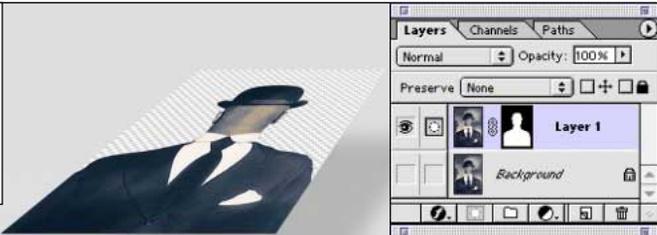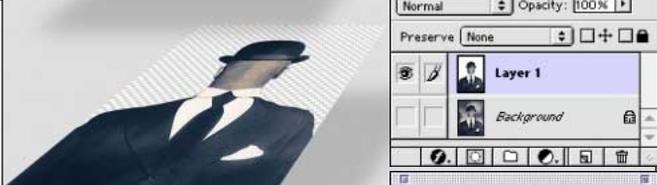Duplicate the background layer, load the alpha 1 channel as a selection and click on the Add a mask button. This will add a layer mask to the active layer and reveal the selection area.

Making a new 'Layer via Copy' based on an active selection creates a new layer. The background is switched off and the transparent areas are shown as a checkerboard pattern.

An active selection can be viewed in Quick mask mode, shown here as a semitransparent red color. Double-click on the Quick mask icon and click on the color box, and you can choose a different color from the picker.
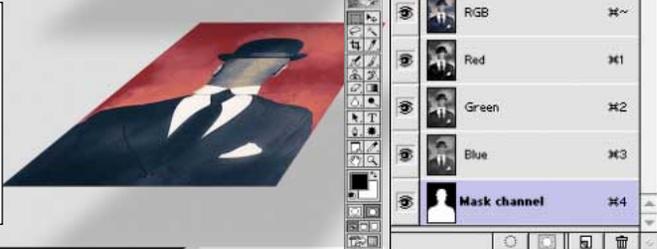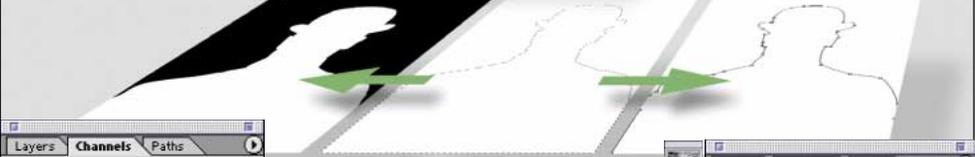
A selection can be saved as a mask channel or as a path (choose Make Work Path from the Paths palette sub-menu). Paths and mask channels can be converted back to selections.

When a selection is active (shown by the marching ants surrounding the border), only the pixels inside the selection area will be modified by further Photoshop commands.
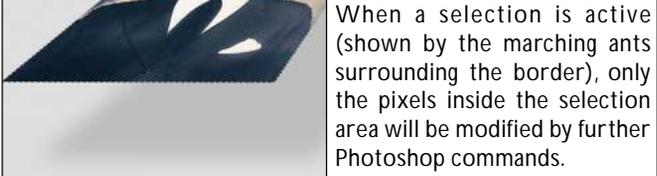
Figure 11.2 The above diagram shows the relationship between selections, channels, paths and layers.

few kilobytes of file space. This is only more economical than saving as an alpha channel if you are saving in the TIFF format. Paths cannot save graduated tone selections though. A saved path can only generate a non-anti-aliased, anti-aliased or feathered selection, but we'll come to that later on in the chapter. A work path can be used to define a layer clipping path (which will mask a layer's contents) or it can be used in Create Shape Layer mode to add a filled layer which is auto masked as you define a path outline.

Modifying selections

As was mentioned in Chapter Six, to modify the content of a selection you need to learn how to coordinate the use of the modifier keys with the dragging of the mouse as you define a selection. To add to a selection with a selection tool, hold down the Shift key as you drag. To subtract from a selection with a selection tool, hold down the Option/Alt key as you drag. To intersect a selection with a selection tool, hold down the Shift+Option/Alt keys as you drag. Placing the cursor inside the selection and dragging moves the selection boundary position, but not the selection contents. The magic wand is a selection tool too – click with the wand, holding down the appropriate key(s) to add or subtract from a selection.

To expand or shrink a selection, choose Select > Modify > Expand/Contract. Select the number of pixels to modify by up to a maximum of 100 pixels. From the same menu the other options include Border and Smooth. To see how this works, make a selection and choose Select > Modify > Border. Enter various pixel amounts and inspect the results by switching from selection to Quick mask mode. I think the border modification feature is rather crude as it is and can be improved by applying feathering or saving the selection as a channel and filtering with Gaussian blur. An example of a border modification is featured in the Extract tutorial on page 288.

Smoothing and enlarging a selection

Selections made on the basis of color values, i.e. when you use the magic wand or Color Range method, under close inspection are rarely complete. The Smooth option in the Select > Modify sub-menu addresses this by averaging out the pixels selected or not selected to the level of tolerance you set in the dialog box.

The Grow and Similar options enlarge the selection using the same criteria as with the magic wand tool, regardless of whether the original selection was created with the wand or not. To determine the range of color levels to expand the selection by, enter a tolerance value in the Options palette. A higher tolerance value means a greater range of color levels will be included in the enlarged selection.