The Art of Masking
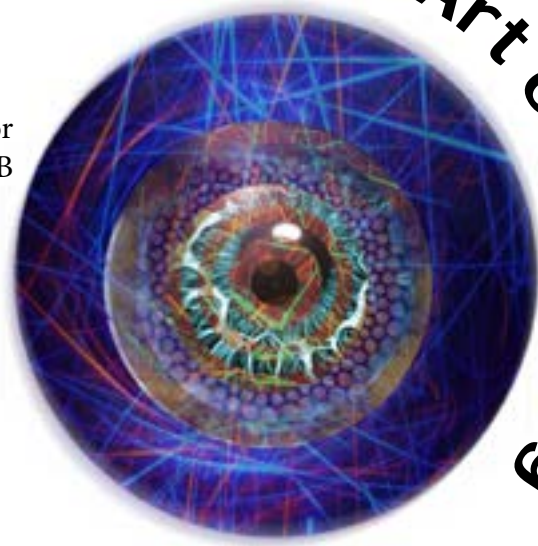
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A wise man once said, "Nothing worth doing in life should be done without layer masks". Apparently, the wise man was a big Photoshop user who may have spent a little too much time alone on top of the mountain. But enough about him. Layer masks are right up there at the top of the list of things you really need to know about when working in Photoshop because without them, your work, your creativity and your flexibility all suffer. It's that simple. It's a good thing for us, then, that layer masks are so incredibly simple and easy to understand!

Essentially, a mask is a grayscale bitmap image. The pure white areas in the image represent the portions of your original image that will be 100% protected. The pure black portions of the image represent the areas of your original image that are completely masked out, or erased. The levels of gray in-between allow your image to be partially protected. If you have trouble keeping track of which color does what, just think of masking tape to help you remember... masking tape is usually white or light colored, so the white areas of your mask are the most protected. Many image editing software allows you to save your masks as grayscale images so they can be used over and over again. On the following pages, I'll show you how you you can use any grayscale image as a mask in several popular image editors

A mask does not have to be a separate image. Most software allows you to paint a mask directly onto your image. It works the same way... painting with black while in mask mode erases the underlying layer of your image, and painting with white brings it back. Shades of gray allow you to paint in partial transparency.

When you're painting in mask mode, the mask is usually represented on the screen by a ruby overlay. The ruby overlay lets you see the mask represented by a reddish tint while still allowing you to still the image you're working on. Some software allows you change the overlay tint color. To the right you can see the same image used in the examples above with a ruby overlay. Transparency is indicated by a checkerboard pattern in image editing software; that's why you see the checkerboard pattern in this image.