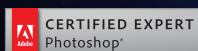


Mother Earth

Advanced techniques for
creative photo composites

Jamie Carroll



Mother Earth

Advanced techniques for
creative photo composites

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To Amy,
the amazing mother
of my wonderful son.

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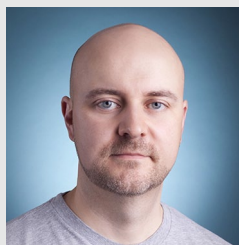
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Referral Link Disclaimer

I receive compensation from Dollar Photo Club for referrals resulting in memberships.

Credits

Stock photos: See page 6
Special thanks: Lee Cashatt, Steve Emlund, Ginni Francis, Pauline J.



Jamie is a BFA graduate and full-time graphic artist. He is an Adobe Certified Expert in Photoshop CS6.

Acknowledgements include winning the *iStock Battle Royale IV* (Photoshop competition) and being published in *Advanced Photoshop*, *Photoshop Creative* and *Photoshop User* magazine.

www.jamiec.com

Welcome

Transforming multiple stock photos into unique digital works of art is my passion. My goal is to share techniques I use consistently to achieve dynamic results. I've designed the ebook for the artist that already creates photo composites and has an understanding of Photoshop.

The ebook is an overview of my design process with a focus on areas I believe are most important.

I cover key concepts and techniques, from initial planning to finishing effects. I walk through Pen Tool selections and outline techniques for building up lighting and effects for individual elements.

Read on, and begin incorporating these techniques into your own works of art.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jamie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long, sweeping underline.

Inspiration and discovering your theme

What inspires or influences you? How I choose a theme for my work varies greatly. It often comes down to my mood and circumstances at the time. I tend to use a lot of female subjects in my work. I've always been fascinated by the power of a woman, and they make more interesting subjects to me.

For Mother Earth, my process went something like this: I wanted to use a female character. I find the thought of aliens interesting. Scenes of war in the news have been bombarding me almost daily. This thought process reveals how my concept was born. Mother Earth depicts a saddened, motherly character. She is disappointed in what has become of the planet she nurtured.

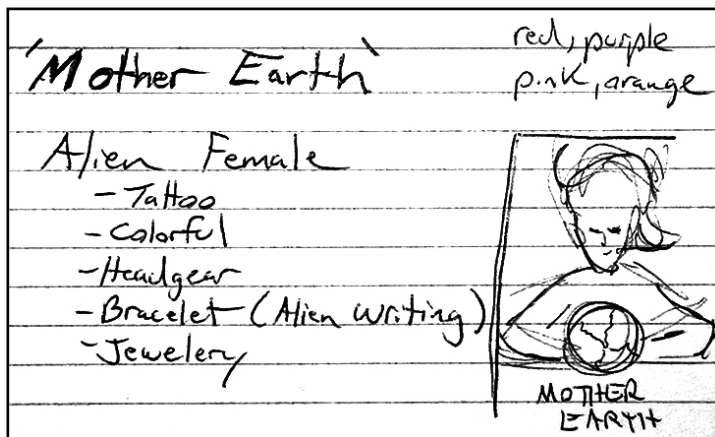


Women + Aliens + War = Mother Earth

Planning your composition with stock photos in mind

After establishing a concept, I create a rough sketch with notes. This is usually a quick thumbnail sketch in pencil or pen so I don't forget my overall idea. I include notes about color, design elements, or any other idea I may want to experiment with.

With sketch in hand, I begin the search for a stock photo that will represent the female subject. I also locate a globe that will rest in her hand.



Once the subject or central stock photos are chosen,
I sketch out the composition within Photoshop.

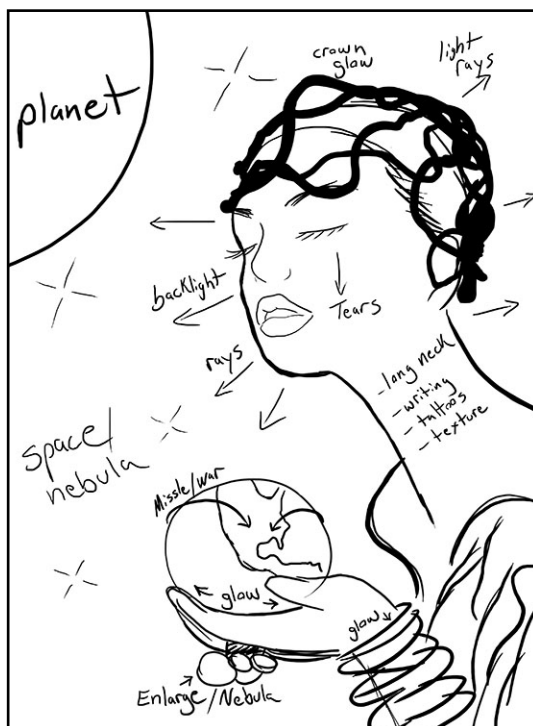
Creating an initial Photoshop sketch provides a guide
when you are selecting your remaining stock photos.
Although the final composition does not always resemble
the sketch, it is a good starting point. I generally don't like
to plan out all the details. Part of the enjoyment comes
from discovering the work as you create it. I prefer to
remain flexible and leave enough open to experiment.



dollarphotoclub.com/42076644

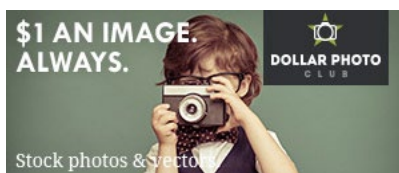


NASA



Unless you photograph your own images, you are at the mercy of stock photos. I occasionally shoot my own photos, but I generally use stock photos. Most of my composite work includes so many images, it would be too time consuming to personally photograph everything. I have become accustomed to searching through stock photos, looking for those images that fit just right. Finding the right image is part of the process and can take some time, but it's worth it when you find an image that sparks your imagination.

I recently discovered the Dollar Photo Club, a stock site that sells images for \$1 per image. With the exception of the NASA globe and my smoke photo, all other stock images were licensed from the Dollar Photo Club.



Dollar Photo Club

After an initial search, I established the composition with these images in mind:



Female: dollarphotoclub.com/42076644



NASA Globe: <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov>

The following supporting elements were found throughout the process:



Nebula 1: dollarphotoclub.com/35031901



Nebula 2: dollarphotoclub.com/61830159



Nebula 3: dollarphotoclub.com/54924688



Planet & nebula: dollarphotoclub.com/26339869



Light rays: dollarphotoclub.com/54541684



Vector effects: dollarphotoclub.com/64627579



Skin texture: dollarphotoclub.com/3013740



Skin pearl: dollarphotoclub.com/62060254



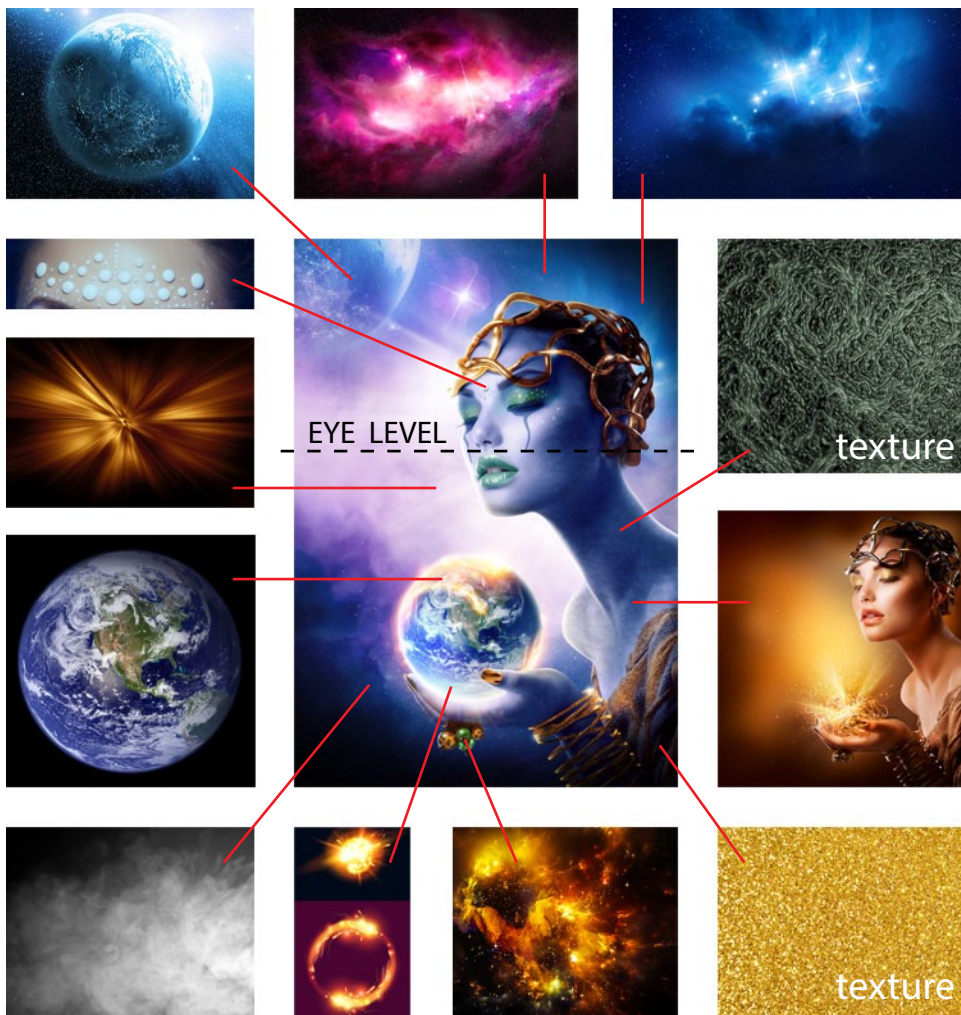
Gold texture: dollarphotoclub.com/65539206



Smoke photo: Used from my personal collection

Note: All images are copyright of the respective artist.

As you select supporting elements, you may have to adjust the composition accordingly. Although this particular composite has a basic composition, this concept is critical; keep the point of view and lighting of the stock photos in mind. Establish a line to mark your eye level and make sure elements that fall above and below this line look like they are at the correct viewpoint.

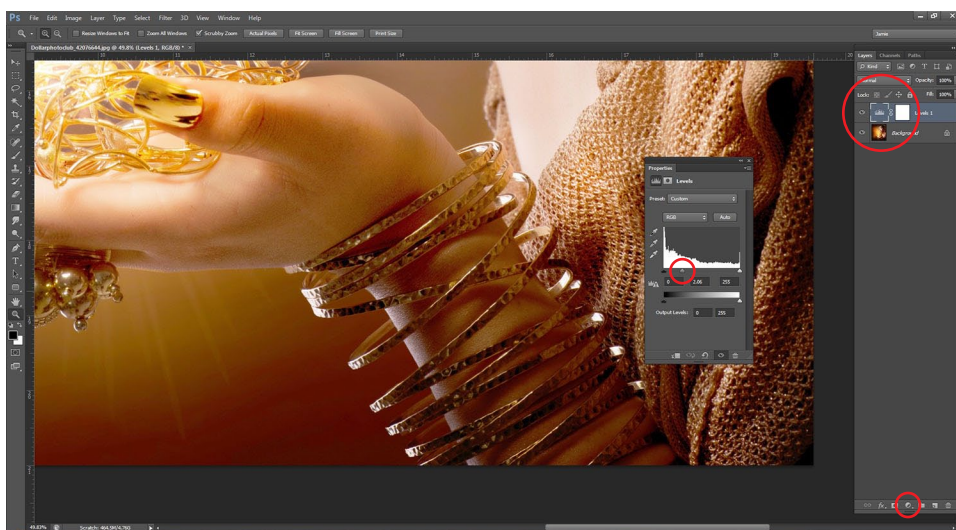


Pen Tool selections


Cleanly isolating elements is a fundamental, but critical, step when creating a composite. In this section, I walk through the process of creating a selection of the female subject in order to remove the background.

Step 1: Lighten edges

I start by opening the female stock photo (42076644). The photo is a little dark, so I add a **Levels Adjustment Layer**. Click the **Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer** icon in the **Layers Panel** and select **Levels**. Lighten the midtones.

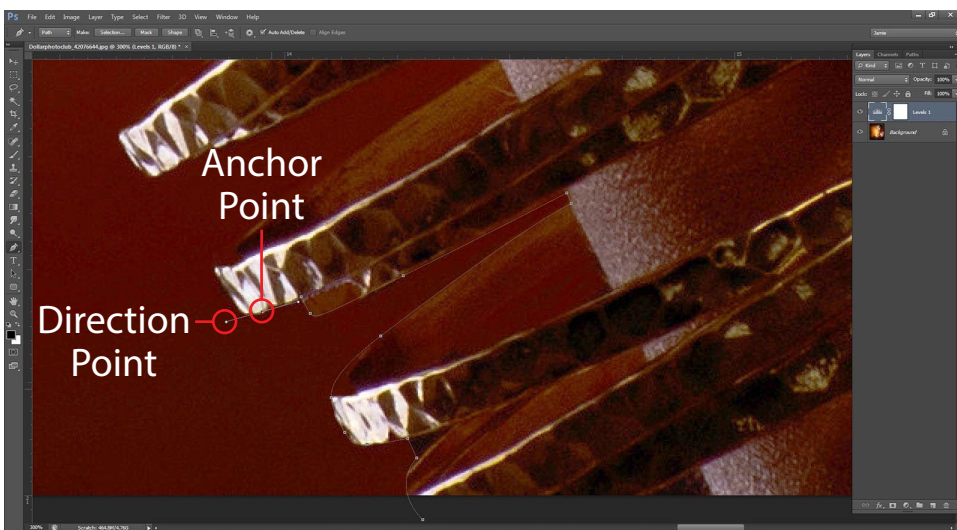


Step 2: Starting the path

With the **Pen Tool (P)** selected, I begin by carefully selecting around the contour of the subject. My starting point is at the bottom, just outside the canvas. Press **Caps Lock** to use a precise cursor. — Precise  * Standard

As I select, I am zoomed in 200-400%. As I make the path, I press the **Spacebar** in order to move around the canvas. **Note:** **Spacebar** is a quick shortcut for the **Hand Tool (H)**.

When I want to create a curve, I **click, hold, and drag** the **Direction Point** in order to position the curve and establish the direction it will take on the next click. When I need to adjust the established curve, I hold the **(Opt/Alt)** key while moving the **Direction Point**.

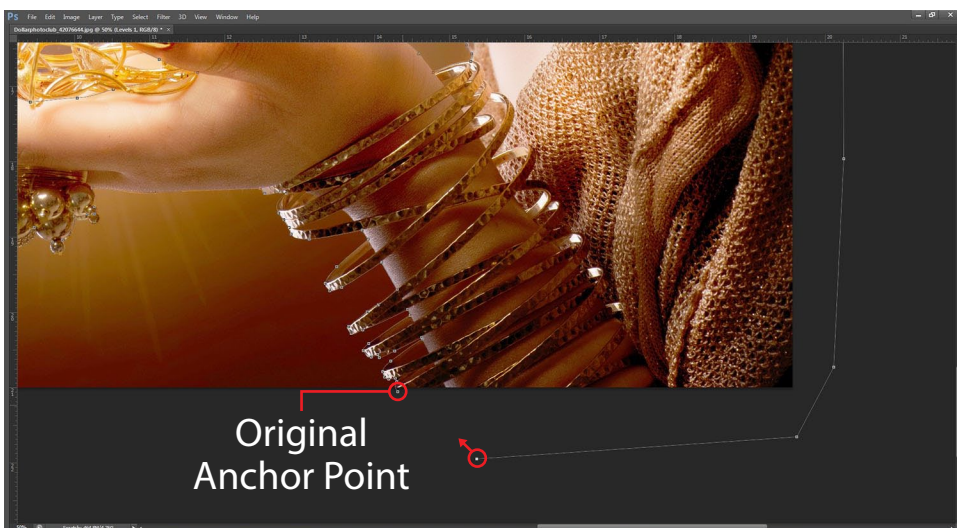


When I need to remove a **Direction Point**, I press the **(Opt/Alt)** key while clicking the current **Anchor Point**.

I make as few points as possible, and I'm always looking ahead to see how the next point will be positioned. If I am unhappy with a point, I press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+Z**. If I need to undo multiple times, I press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+(Opt/Alt)+Z** as many times as needed. You can increase **History States** in **Preferences: (Cmd/Ctrl)+K>Performance**.

Step 3: Closing the path

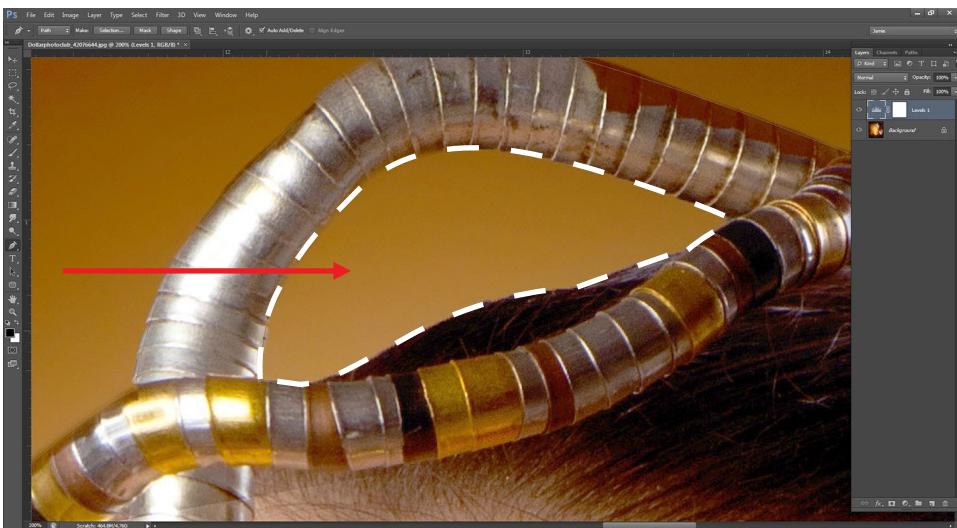
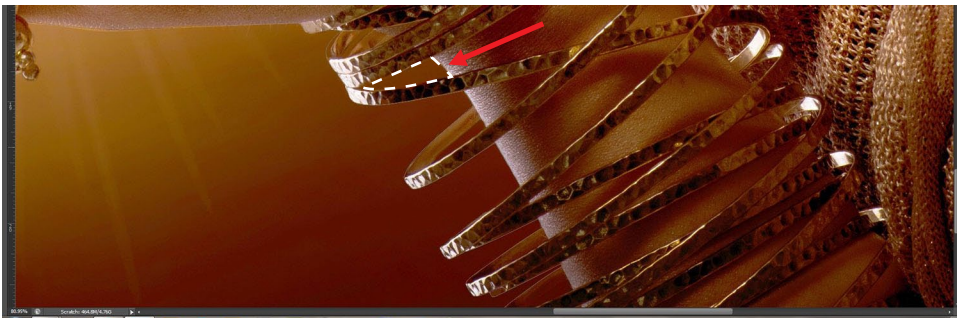
I continue the above steps until I complete the path. Once around the subject, I close the path by clicking the original **Anchor Point**. The cursor will show a circle when you hover over the original **Anchor Point**.



Step 4: Selecting negative space

After the contour of the subject is complete, it is time to select the knockout areas of the photo, or the negative space where the background will show through. The contour selection will stay active; we are just adding to it.

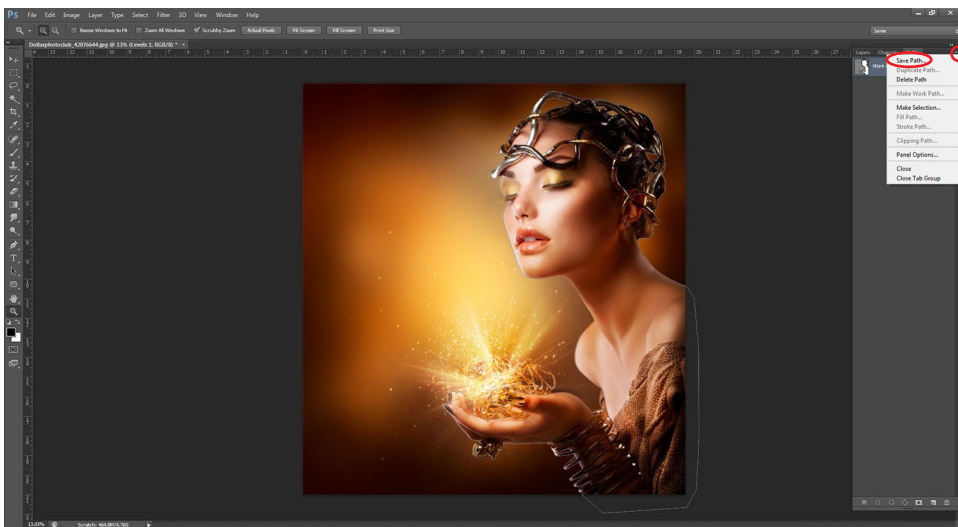
I select the areas of the subject where the background will show. Starting with the bracelet, I select the inside portions that will be cut out.



Step 5: Saving the path

Once all the negative spaces are selected, the path is complete. The path should now be saved for future use.

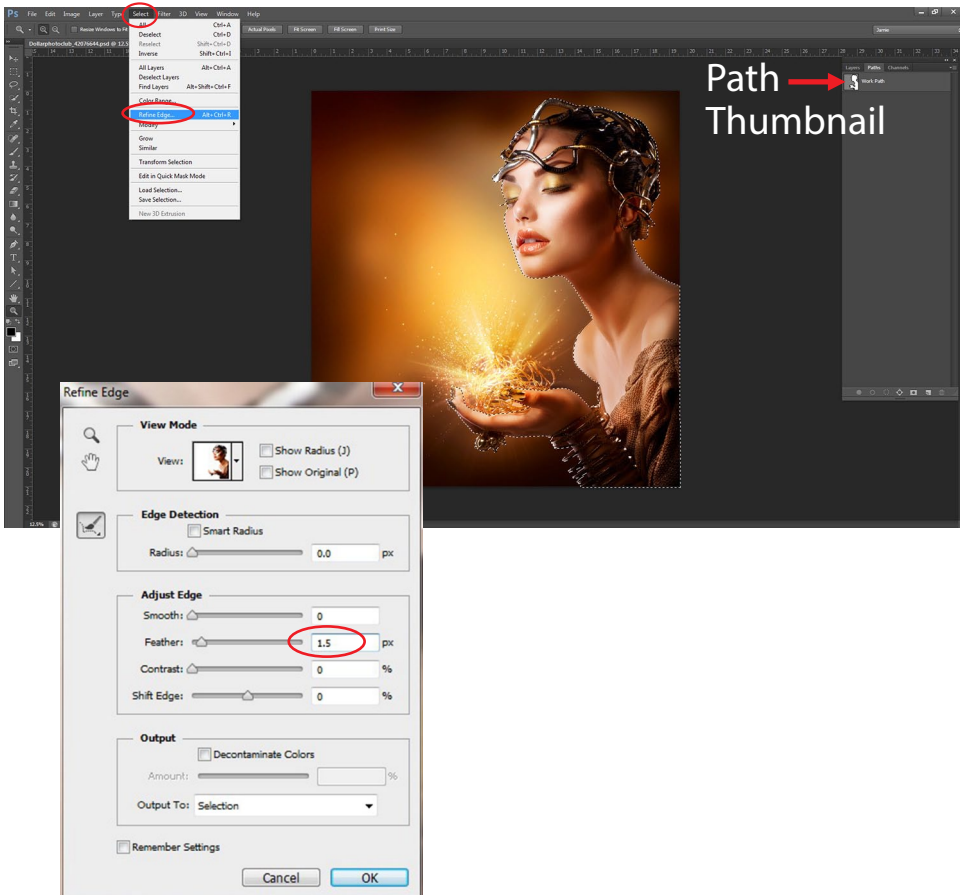
To save a path, open the **Paths Panel** and click the small arrow on the **Paths Panel Menu** and select **Save Path**. We can now remove the subject from the background.



Step 6: Activate selection

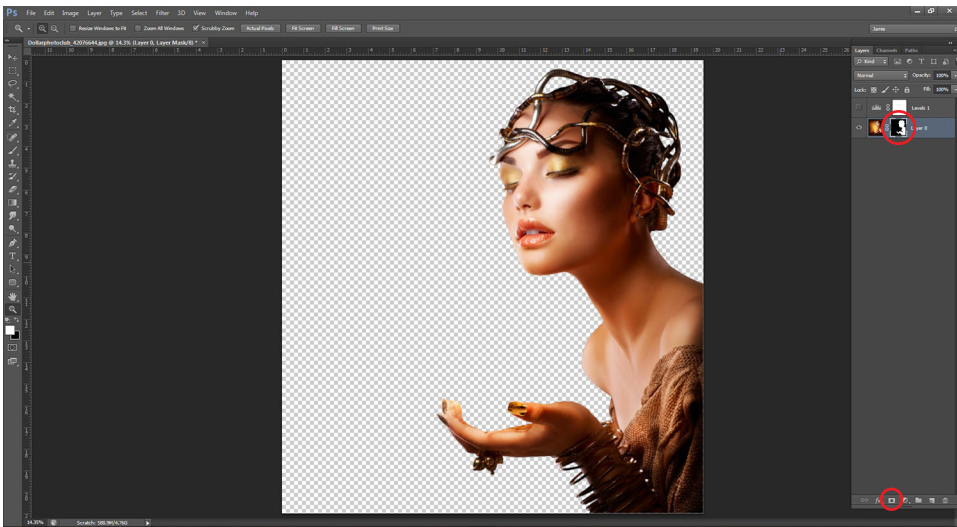
Activate the selection by pressing (**Cmd/Ctrl**) and click on the newly saved **Path Thumbnail**.

With the selection still active, choose **Refine Edge** from the **Select Menu**. For this image, I used a setting of 1.5 for the **Feather**. This removes the hard edges.



Step 7: Adding a Layer Mask

Now it's time to remove the background from the image. Select the bottom layer. Click the **Add Layer Mask** at the bottom of the **Layers Panel**. The isolation of the subject is now complete. If there are any small areas that need to be refined, I select the **Layer Mask** and paint with black to remove or paint with white to add areas back in. I use a small brush for this technique. Now that the isolation is complete, I delete the **Levels Adjustment Layer** and save the file as a .psd.



Tip: Saving separate .psd files of all your isolated elements is a good idea in case you need to use them again.

Establishing a light source

Establish your light source(s) early; they will guide the way you light individual elements within your composite. I find it intriguing to imagine what the light may look like in a scene. **Note:** Ensure the lighting in your stock photos match the choices you make for a light source.

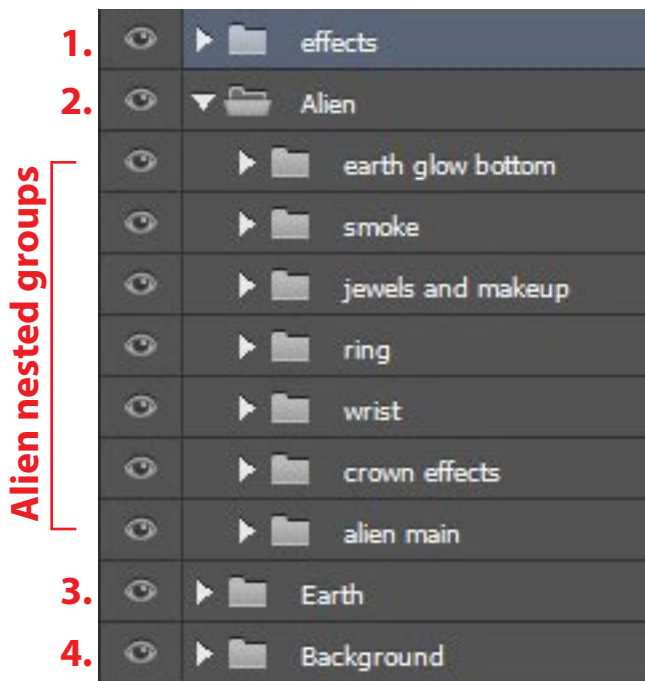


1. Light shining from behind the model, coming from the background stars
2. Fill light coming from the upper left, outside of frame
3. The globe is producing light around the hand

Organizing layers while you work

Layer grouping and naming becomes vital to your sanity as you build a complex, multi-layered composite. I divide my composites into major groups and within each major group, there are nested groups. I use as many nested groups as needed to identify layers.

My composite had four major groups; 1. Effects, 2. Alien, 3. Earth, and 4. Background. From top to bottom:



1. **Effects** - All of my composites include this group. It contains all of the final color adjustments, filters, and effects that influence the entire work.

2. **Alien** - This group contains the female alien subject and anything that influences her appearance. This is the most detailed group as it contains multiple nested groups.

The major Alien group has the following nested groups:

Earth glow bottom - A glow in front of the globe.

Smoke - Smoke that stacks over the shoulder.

Jewels and makeup - Pearl and white dots.

Ring - Ring enlarged with nebula added to each ball.

Wrist - Bracelet was isolated and enhanced to showcase gold color and effects.

Crown effects - Crown was isolated and enhanced to showcase gold color and effects.

Alien main - Includes multiple **Clipping Masks** that shape the appearance of the alien.

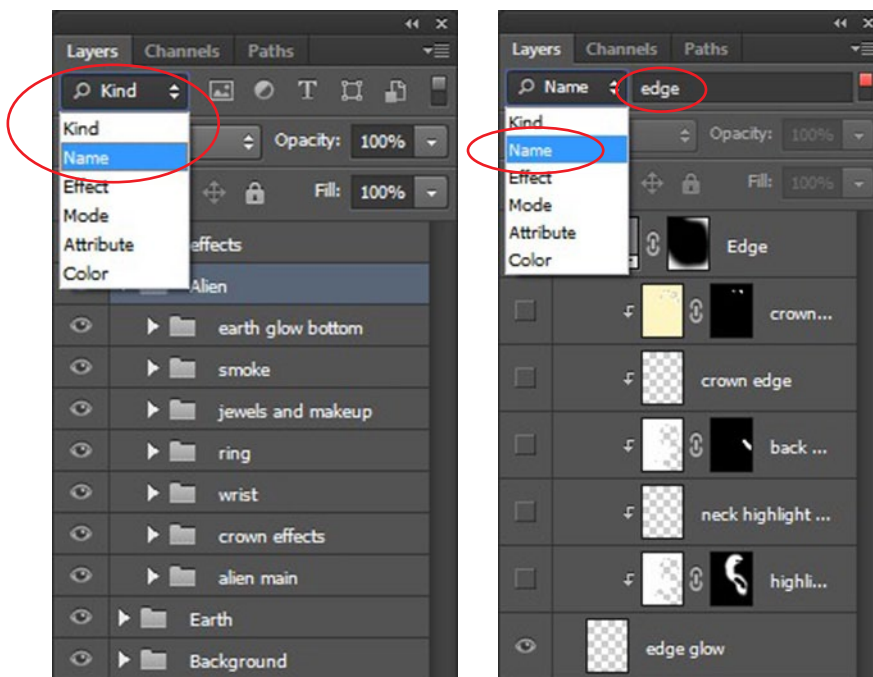
3. **Earth** - The globe with glow effects and light streaks.

4. **Background** - A background group is used in all my composites. This background group contains the main space background, several nebulae, and the upper left planet.

Although grouping and naming layers is a basic concept in Photoshop, naming and structuring layers within a complex composite becomes critical. Name every layer as you add it to the composite and place it in an appropriate group.

When I need to locate a layer, I simply go to the major group and expand the nested group. If I have multiple layers within a nested group and I'm unable to locate a layer quickly, I search (or filter) by layer or effect in the **Layers Panel**. In the example below, I searched by name and typed 'edge' to locate layers by that name.

Assigning a relevant name to layers is important and will save you time and frustration as you work.



Masking, blending, and lighting individual elements

With light source(s) established and elements in place, it is time to start imagining what the lighting and effects might look like for the scene. This is the process I enjoy most. This step relies heavily on the vision you have in mind for the final composition. The elements are built up slowly, and I often skip around within the composition.

I walk through the steps involved in building up the effects and lighting that shape the female subject. Start with the base or 'parent' layer – the female subject that we isolated with the **Pen Tool**.

This section relies heavily on **Clipping Masks**. **Clipping Masks** are layers affecting only the base or 'parent' layer to which they are attached. The female subject is the 'parent' layer, and the **Clipping Masks** are attached 'children'.

The adding and stacking of **Clipping Masks** are not always done in order. I started with a set of **Solid Color Fill Layers** and added several more **Clipping Masks** above and below, depending on my desired effects as I worked.

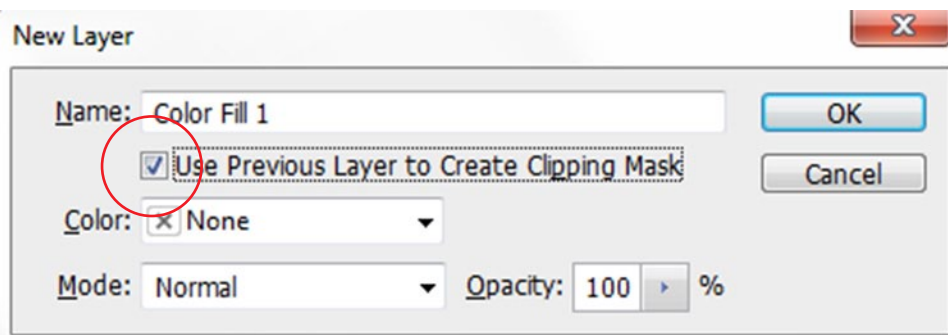
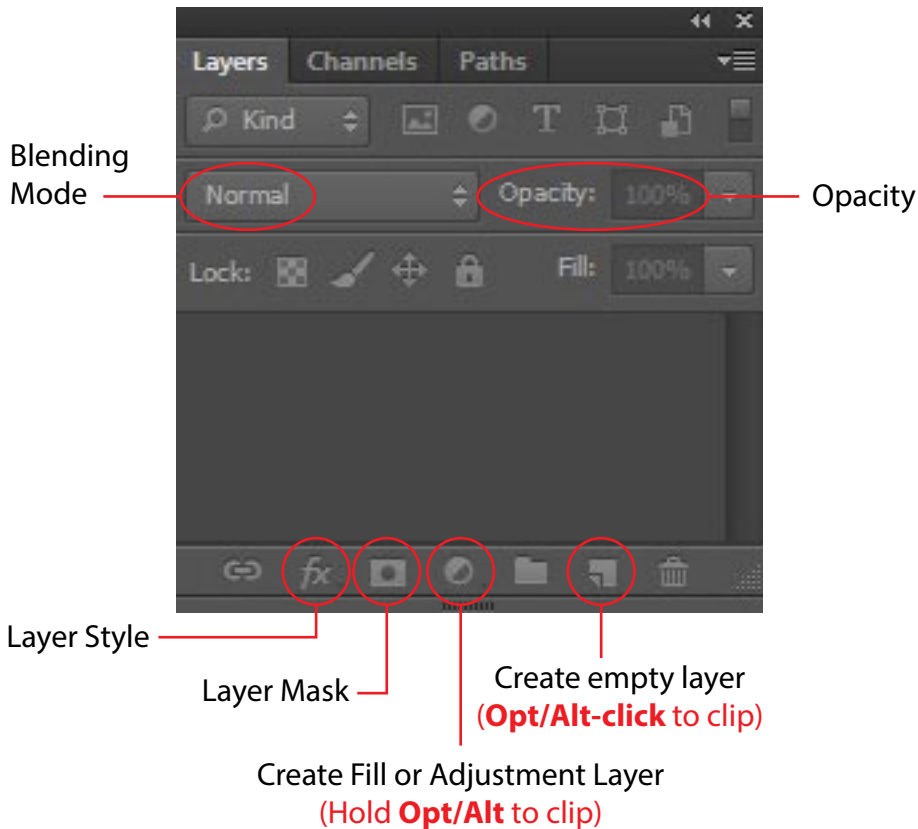
In the following section, I outline how to create **Fill/Adjustment** and empty layer **Clipping Masks** using Photoshop CS6 and earlier.

Create a Fill/Adjustment Layer Clipping Mask:

- With your 'parent' layer selected, hold (**Opt/Alt**), then click and continue to hold the **Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer** icon in the **Layers Panel**.
- Select the desired **Fill/Adjustment** type.
- In the resulting dialog box, select **Use Previous Layer to Create Clipping Mask**. This will clip the new **Fill/Adjustment Layer** to your 'parent' layer.

Create an empty layer Clipping Mask:

- With your 'parent' layer selected, (**Opt/Alt**)-click the **Create New Layer** icon in the **Layers Panel**.
- Select **Use Previous Layer to Create Clipping Mask**. This will clip the new layer to your 'parent' layer.



Photoshop CC and earlier: 1. You can apply/release **Clipping Masks** by placing your cursor between the layers and clicking with (**Opt/Alt**). **2.** You can select the **Clipping Mask**/layer(s) and press (**Cmd/Ctrl**)+(**Opt/Alt**)+**G**. **3.** You can apply/release **Clipping Masks** under the **Layer Menu**.

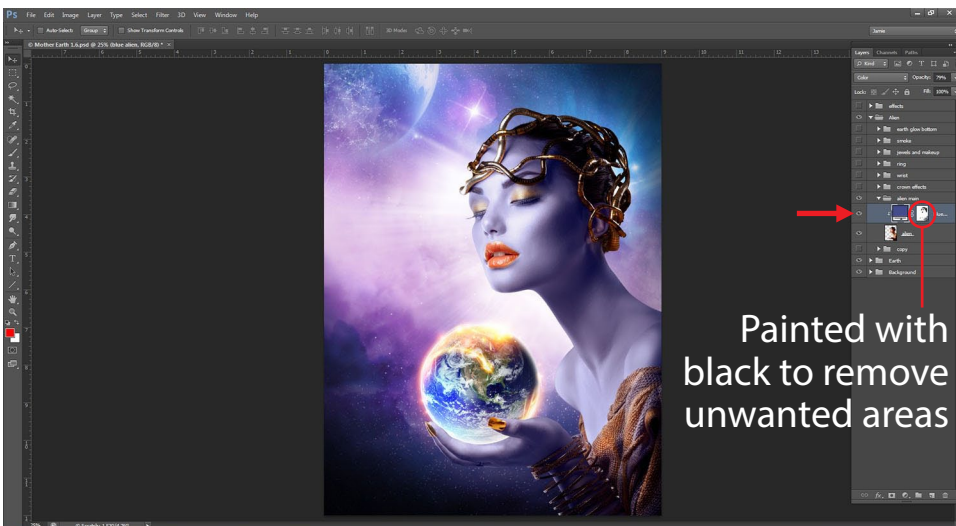


Female subject (from **Pen Tool** selections section). The **Layer Mask** was applied before I began adding effects.



Step 1: Blue skin tone

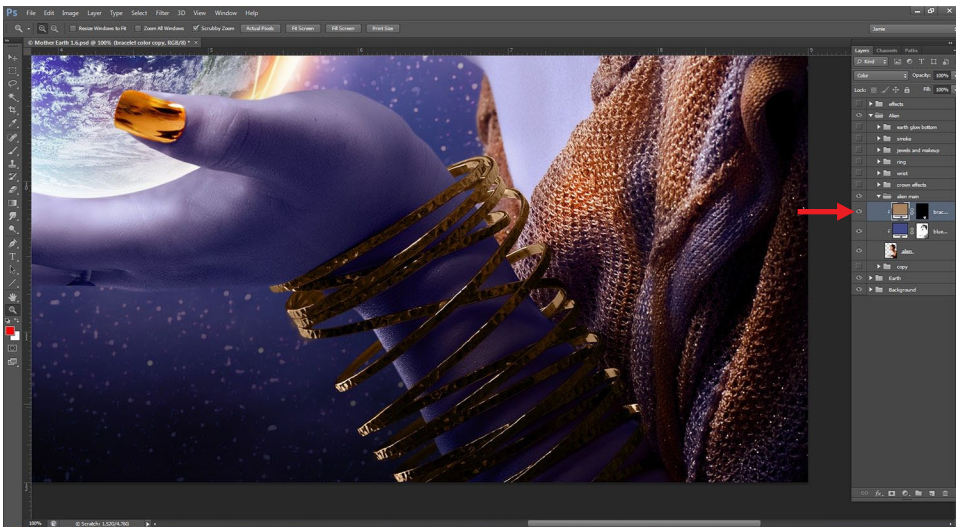
- Select the base or 'parent' (alien) layer.
- Create **Clipping Mask: Solid Color Fill**.
Chose a blue color to tone the skin.
Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 79%.
- Next, select the **Layer Mask** on the **Solid Color Fill** and paint with black to remove blue from unwanted areas.



Step 2: Tone bracelet

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, Create **Clipping Mask: Solid Color Fill**.
I selected a tan color to tone the bracelet.
Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 100%.
- I used the **Pen Tool** to select the bracelet and create a path. I used the resulting path and selection to mask the color effect to only show on the bracelet.

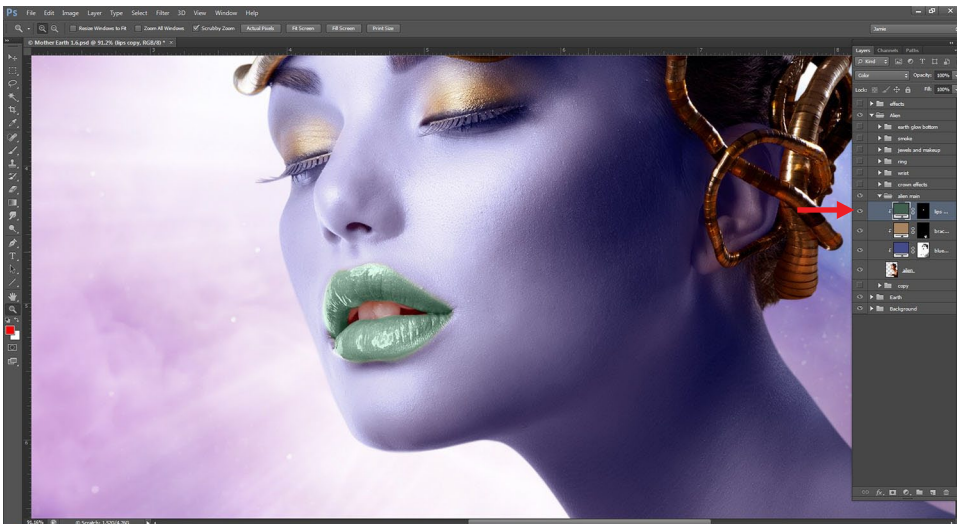
Note: Alternately, you can hand paint the color on the bracelet.



Step 3: Green lips

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, Create **Clipping Mask: Solid Color Fill**.
I selected a green color to tone the lips.
Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 100%.
- Select the **Layer Mask**. With the foreground color set to black, hold (**Opt/Alt**) and press (**Delete/Backspace**).
This will fill the **Layer Mask** with black and hide the green. With the **Layer Mask** selected, I paint with white over the lips where I want to reveal the green color.

Note: I used a **Solid Color Fill** for this layer because I like the ease of changing colors quickly when needed.



Step 4: Neck highlight

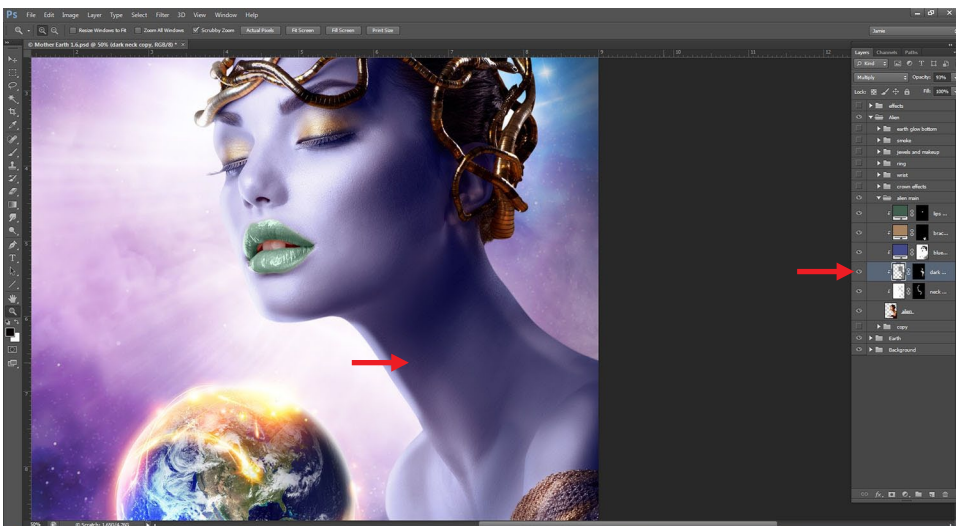
- Select the base or 'parent' (alien) layer.
- Create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Set foreground color to black.
- **(Cmd/Ctrl)-click** on the alien **Layer Thumbnail**.
- Press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+Shift+I** to inverse the selection.
- Press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+Backspace** to fill with white (hidden).
Make sure you still have your new empty layer selected.
- Press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+D** to deselect the selection.
- Select the **Move Tool (V)**. Nudge the white into place using the arrow keys.
- Add a **Layer Mask** to remove unwanted areas of the highlight. **Opacity: 52%** (blur to soften edge).

Optional highlight methods: 1. Use a **Layer Style** (fx icon) in the **Layers Panel**; add a white (Inside) **Stroke**. Next, convert to a layer: **Layer Menu>Layer Style>Create Layer**. Add **Layer Mask** to remove unwanted areas. Blur to smooth edges. **2.** Alternately, hand paint the edges.



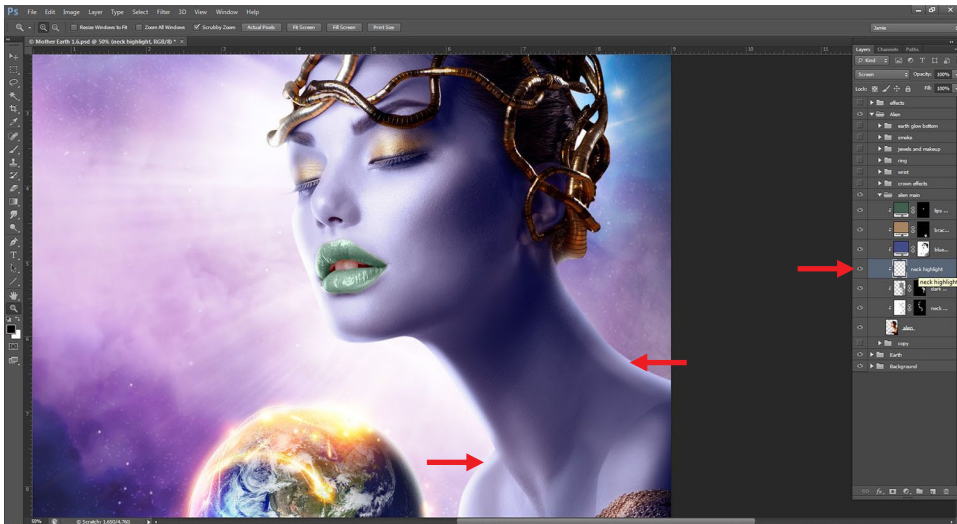
Step 5: Darken neck

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
 - Using the **Color Picker**, select a medium skin tone color or sample from the neck.
 - **(Cmd/Ctrl)-click** the alien **Layer Thumbnail**.
 - From the **Select Menu: Modify>Contract: 60 pixels**.
 - **(Opt/Alt)+Delete/Backspace** to fill the area.
Make sure you still have your new empty layer selected.
 - Create a **Layer Mask** to remove unwanted shadow areas, keeping the neck area.
- Blending Mode: Multiply. Opacity: 93%** (blur to soften edge).



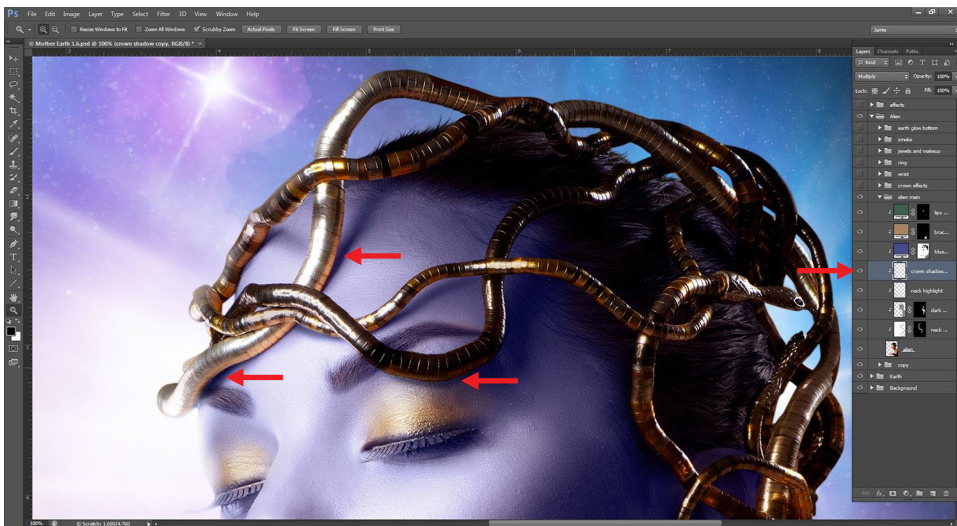
Step 6: Neck highlight

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using white with a soft brush, paint highlights along the face, neck, and shoulders to build up the backlight appearance. Lower **Brush Opacity** to 20% and build up the desired highlight. **Blending Mode: Normal**.



Step 7: Crown shadows

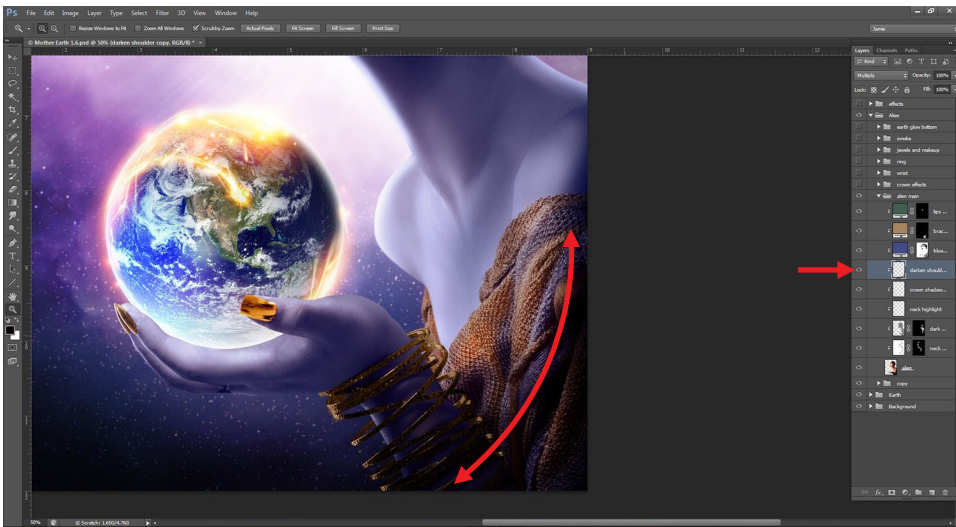
- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using a medium gray color with a soft brush, paint and enhance the crown shadows. Lower **Brush Opacity** to 20% and build up the desired shadow. **Blending Mode: Multiply. Opacity: 100%.**



Step 8: Darken corner

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using a medium gray color with a soft brush, paint around the bottom right corner.
Blending Mode: Multiply. Opacity: 100%.

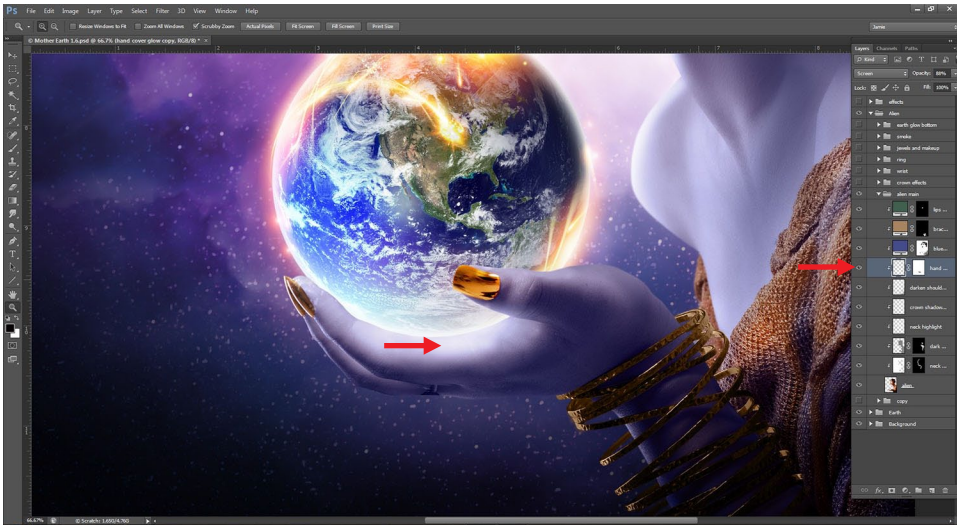
Tip: Darkening less important areas will help focus the viewers' attention.



Step 9: Hand glow

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using white with a soft brush, paint a glow in the palm of the hand.
- Create a **Layer Mask** to remove unwanted areas.
Blending Mode: Normal. Opacity 88%.

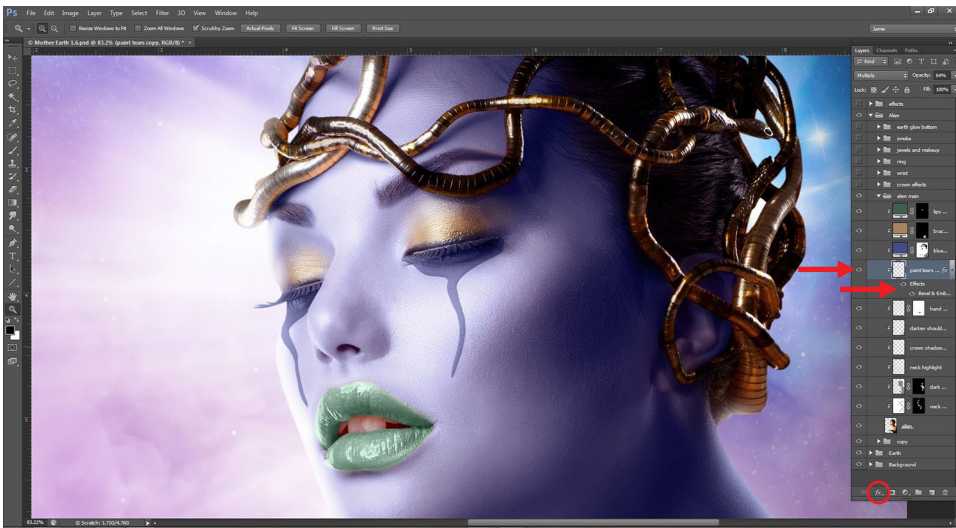
Note: This is the starting point to integrate the hand and globe. I'll add similar layers as I work.



Step 10: Painted tears

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using a medium gray color with a hard brush, paint the tears/makeup. **Note:** using a graphics tablet makes painting much easier.
- Add a subtle **Bevel and Emboss Layer Style** (fx icon) to add dimension to the tears.

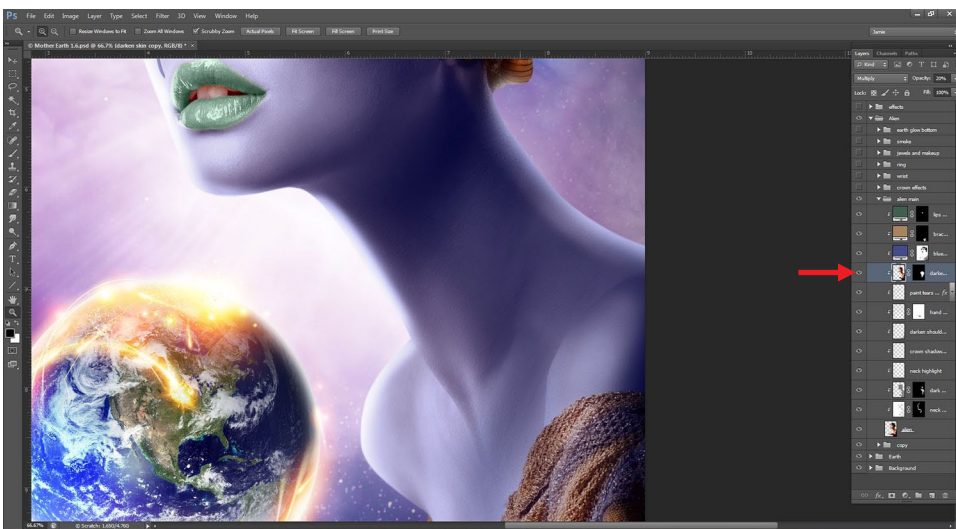
Blending Mode: Multiply. Opacity 64%.



Step 11: Darken neck using layer copy

- Select the base or 'parent' (alien) layer.
- Press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+J** to copy the layer.
- Press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+(Opt/Alt)+G** to make a Clipping Mask.
- Drag the layer just below the blue **Solid Color Fill** layer.
- Set **Blending Mode** to **Multiply**. **Opacity: 40%**.
- Add a **Layer Mask** and fill with black to hide the layer.
- Using a soft brush, paint with white to reveal some darker shading on the neck and chest.

Tip: Using a copy of the base/parent layer set to Multiply/Screen is a useful technique to Burn/Dodge areas of your subject. Lower the opacity until you reach the desired effect and mask where needed.



Step 12: Hand glow

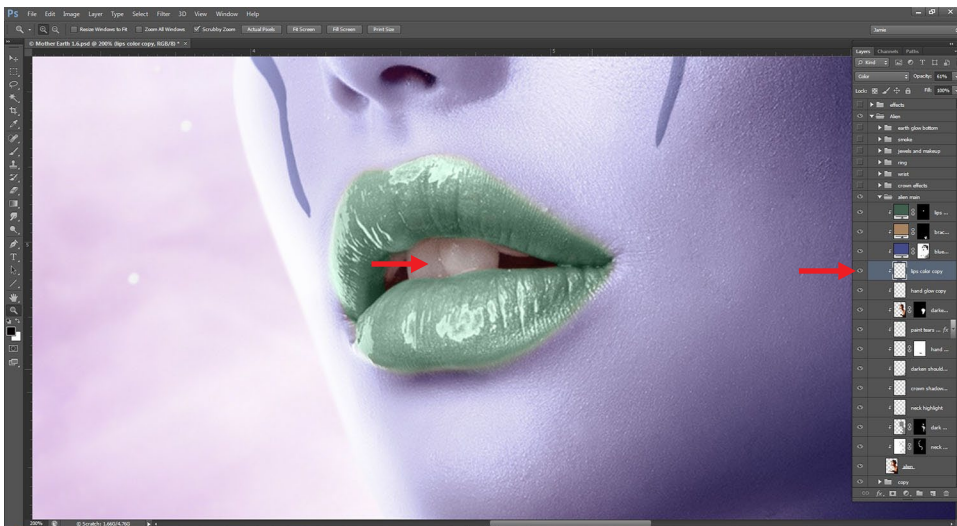
- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using white with a soft brush, paint a thin highlight on the palm.

Note: This is similar to step 9, but the desired effect is different. The process is to build up the effects.



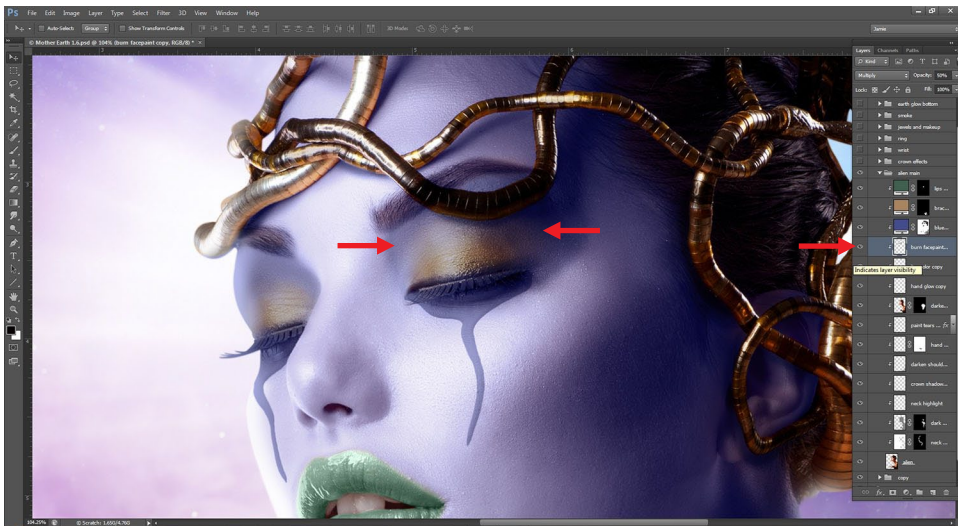
Step 13: Remove color cast from teeth

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using a medium gray with a soft brush, paint over the teeth area. This is to remove the red color cast.
Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 61%.



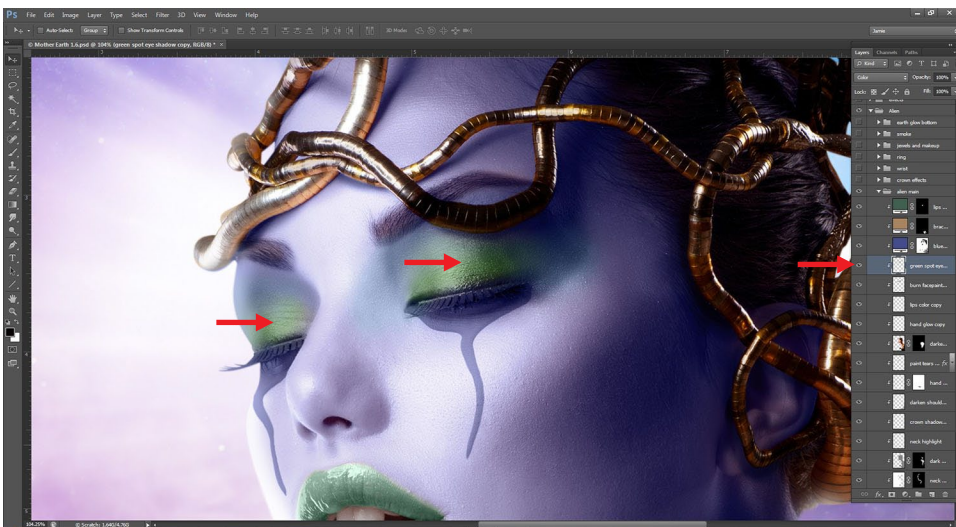
Step 14: Darken eyes

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using a medium gray with a soft brush, paint in the eye socket area to darken around the eyes.
Blending Mode: Multiply. Opacity: 50%.



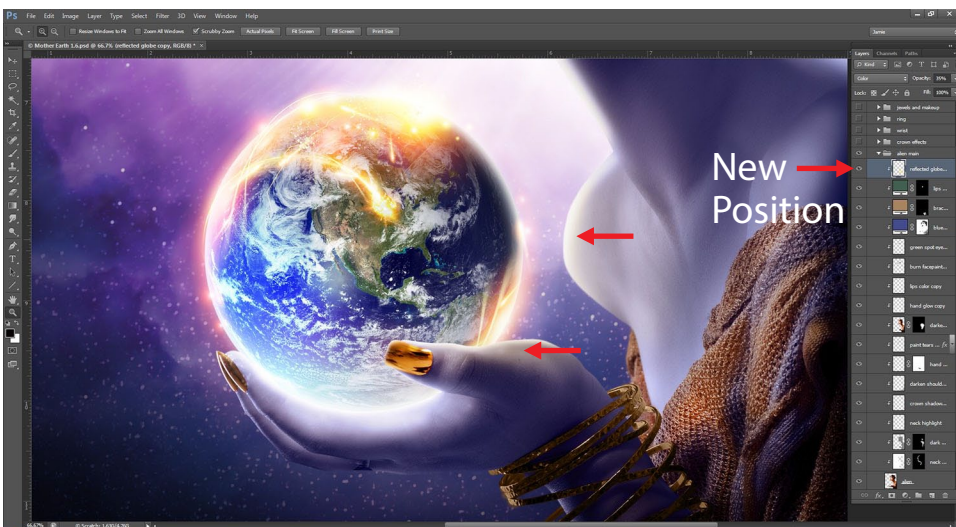
Step 15: Green eye shadow

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using green and then blue, paint with a soft brush around the eye to enhance the color of the eye shadow. **Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 100%.**



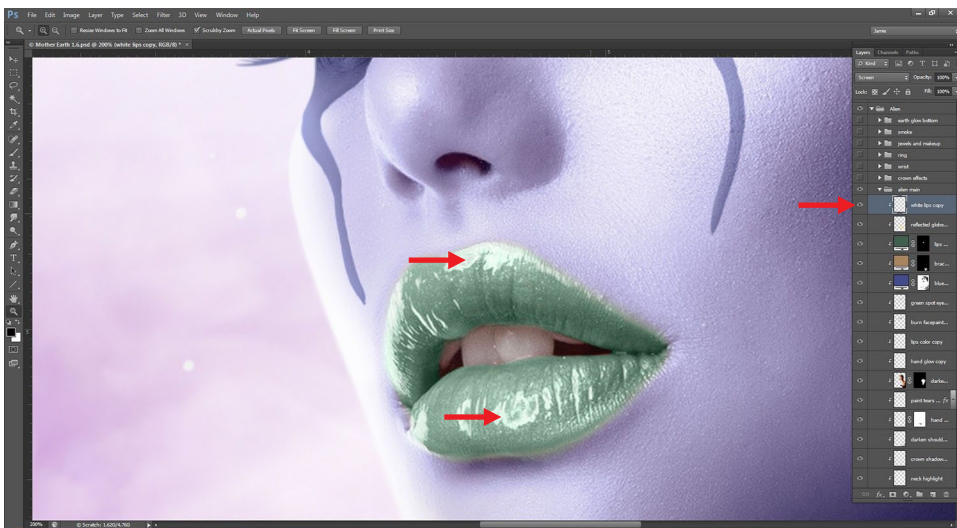
Step 16: Globe reflected light

- We'll now start working above the three **Solid Color Fill Layers**.
- With the green fill or 'Lips' layer selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using a yellow-orange color with a soft brush, paint (reflected) color onto the shoulder and palm. This light is coming from the globe.
Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 35%.



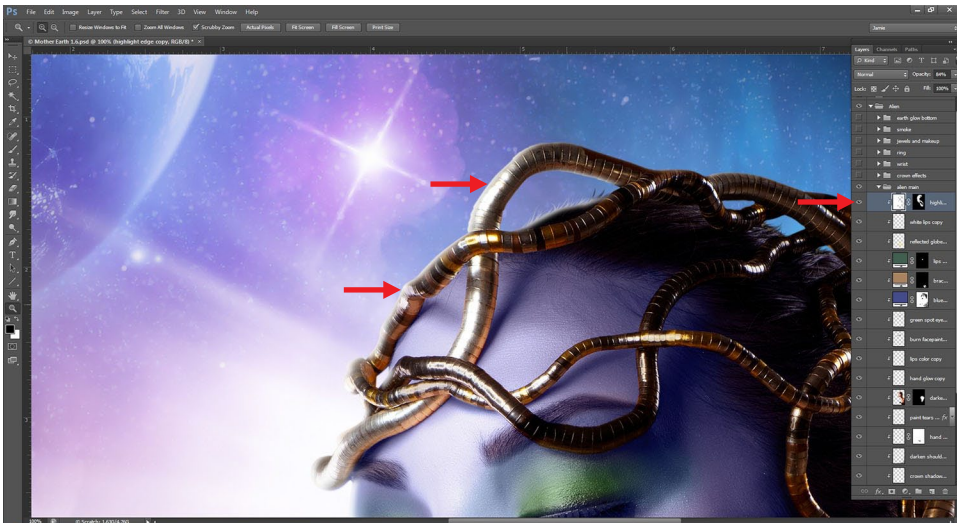
Step 17: Lip highlights

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using white, paint with a hard brush to enhance the highlights on the lips. Lower **Brush Opacity** to 20% and build up the desired highlight.
Blending Mode: Normal. Opacity: 100%.



Step 18: Crown highlights

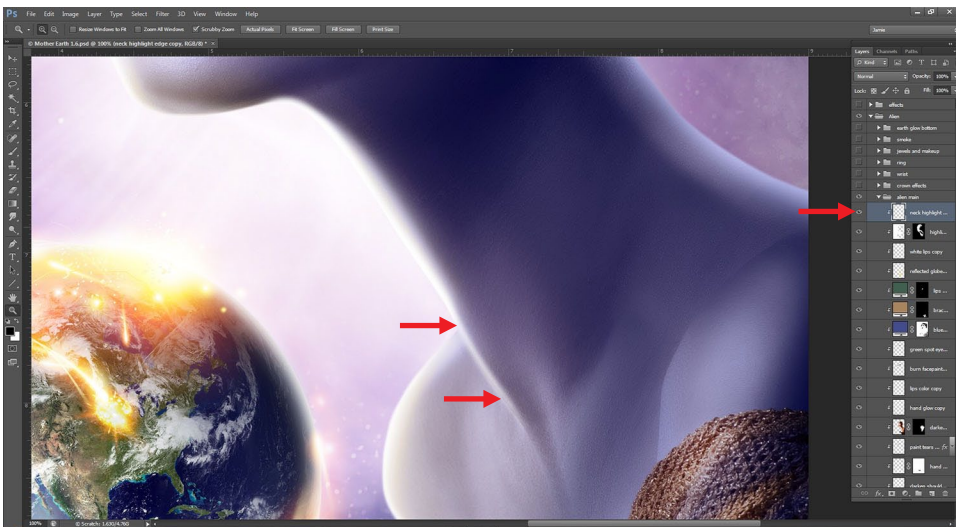
- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
 - Set foreground color to black.
 - (**Cmd/Ctrl**)-click the 'parent' (alien) **Layer Thumbnail**.
 - Press (**Cmd/Ctrl**)+**Shift+I** to inverse the selection.
 - Press (**Cmd/Ctrl**)+**Backspace** to fill with white (hidden).
- Make sure you still have your new empty layer selected.
- Press (**Cmd/Ctrl**)+**D** to deselect the selection.
 - Select the **Move Tool (V)**. Nudge the white into place using the arrow keys.
 - Add a **Layer Mask** to remove unwanted areas.
 - Blur the highlight. In the **Filter Menu>Blur>Gaussian Blur: 3.6 Pixels**.



Step 19: Neck highlight

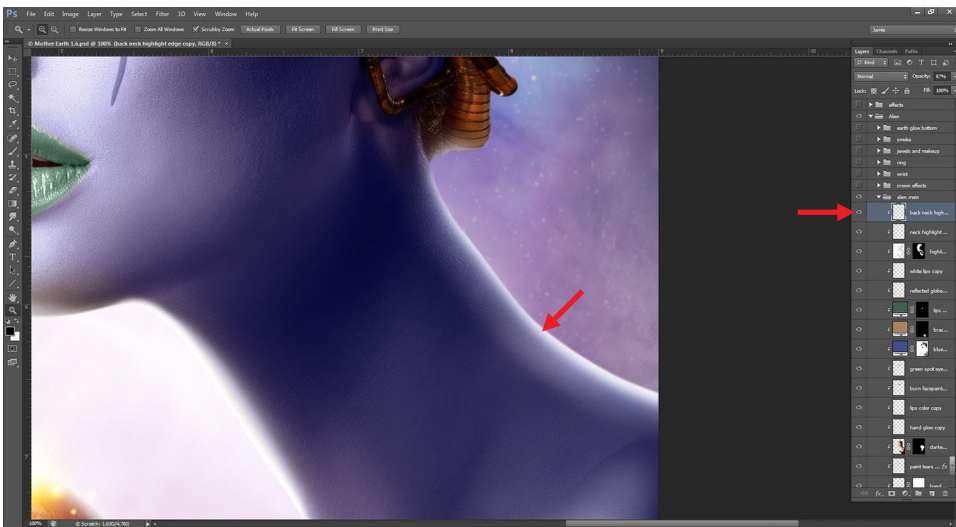
- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using white, paint with a small brush along the neckline to create a highlight, which will add some separation for the neck. Lower Opacity for desired effect.

Note: You can also make a selection of the area you want to highlight and fill it with white. You would then blur and mask unwanted areas.



Step 20: Back neck highlight

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
- Using white, paint with a soft brush and add a highlight along the rear portion of the neck.
Opacity: 87%.

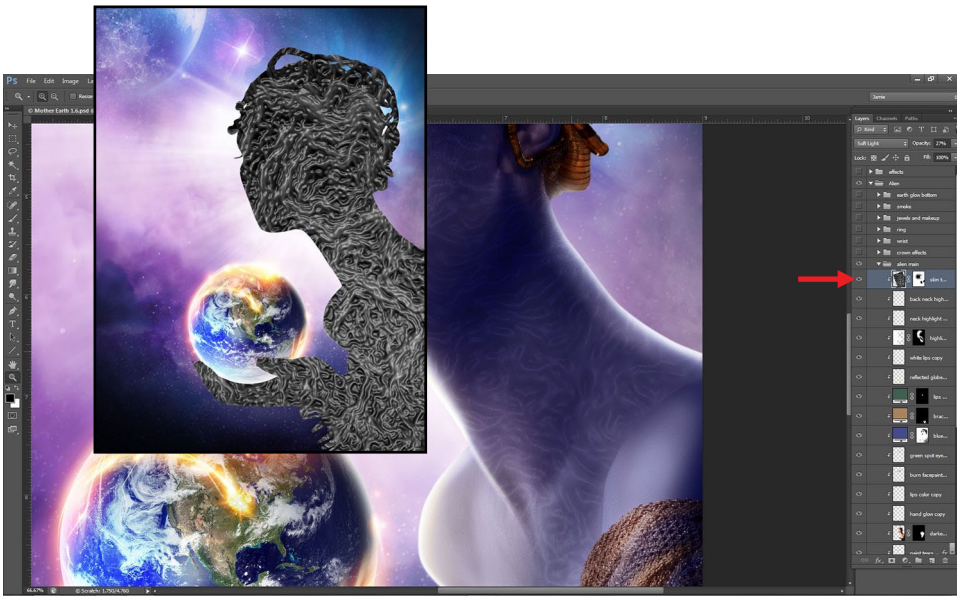


Step 21: Skin texture (before and after)

- Drag the texture photo (3013740) into the composition and make a **Clipping Mask** (Cmd/Ctrl)+(Opt/Alt)+G.
- Position and scale. Rasterize layer (if Smart Object).
- **Desaturate** the image (Cmd/Ctrl)+U and pull the **Saturation** slider to -100.
- Using a **Layer Mask**, remove unwanted areas by painting with black.

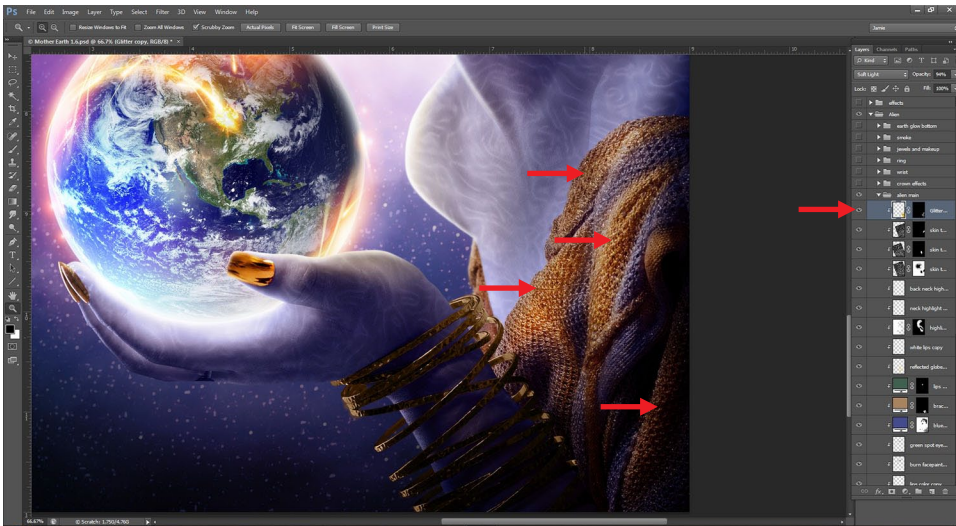
Blending Mode: Soft Light. Opacity: 27%.

Note: I repeated step 21 for both shoulders. I wanted to use the same texture, but vary the pattern where the shoulders meet the chest.



Step 22: Gold texture on clothing

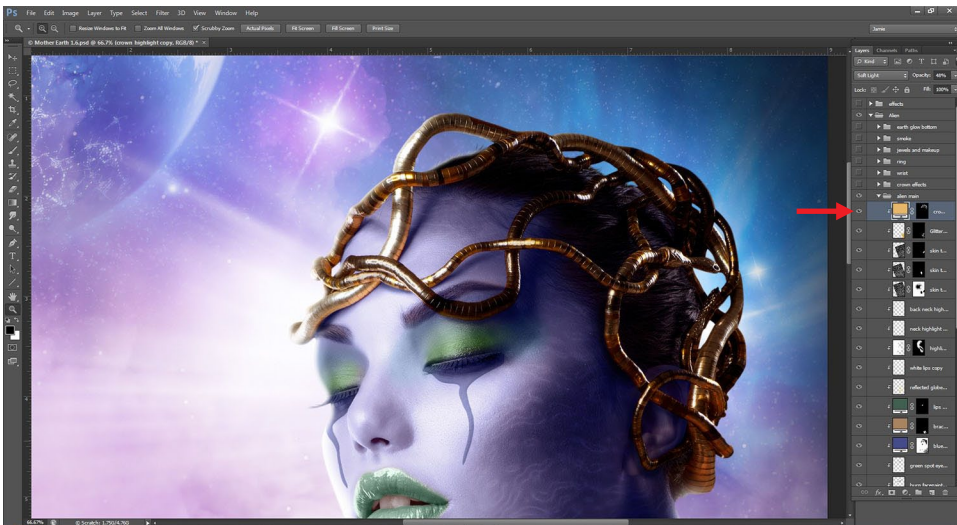
- Drag the gold texture photo (65539206) into the composition and add as a **Clipping Mask (Cmd/Ctrl)+(Opt/Alt)+G.**
 - Position and scale over the clothing.
 - Using a **Layer Mask**, remove unwanted areas by painting with black.
- Blending Mode: Soft Light. Opacity: 94%.**



Step 23: Crown color

- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: Solid Color Fill**.
An orange-gold color was used.
Blending Mode: Color. Opacity: 100%.
- Fill the **Layer Mask** with black to hide the solid fill and paint with white to reveal desired areas.

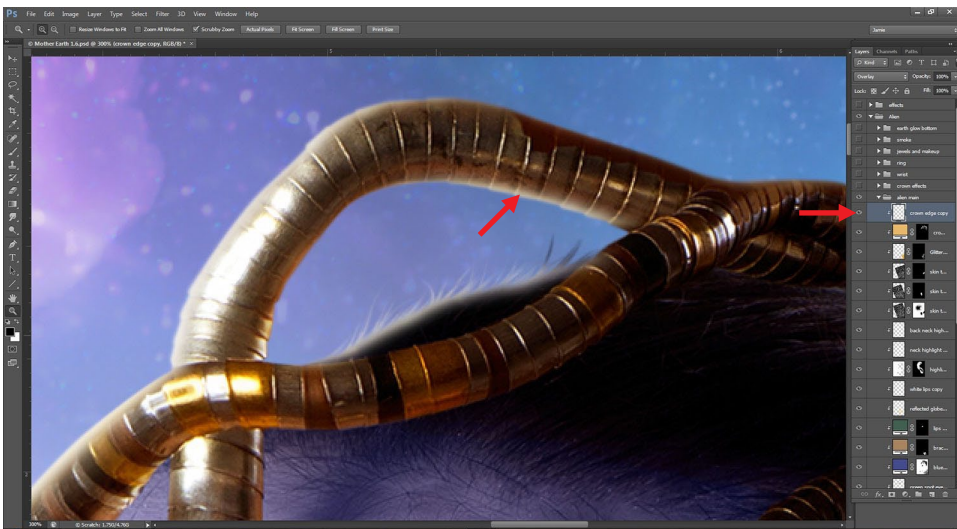
Note: The combination of a graphics tablet and the **Rotate View Tool (R)** in Photoshop make the painting motion much more natural and fluid.



Step 24: Crown edge highlight

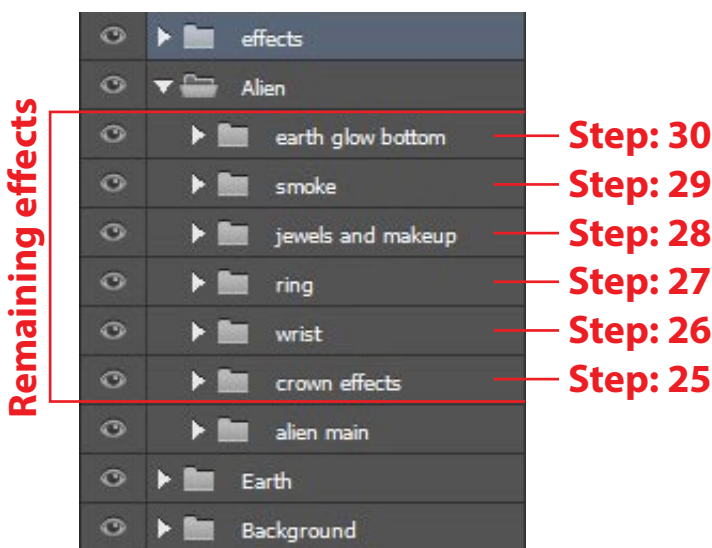
- With the previous Clipping Mask selected, create **Clipping Mask: New empty layer**.
 - Using a soft brush, paint with yellow-gold and add highlights to the crown.
- Blending Mode: Overlay. Opacity: 100%.**

Note: I repeated step 24 to paint additional highlights, except I used a **Normal Blending Mode** with **50% Opacity**.



Remaining effects

The remaining effects that apply to the female alien are not **Clipping Masks** applied to the base/parent layer. They are a series of nested group layers that include similar effects, which are masked or applied in spots over the alien. The stacking order was covered in the Organizing Layers section on page 16. Summarized are each group, and I explain the techniques used.

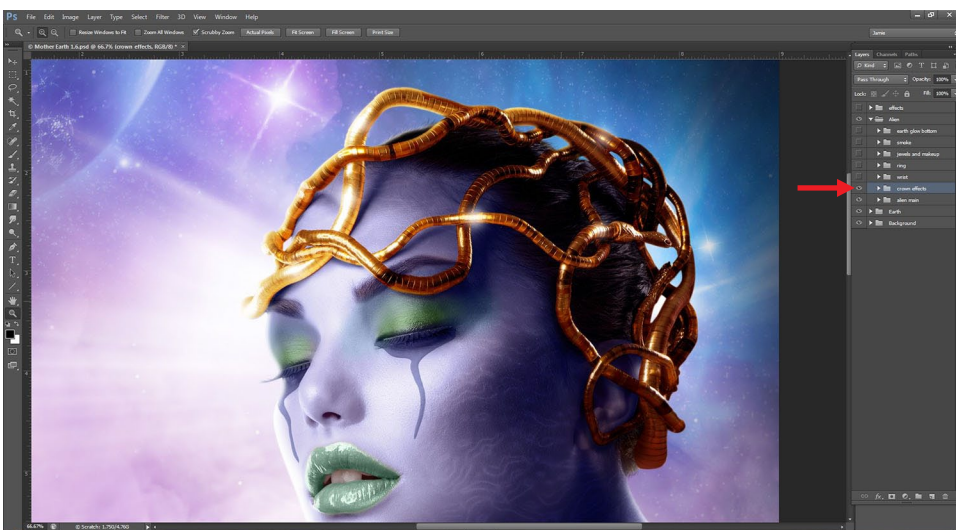


Step 25: Crown effects (nested group)

Using the same process in the **Pen Tool** selections section on page 8, I isolated the crown (independent of the alien). I needed to easily add effects to the crown without having to hand paint multiple effects. The following effects are all masked by the crown.

Step 25 continued:

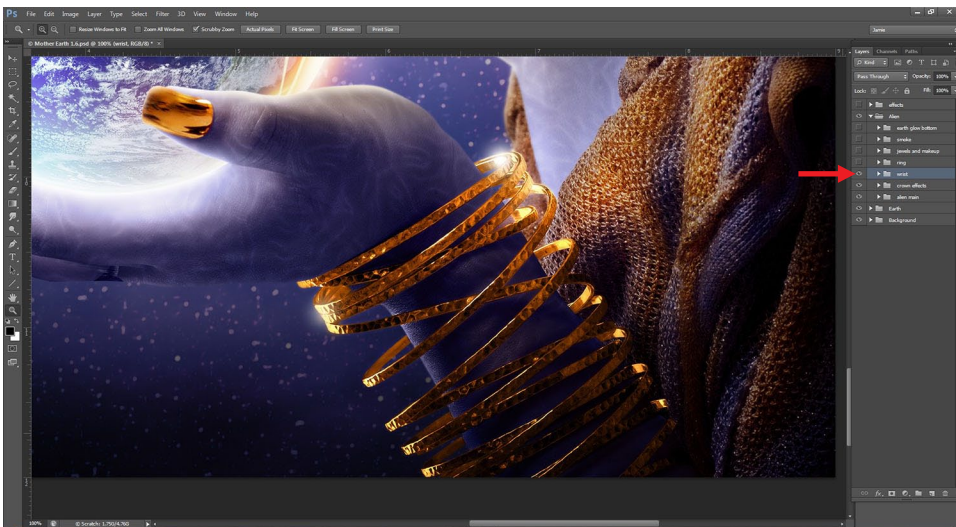
- Hand painted small hairs that eased the transition from subject to background.
- **Solid Color Fill Layer** to enhance the gold color and contrast. **Blending Mode: Overlay. Opacity: 69%.**
- **Solid Color Fill Layer** to bring out the gold tones. **Blending Mode: Soft Light.**
- Hand painted shadows for the back edge of the crown. **Blending Mode: Multiply.**
- Added **Solid Color Fill Layer** to add some blue into the right side of the crown (shadow area). **Blending Mode: Soft Light.**
- Using white and a soft brush, added some glints of light or highlights to the crown. **Opacity: 80%.**



Step 26: Wrist (nested group)

Using the same process from the **Pen Tool** selections section on page 8, I isolated the wrist bracelet (independent of the alien). The following effects are masked by the bracelet.

- **Solid Color Fill Layer** to add some gold color and contrast. **Blending Mode: Overlay. Opacity: 81%.**
- **Solid Color Fill Layer** to enhance the gold color. **Blending Mode: Soft Light. Opacity: 49%.**
- **Levels Adjustment Layer** added to brighten the bracelet. Pushed the highlight slider to the left.
- Hand painted glints or highlights using a white brush.



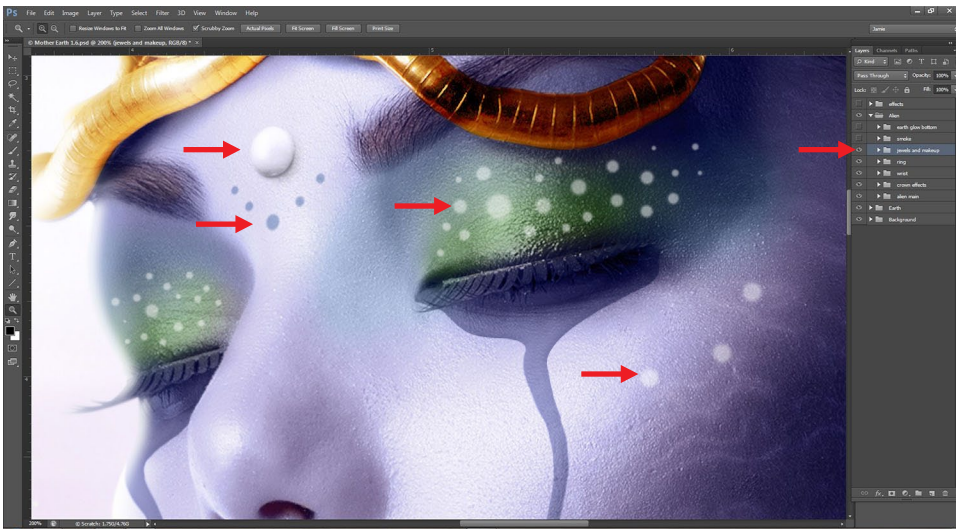
Step 27: Ring (nested group)

- Isolated the ring and increased the size.
- Added the nebula stock photo (61830159) over each of the balls of the ring using a **Screen Blending Mode** to integrate, then added a **Layer Mask** to hide edges. The green nebulae were colored using a green **Solid Color Fill Layer** with a **Clipping Mask**.



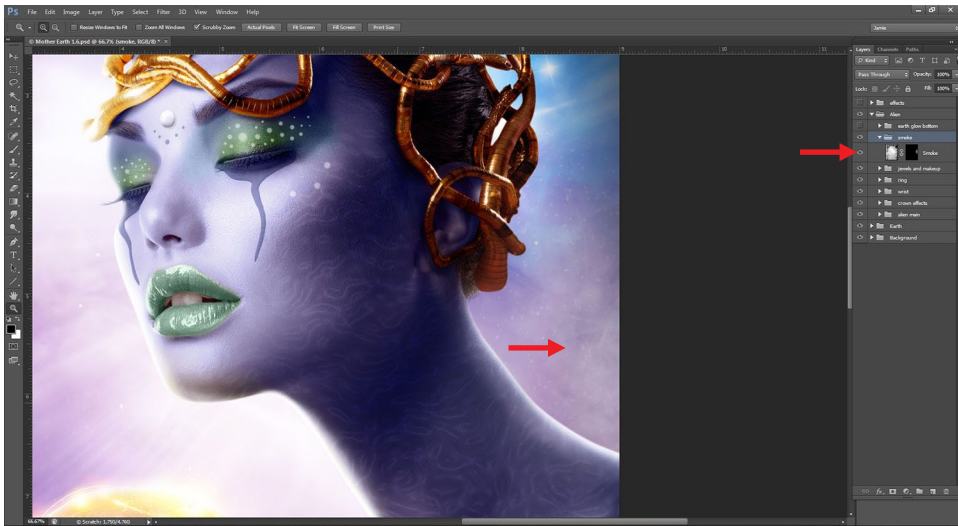
Step 28: Jewels and makeup (nested group)

- Using a small white brush, I painted dots around the eyes. **Blending Mode: Normal. Opacity: 49%.**
- Using a small gray brush, I painted darker dots between the eyes.
Blending Mode: Multiply. Opacity: 51%.
- Using the female (skin pearl) stock photo (62060254), I added a single pearl decoration to the center of the alien's forehead.



Step 29: Smoke over shoulder (nested group)

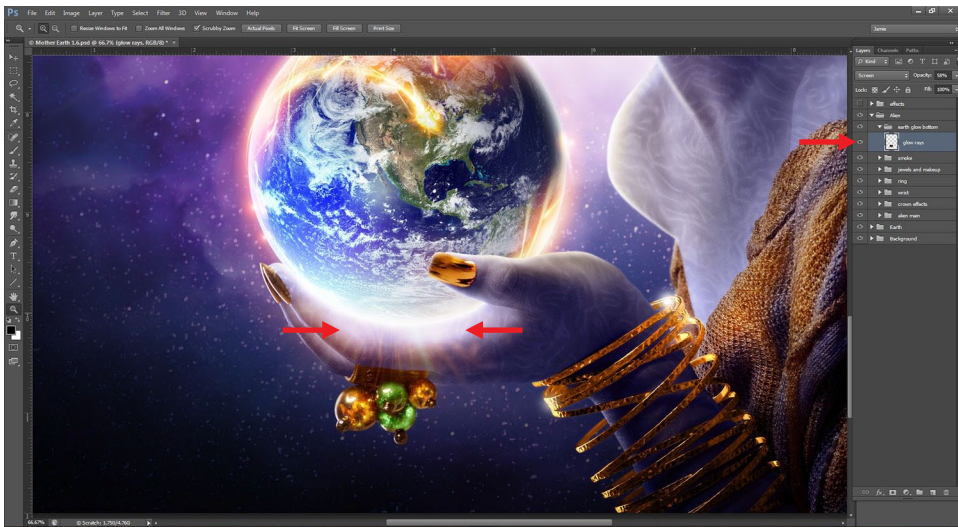
Using my photo of a cloud of smoke, I added a small amount of smoke over the right side shoulder, then masked unwanted areas. **Blending Mode: Screen.**



Step 30: Glow over palm (nested group)

Using a stock image of light effects (64627579),
I added light rays or glow effects to the base of the globe
and over the palm, then masked unwanted areas.

Blending Mode: Screen. Opacity: 58%.



Finishing effects

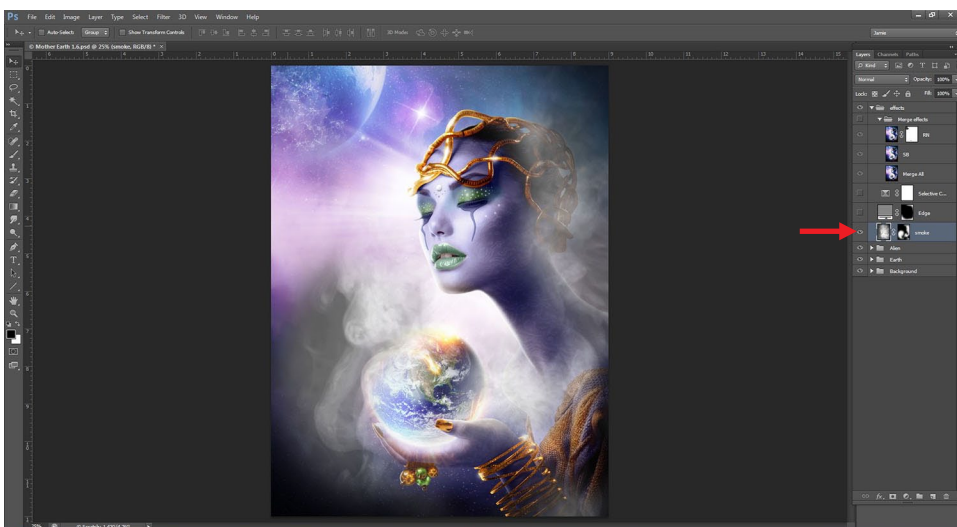
Adding finishing effects helps unify the overall appearance. The effects vary, but generally include color adjustments, filters, and sometimes overpainting. In the following pages, I outline the steps I used for my composite. The final effects are in a top level group named Effects.

Smoke (finishing effects)

My smoke photo was inserted to add some atmosphere.

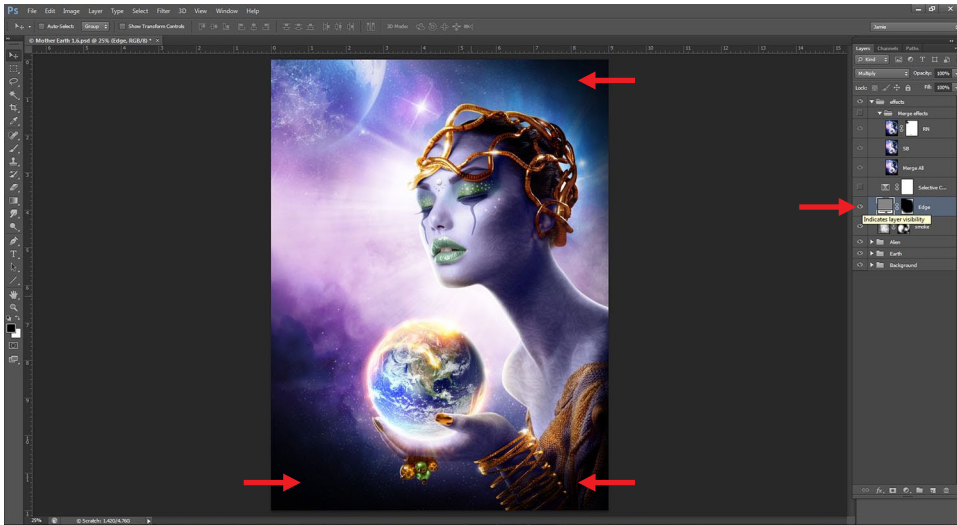
A **Layer Mask** was added to remove unwanted areas.

Blending Mode: Soft Light.



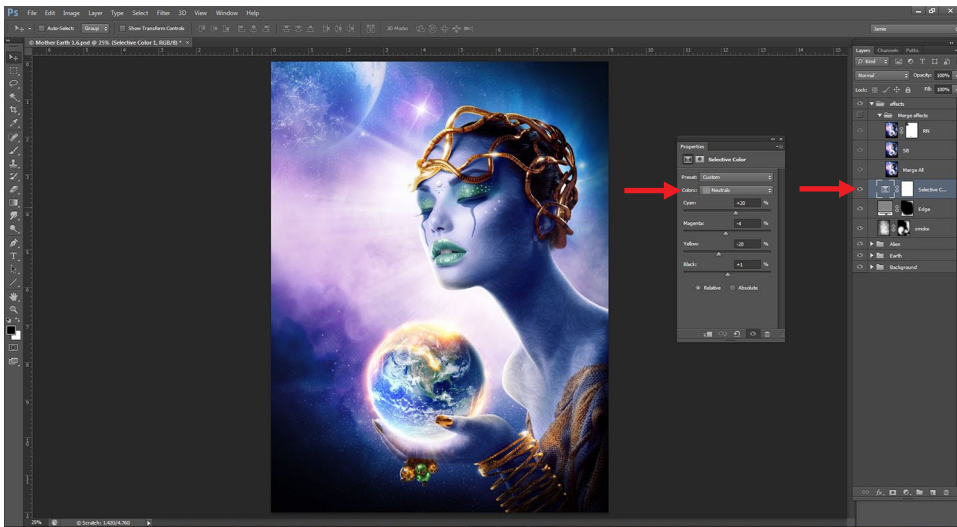
Darken edges (finishing effects)

A gray **Solid Color Fill Layer** was added to burn the edges. Using a **Layer Mask**, I removed the center portion, leaving the edges. **Blending Mode: Multiply**.



Selective Color (finishing effects)

I added a **Selective Color Adjustment Layer**. I wanted to blend and enhance the purple and blue tones. The **Neutrals** color option was chosen with the following settings: **Cyan +20, Magenta -4, Yellow -20, Black +1**.



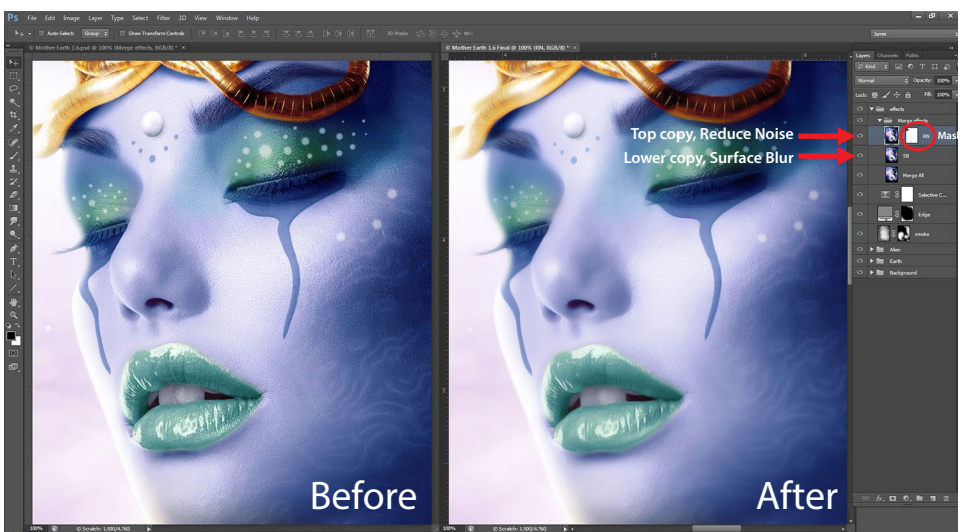
Surface Blur & Reduce Noise (finishing effects)

I created a new layer and 'merged all visible layers' into it.

Create a new layer at the top level and press **(Cmd/Ctrl)+(Opt/Alt)+Shift+E**. This merges all the visible layers into a copy. Make two copies of the merged layer by pressing **(Cmd/Ctrl)+J**. Name the lower copy **Surface Blur** and name the top copy **Reduce Noise**.

Surface Blur

Using the **Layer Visibility** (eye icon), turn off the **Reduce Noise** layer for now. Select the **Surface Blur** layer. Under the **Filter Menu>Blur>Surface Blur**: **Radius 3, Threshold 15**.



Reduce Noise (finishing effects)

- Turn the visibility (eye icon) for the **Reduce Noise** layer on and select the layer.
- Under the **Filter Menu>Noise>Reduce Noise:**
Strength 10, Preserve Details 27% (Other settings: 0).

Note: The **Reduce Noise Filter** is a little harsh on some of the details. I used a **Layer Mask** to remove some of the detail of the upper left planet and the nebula on the ring. This mask will reveal the **Surface Blur** effect from the lower layer, which was less destructive to those areas.

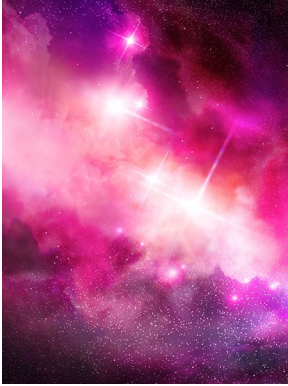
Final thoughts

I hope the techniques shared will advance your work. Although the ebook contains a lot of technical information and techniques, remember that your creativity and story telling ability will make your work unique. Keep working, and enjoy your art.

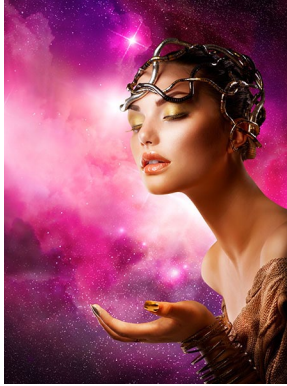
I leave you with a breakdown of the basic stages of the photo composite, followed by a link to a time-lapse video showing my editing process.

Final tip: Don't forget to save your work. I generally save my work in stages. For instance, Mother Earth 1.0.psd, 1.1.psd, 1.2.psd, and so on. Save a new version whenever major progress occurs.

Photo composite basic stages



Base background image,
transformed and positioned



Female subject added after
Pen Tool isolation



Globe placed in hand



Background buildup and start
of toning the female subject



Painted effects and edge
highlights added



Globe effects added to indicate
war and destruction



Enhanced lighting and effects on
the crown and bracelet



Ring enlarged; nebulae added



Finishing effects applied



Mother Earth



Watch the photo composite process in this time-lapse video.



Don't miss my latest work and news.



Submit your feedback or questions.