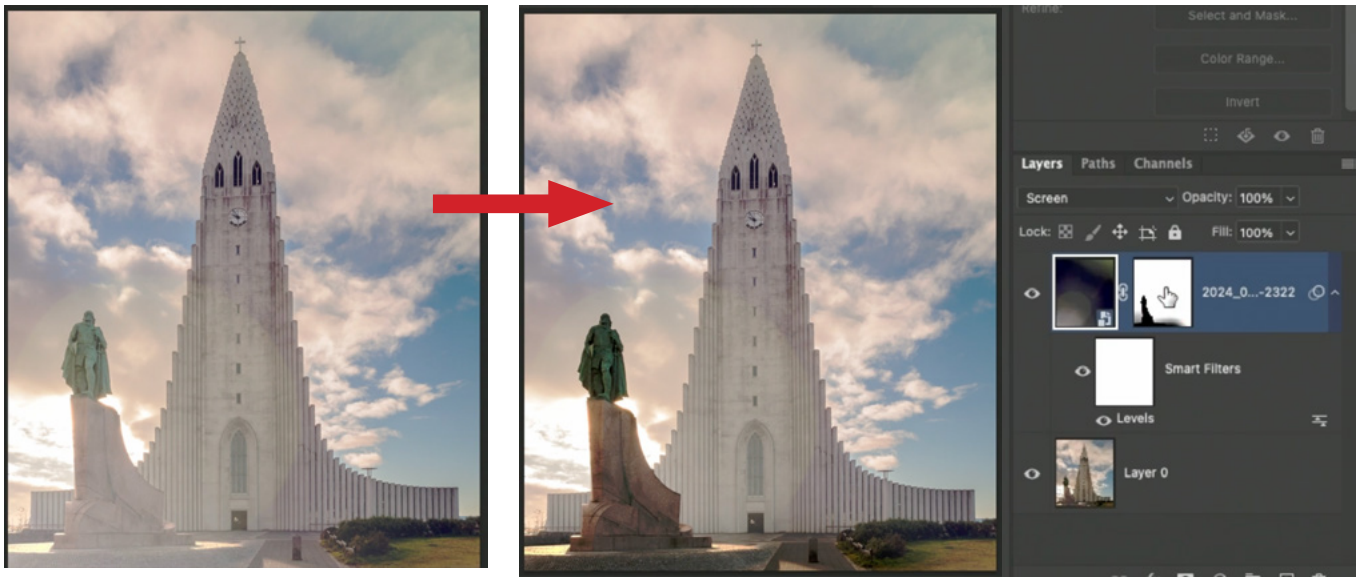


Masking the Lens Flare Layer (11:53)

Layer masks can be applied to the lens flare layer in order to control where the flare appears. This can be useful when you want the flare to appear over everything EXCEPT the subject or a specific element in the scene. In the example image, I applied the lens flare but did not want the flare to appear over the statue in the foreground. To mask that object, I started with a selection using the Object Selection Tool. With this tool active, I made sure that the Object Finder check box (in the Options Bar) was turned on. This allows you to hover your cursor over parts of the image and the tool will highlight any objects it detects. Click on the object to select it. If you want to select additional areas, hold down the Shift key while clicking on them. This tells Photoshop that you want to add to the selection instead of create a new one.



With the selection active, I created a layer mask by clicking the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel. Since there was an active selection at the time I created the mask, the selection is automatically applied to the mask. The area that was selected will be the white part of the mask, which represents the part of the layer that is visible. The problem is that I needed the flare layer to be HIDDEN in the area I selected so I used the shortcut Command+I (Ctrl+I on Win) to invert the mask. This ensures that the flare is visible in all areas EXCEPT the isolated statue.



Correcting the Effect of Color Dodge (18:50)

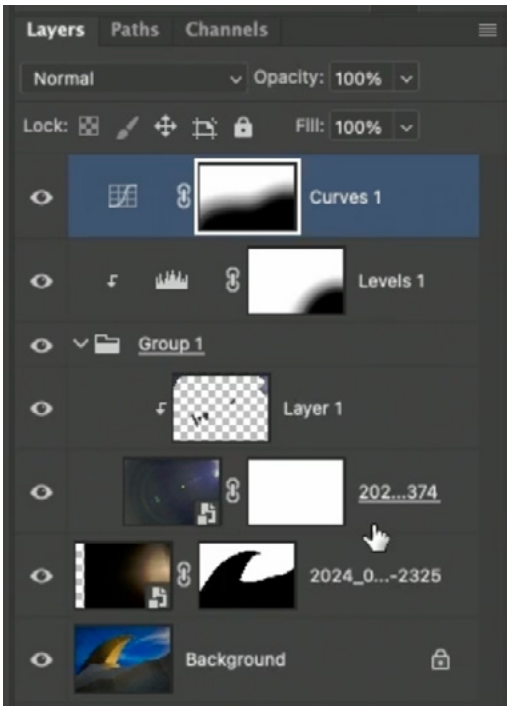
If you set the blending mode to Color Dodge instead of Screen, you will find that it will affect the bright areas way to much. A different Levels adjustment can be made to fix this. Click on the Image menu and choose Adjustments > Levels and the Levels dialog will appear.

At the bottom, there is a gradient with two slider handles beneath it. The right, white slider will take any area that is currently white and change it to become the shade of gray that the slider handle is pointing to. Therefore, we can drag this slider to the left until the bright area looks less extreme and more natural.

More Complicated Composite (19:50)

In the next example image, I used multiple flare overlays in order to build up an effect. The first flare comes from the right side and it was masked to only affect the sky (not the building). A sky selection can be made by clicking on the Select menu and choosing Sky.

The second flare overlay adds some detail to the left side. I allowed this flare to affect the entire image, but I did use a retouching layer (clipped to the image layer) in order to remove some distracting elements.



Next, I wanted to create a Levels adjustment that only affected the flare layers, so I first placed those layers into a group by selecting them all and then clicking the folder icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel. Then, instead of changing the blending modes of the individual layers, I set the blending mode of the group to screen.

I then created a Levels adjustment layer above the group layer. After making the adjustment, I clipped the adjustment layer to the underlying group so that it shared the same blending mode aspects.

The last layer is a Curves Adjustment Layer that was created to add some contrast back into the top of the image. You can see that it is masked such that the effect is hidden at the bottom of the image.