Cleaning Up a Scanned Sketch in Photoshop

prepared by Gabe Landes for T. Purdy

When scanning a sketch, make sure to use the scanner's preview function. This allows you adjust your area of interest so the scanner only captures your sketch and not a lot of negative space. The scanner I used has an adjustable box of marching ants to constrain the focus.
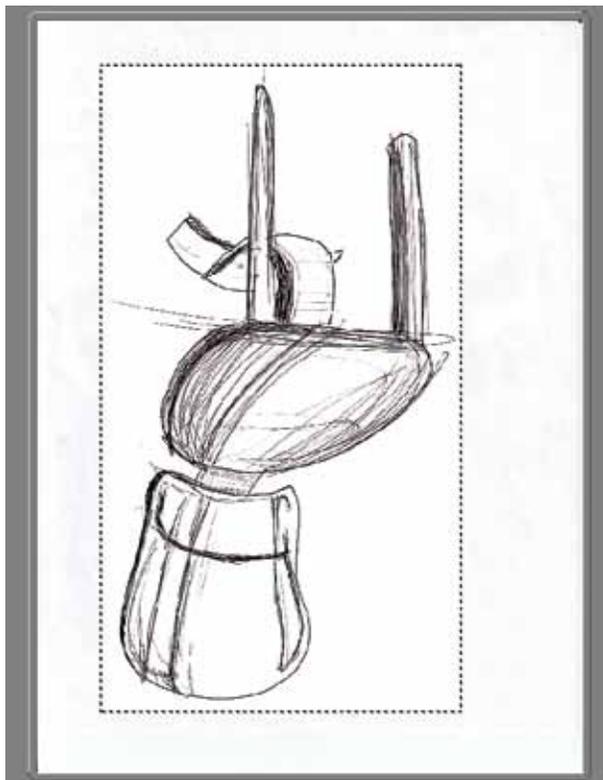
Specifying your area of interest yields better image resolution when the data is imported into Photoshop. If you import a scan of the whole scanner bed, your image will be more pixilated than if you set the focus.
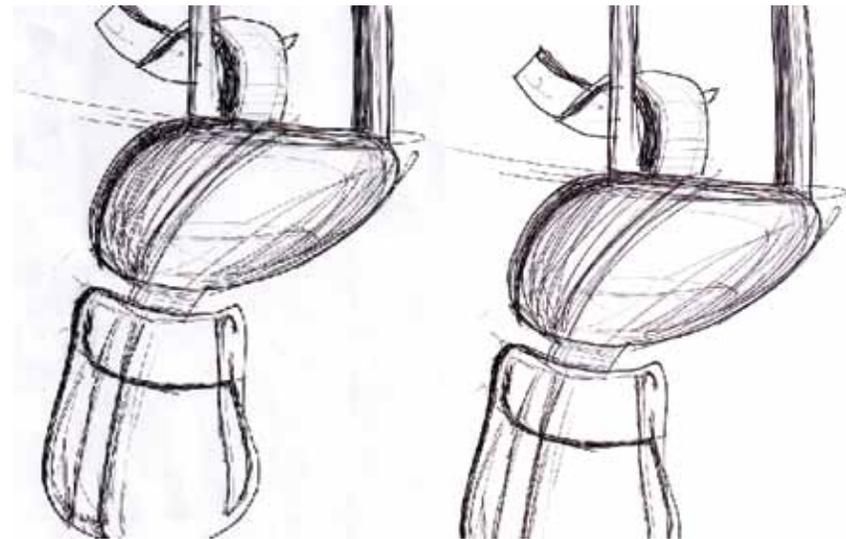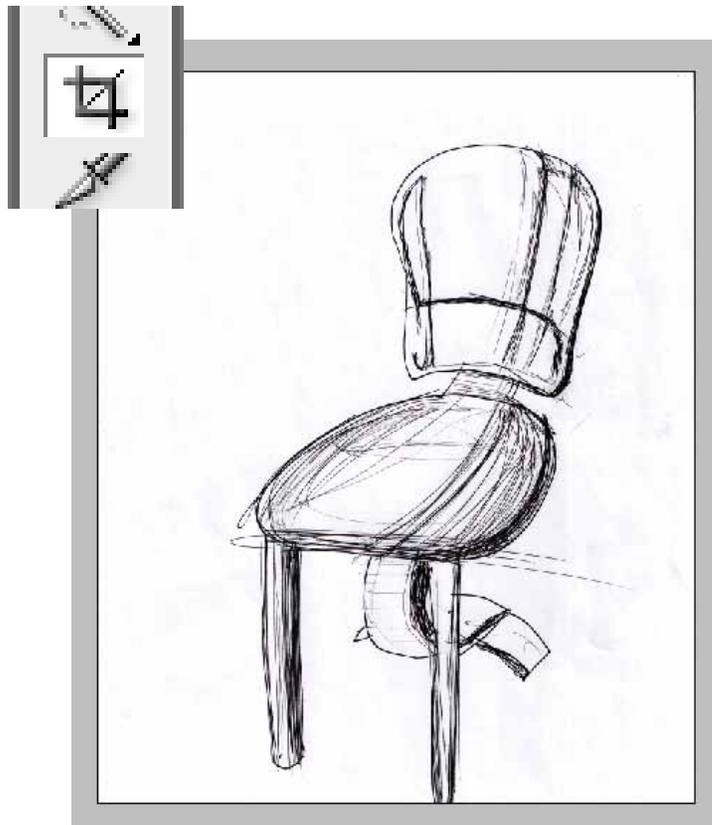
More Pixilated   Less Pixilated

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Once your image has been imported into Photoshop, rotate the image so it is properly oriented. Click on the **Image Menu**, and go to **Rotate Canvas**. Make the appropriate selection. Next, trim away the unnecessary space using the **Crop Tool** (C).

The key to capturing sharp scanned sketches is the **Levels** adjustment. Click on the **Image Menu**. Go to **Adjustments>Levels**.

In this window you will see a histogram that shows the distribution of tonal value in the image. First, grab the pointer for the white values and slide it left. The goal is to get rid of haze from the paper and light smudges so you have a clean pure white. Be careful to avoid washing out the detail in your image. Next grab the pointer for the black values and slide it right. The goal is to create some areas of rich dense true black. Be careful to avoid making every line look uniform.

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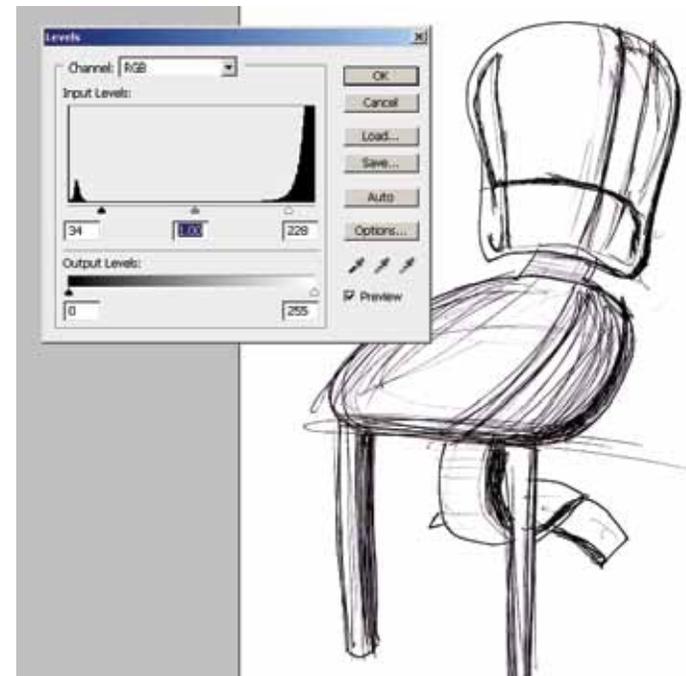
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For a more stylized look, you can adjust the reference point for 50% grey in your image. Grab the grey pointer and slide it right. This will make your lines appear thicker and darker, as if you drew them while applying more pressure to the paper.
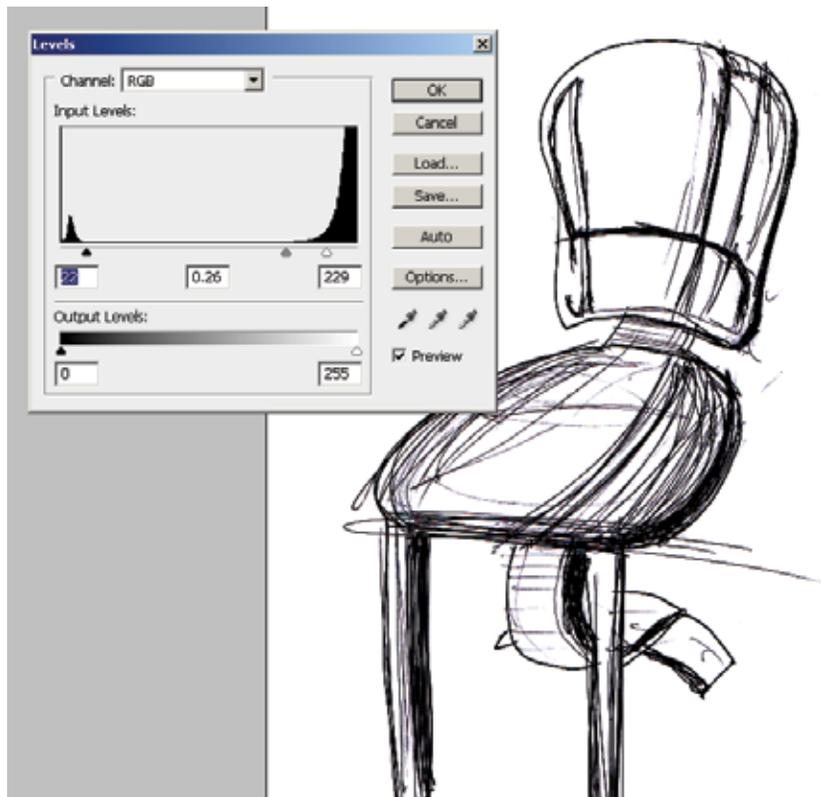
For a more nuanced look, you can adjust the reference point for 50% grey in the other direction. Grab the grey pointer and slide it left. This will make your lines appear thinner and lighter, as if you were barely touching your writing utensil to the page while sketching.

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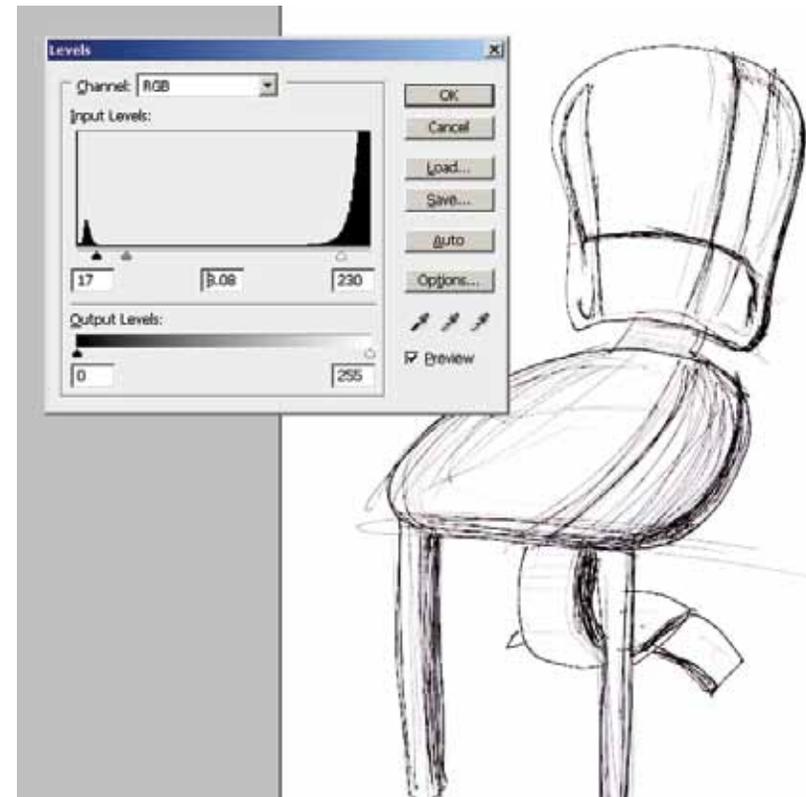
Often while sketching, designers will use a colored pencil to build construction lines. Then, once the shape has been laid out, the designer will go back with black ink. Photoshop makes it easy to clean up sketches like this.

Once your sketch has been scanned, click on **Select Menu>Color Range**. In this window you can make a selection using the **Eyedropper Tool** (I) or by picking a selection from the dropdown menu.

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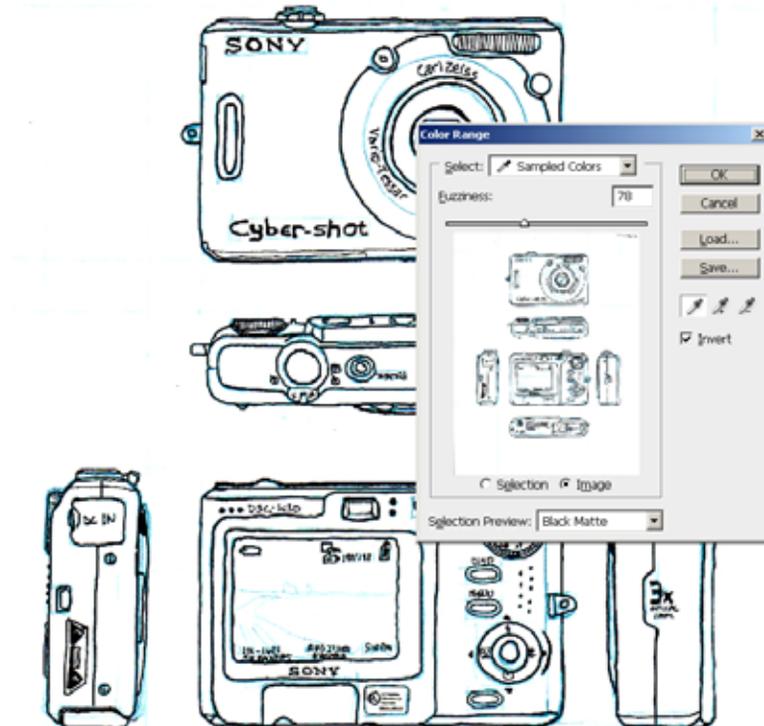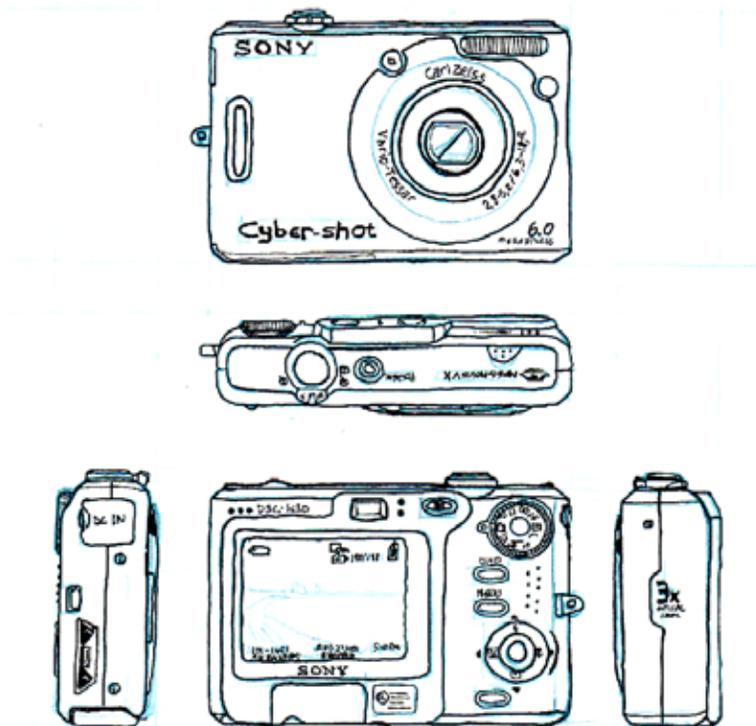
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For an image like this, select Cyans. After clicking OK, the cyan will be enclosed with marching ants, meaning it has been selected. To eliminate the cyan construction lines, simply press the **Delete** key. At first it will get lighter. The more the Delete key is pressed, the more cyan will be removed until it is completely gone.

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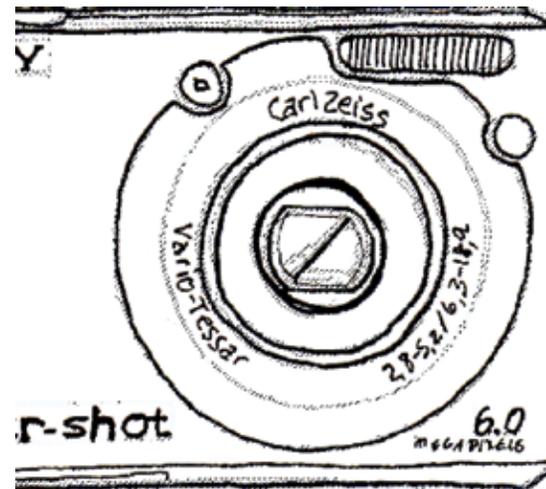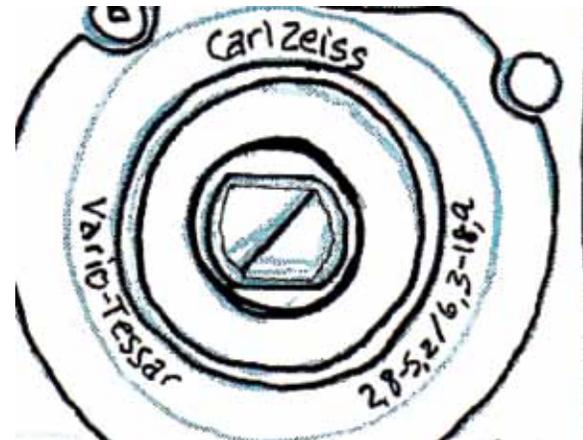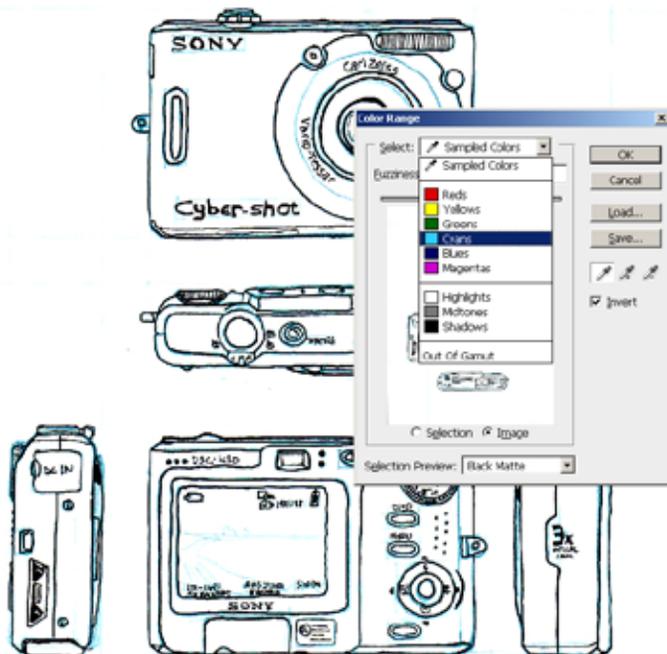
It looks pretty good. Just to be sure that there is no more cyan left in the image, convert it to **Grayscale**. Click on **Image Menu>Mode>Grayscale**. Photoshop will ask you if you want to Discard color information. Click Discard and you will be done.

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