

Tricky Transparency, Part Three — The Transparency Test, Pass or Fail?

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Tricky Transparency, Part Three The Transparency Test, Pass or Fail?

by Jen White

Transparency is the key to any good complex photo mask, but transparency cannot be determined with just a glance. Part Three of my Tricky Transparency series is all about transparency—what it looks like and how to test for it.

NOTE: Understanding Part One and Part Two of this series is an important part to understanding Part Three.

Part Three includes:

- Understanding Transparency in Masks
- Applying the Transparency Test

For this tutorial you will need:

- A computer program capable of lowering the Lightness values of an image, like Photoshop Elements or Adobe Photoshop.
- A small assortment of masks collected from the assignments in Part One or Part Two of this series, or use the download found in Part One.



Understanding Transparency in Masks

When surfing the web, I often come across images that would make a wonderful complex photo mask for a scrapbook page or other digital project.

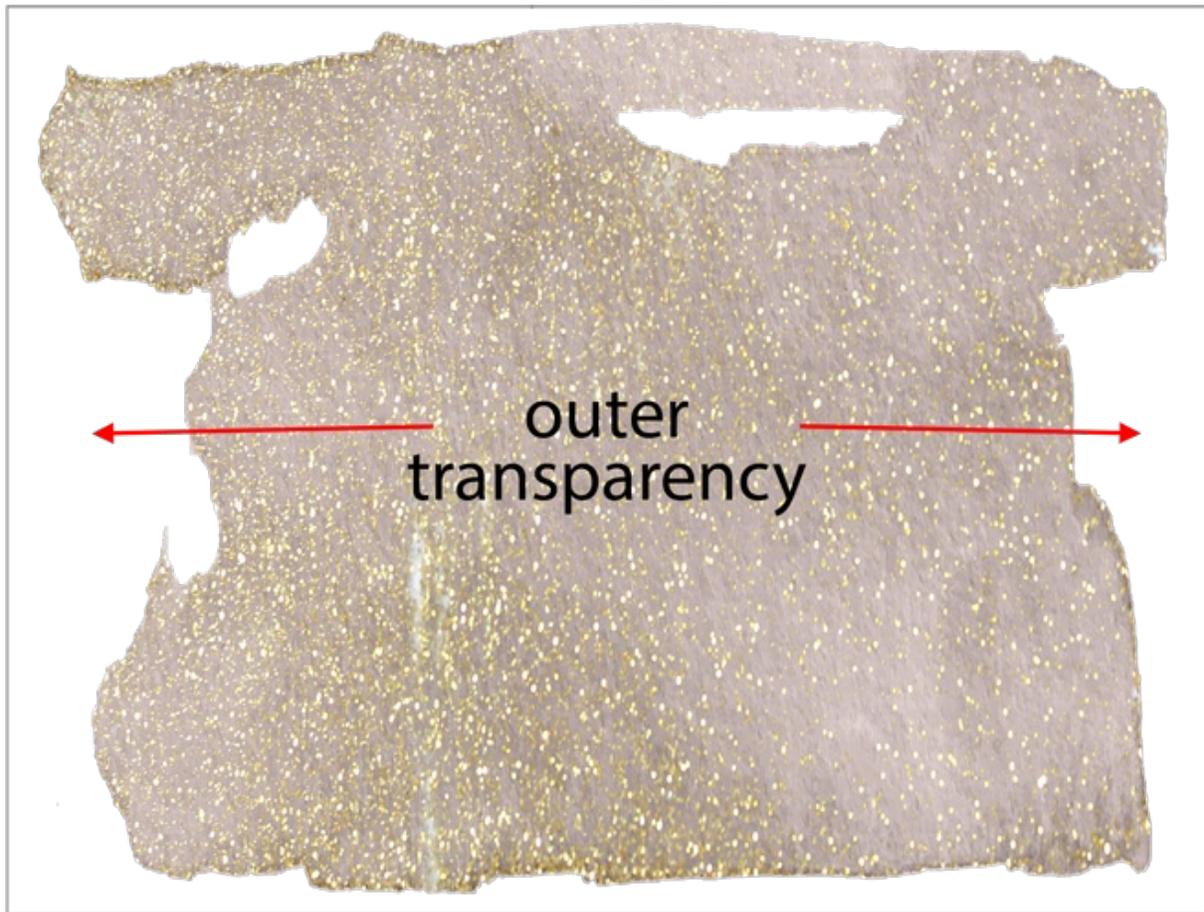
The Problem

The problem is, the images I find are often not geared toward my craft. That is to say, they often do not contain the transparency that is required for a great photo mask.

Above are three images (from the download in Part One of this series) that we've already identified as having “**good**” potential to be a complex photo mask. Note: The lines indicate the image boundaries.

When looking at the three files above on the web (in Google Images or a blogpost like this), transparency is generally not indicated or immediately noticeable.

There are two kinds of transparency we'll be referring to in this tutorial, let's take a look at them now.

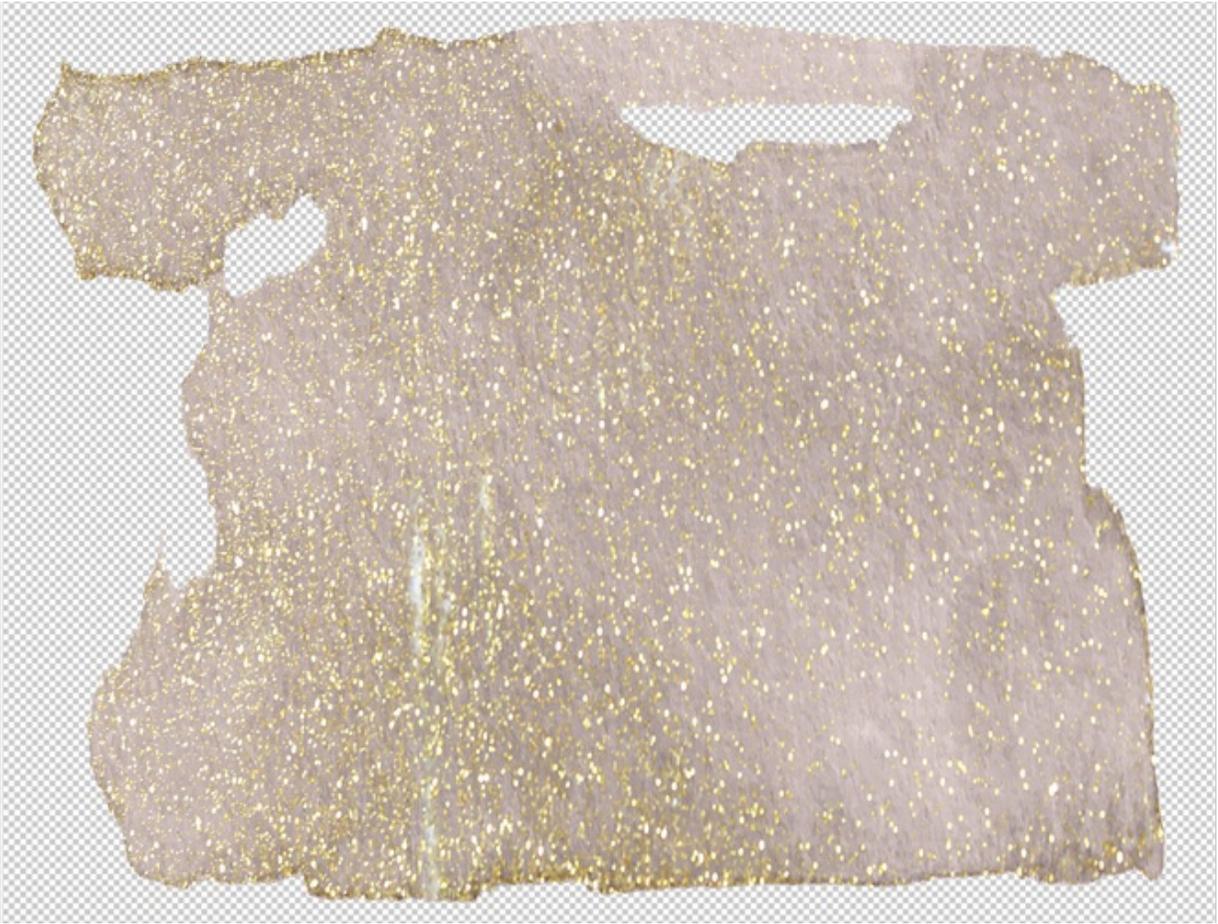


Outer Transparency in Mask Images

Outer transparency refers to the pixels **surrounding** the mask.

In the image above, I cannot tell just by looking if the gold painterly blob is surrounded by white pixels or surrounded by transparent pixels.

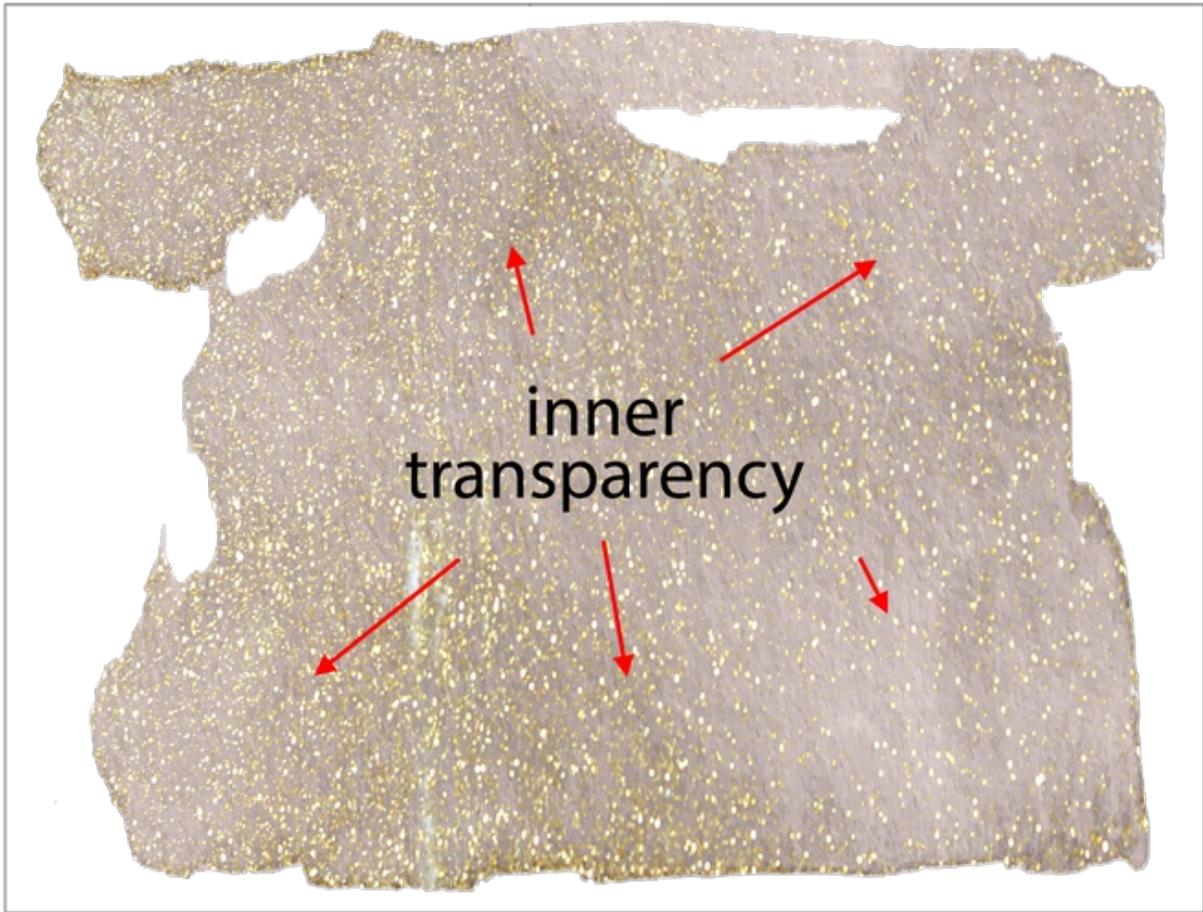
But, why does it matter? While either one has good potential, a mask surrounded by white pixels will require an extra step if you want to use it as a clipping mask.



Outer transparency is easily determined by simply opening an image in Photoshop or Photoshop Elements. These programs will display transparent pixels as a grey and white checkerboard by default. This is shown above.

Also, outer transparency can **sometimes** be determined by the file name extension of an image.

- A .jpg or .jpeg extension does not support transparent pixels, so you will know immediately that the image does not contain transparency. But that's not a problem, we'll talk more about this farther down.
- A .png extension will **sometimes** indicate that transparency is being used. But you cannot rely on this alone.



Inner Transparency in Mask Images

Inner transparency refers to the pixels **inside** the mask, the ones that make up the mask itself.

In the image above, I cannot tell just by looking if the gold painterly blob is made up of solid colors (gold, tan, white) or semi transparent colors.

But, why does it matter? If a potential mask has both outer transparency and inner transparency, it is ready to be used as a clipping mask. If it doesn't contain either or both of these things, then more work will be required in order for the mask to be useful.



See the Difference

Above are two potentially good mask images from the download folder in Part One of this series. Using Photoshop, I placed both images over a busy background paper.

- Both of these images contain outer transparency.
- Only one of these images contain inner transparency. Which one is it?

ANSWERS:

— The image on the left, the gold painterly blob, is **does not** contain inner transparency. You cannot see the pattern of the paper through the paint.

— The image on the right **does** contain inner transparency. You can see the pattern of the paper through the paint.

Does this mean the gold painterly blob cannot be used as a complex photo mask?

No. The gold painterly blob is still usable, it will just require a little extra work before it can be used. I'll show you how to do that in Part Four of this series.

==> Now that you understand what transparency is and what it really looks like, let me show you the easy way to test for it.

Recall Part One

Continuing through this tutorial assumes that you are only considering images that match the characteristics of a potentially good complex photo mask. The characteristics are explained in [Part One of this series](#).

All images you are working with at this point should have:

- a white or transparent background,
- varied edges,
- varied saturation,
- and, varied insides.



Applying the Transparency Test

Transparency is the key to a great complex photo mask. But as I already mentioned, eyeballing for transparency is not always successful.

If you have an image that you think has great potential to be a complex photo mask, put it to the Transparency Test.

- If the image **passes** the mask test, then you are golden! Use the image as a clipping mask right away. I'll show you how at the end of this post.
- If the image **fails** the transparency test, that's okay. In Part Four of this series I'll show

one thing you can do to make the image useable.

Here's how to apply the Transparency Test:

Open an image (File > Open) that has great complex photo mask potential. The image I'm using (below) is in the download provided in [Part One of this series](#).

Note: The lines indicate the image boundaries.

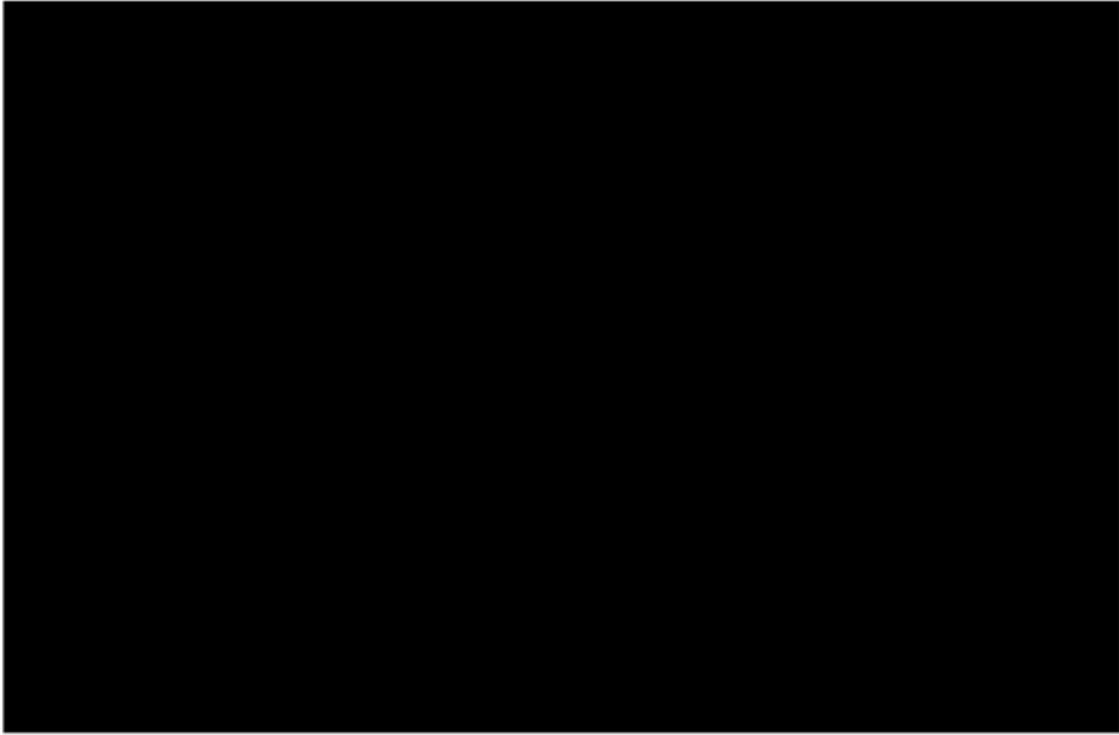


- In the Layers Panel, click on the Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer icon and choose Hue/Saturation.
- In the Hue/Saturation panel (Properties panel), click and drag the Lightness slider all the way to the left.

Does the image pass the Transparency Test?

If the image **lost its texture** (varied saturation and varied insides) and turned completely black, it **failed** the test. NOTE: We'll talk about why a potentially good image fails later in this tutorial and I'll show you one thing you can do about it in Part Four of this series.

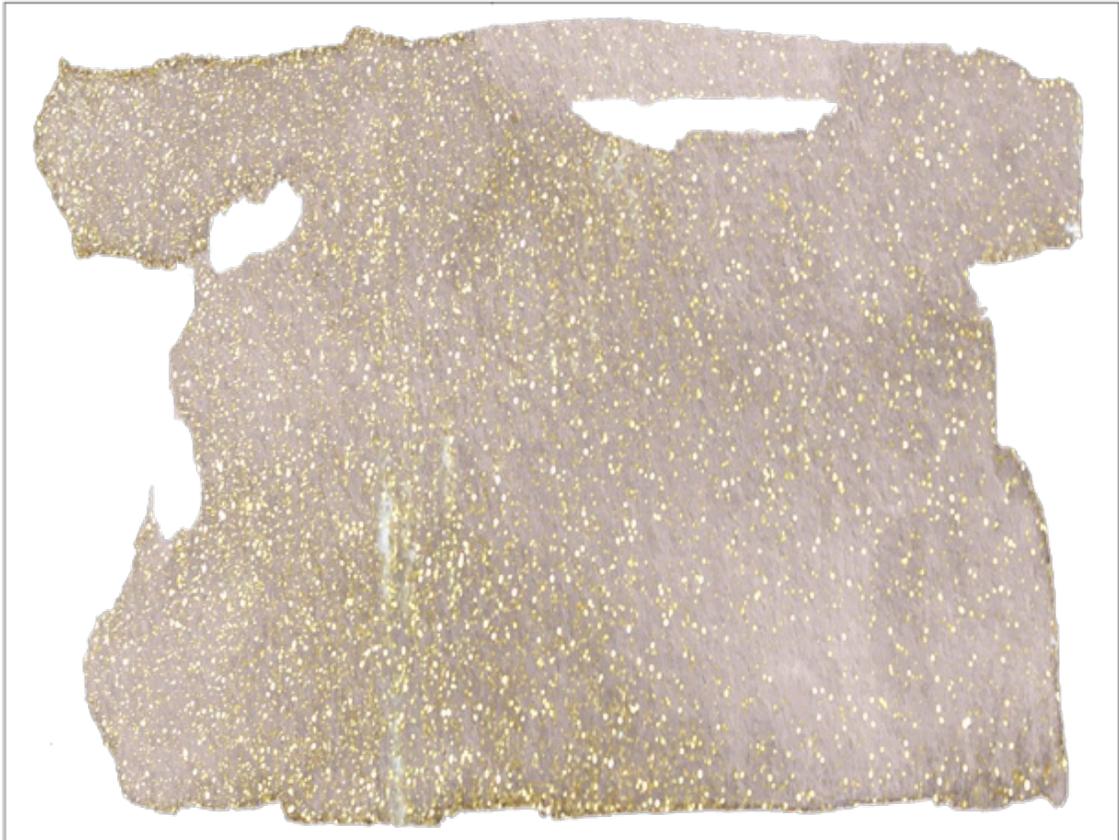
If the image **retained its texture** (varied saturation and varied insides), it **passed** the test!



Here are my results from the image above. It failed the test because it lost all texture and turned completely black.

Close the image without saving.

Let's try a different one.

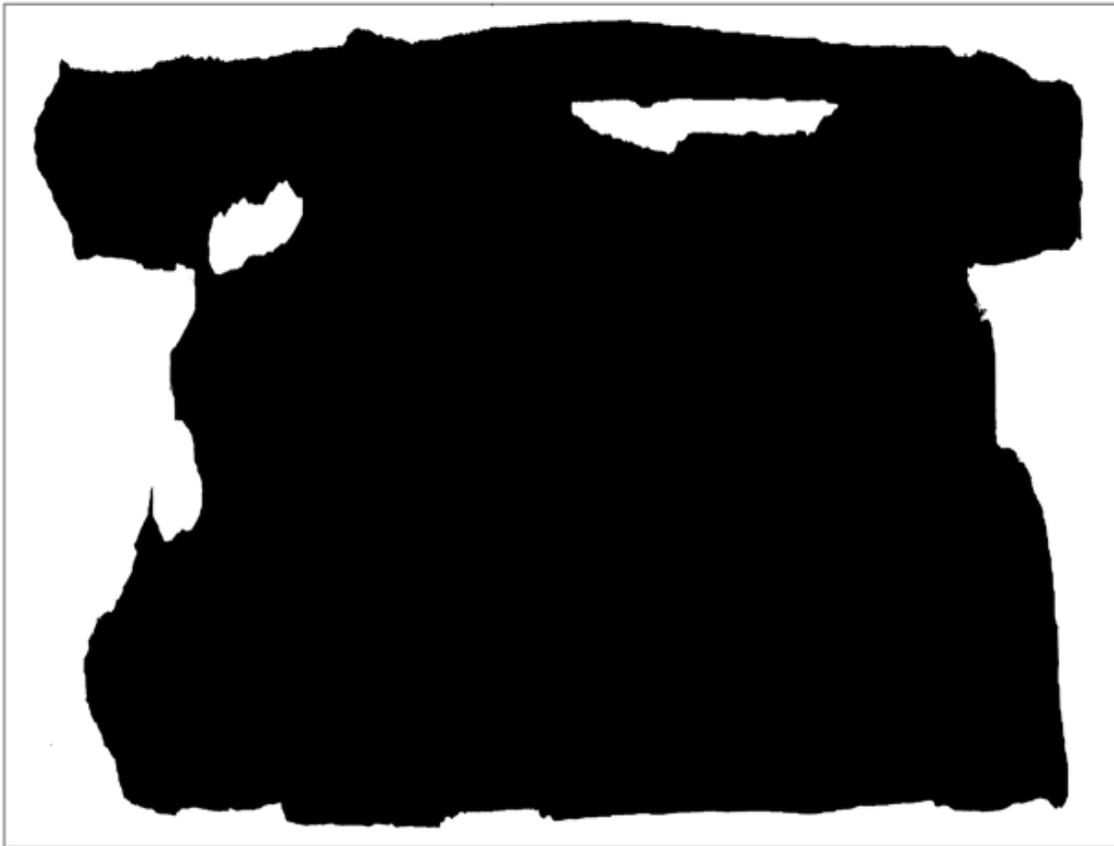


Try applying the Transparency Test to this image (above) that can be found in the download folder.

Note: The lines indicate the image boundaries.

- Think back. Did this image have outer transparency? How about inner transparency?
- Based on what you already know about this image, what do you think is going to happen?

Do you think this image will pass the Transparency Test? Let's look at the results:



After applying the Transparency Test to the gold painterly blob image, this is the result I got. Even though this is a slightly better result than the rainbow image, it **does not pass** the test because the image lost all texture and turned completely black.

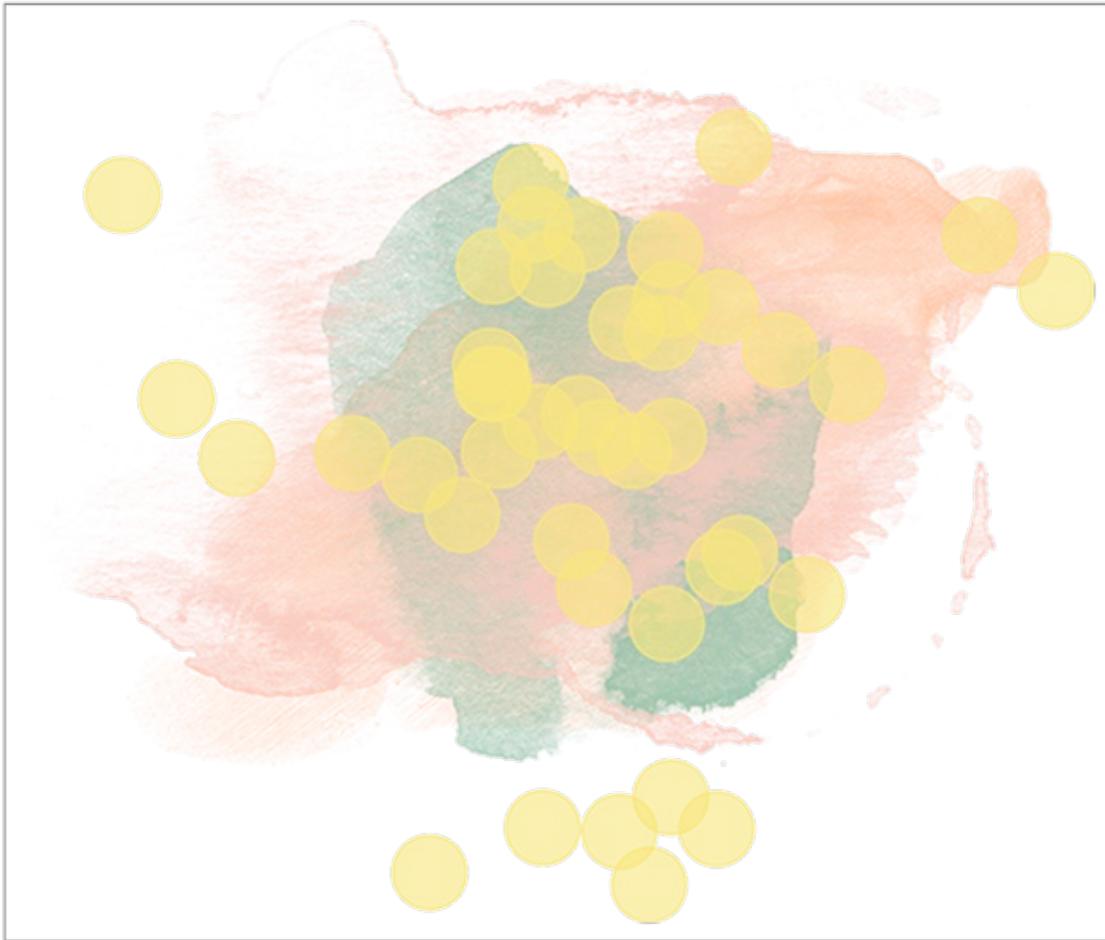
The reason: This image does not have inner transparency.

Why was this image's results different from the first image I tried?

- The first image was surrounded by white pixels, it did not have outer transparency.
- This second image is surrounded by transparent pixels, it does have outer transparency.

Close the image without saving.

Okay, let's try a third image.

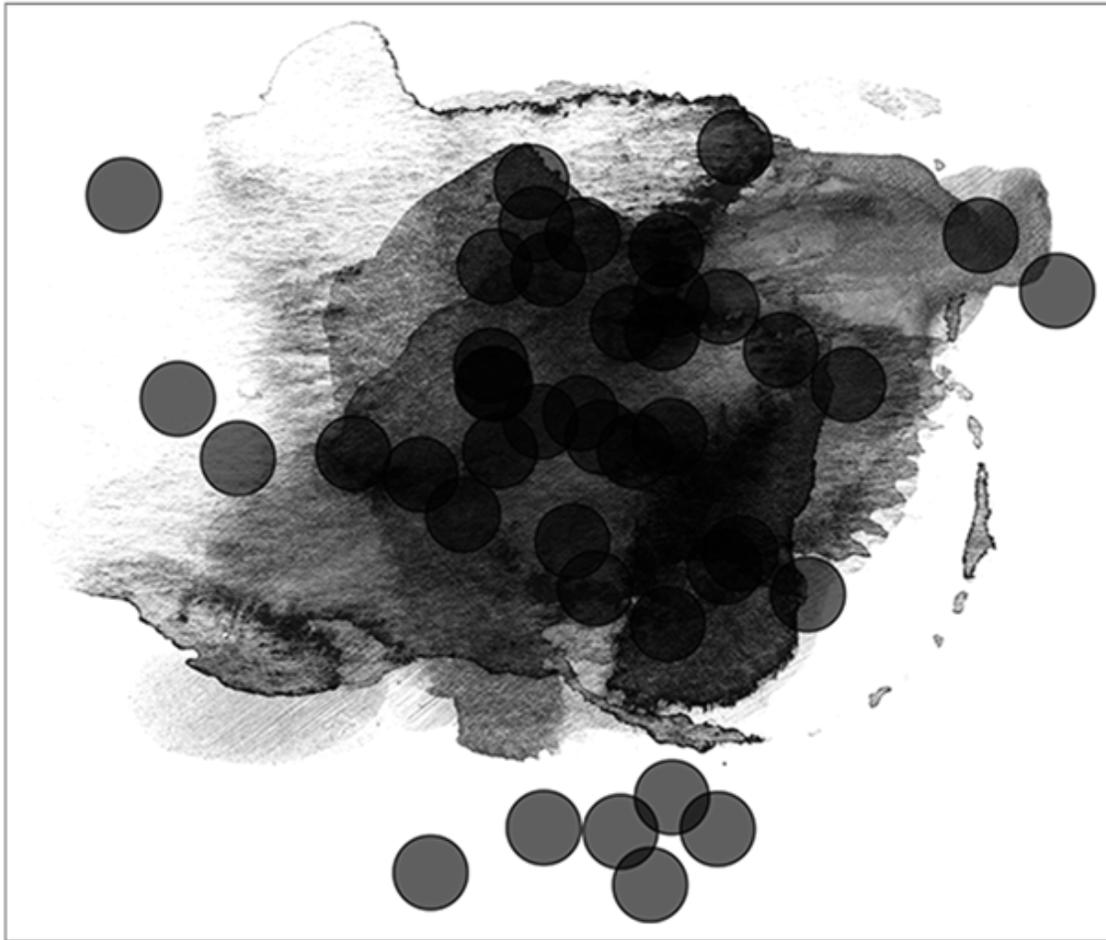


Try applying the Transparency Test to this image (above) that can be found in the download folder.

Note: The lines indicate the image boundaries.

- Based on what you already know about this image, what do you think is going to happen?
- When we looked at this image before, did it either outer or inner transparency?

Does this image pass the test? Let's look at the results:



After applying the Transparency Test to the pastel painterly image, this is the result I got. It **passed** the test. This image retained its texture (varied saturation and varied insides). This image is ready to clip a photo or paper to. I'll show you how to do that next.

Why was this image's results different from the first two images we tried?

—The first two images did not contain inner transparency.

Close the image without saving.

Remember: You cannot always spot transparency by simply looking at an image.

Pass or Fail — SO, NOW WHAT?

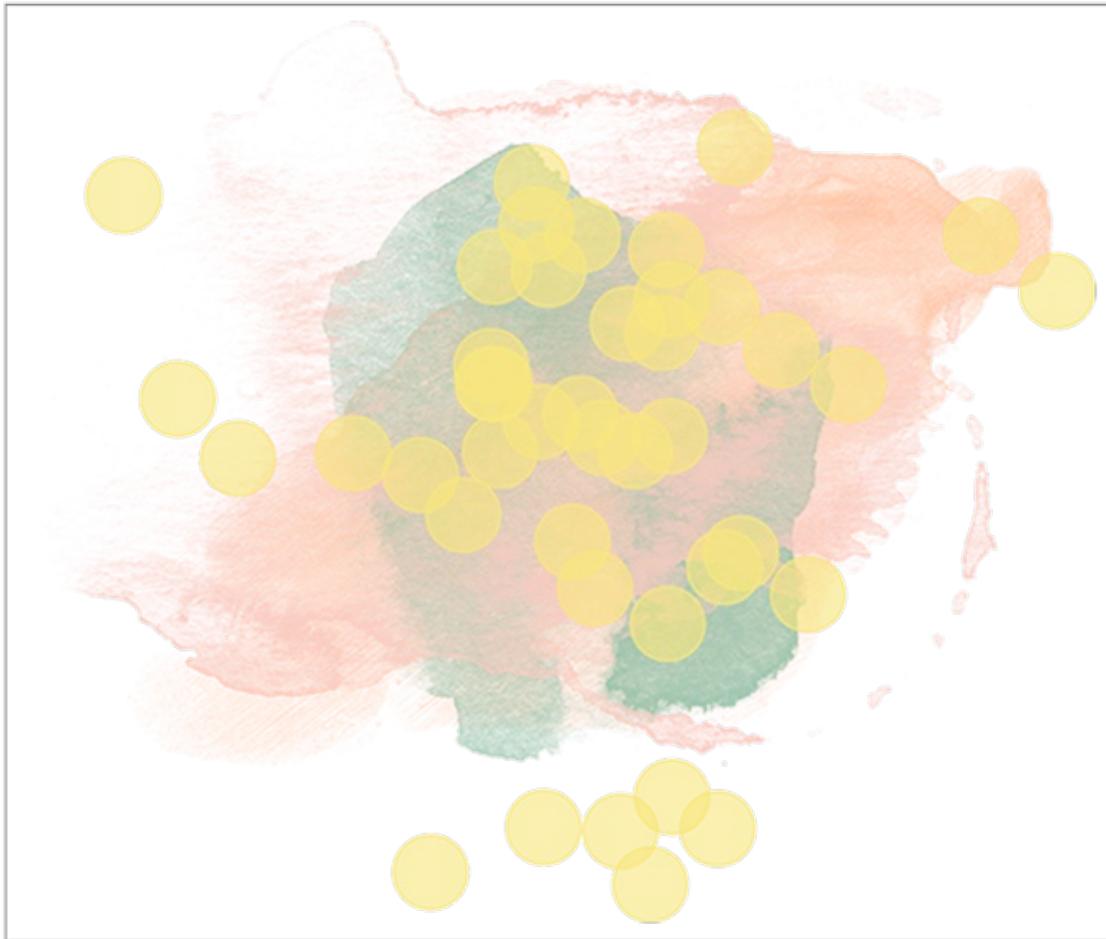
TIP: You might want to make a new folder for images that passed the Transparency Test. I'll show you what to do with the failed images in Part Four of this series.

Use Passed Images As Complex Photo Masks

If you have an image that passes the Transparency Test, start clipping things to it! Here's how:

Open an image (File > Open) that passes the transparency test. I'll use the same one that passed above.

Note: The lines indicate the image boundaries.

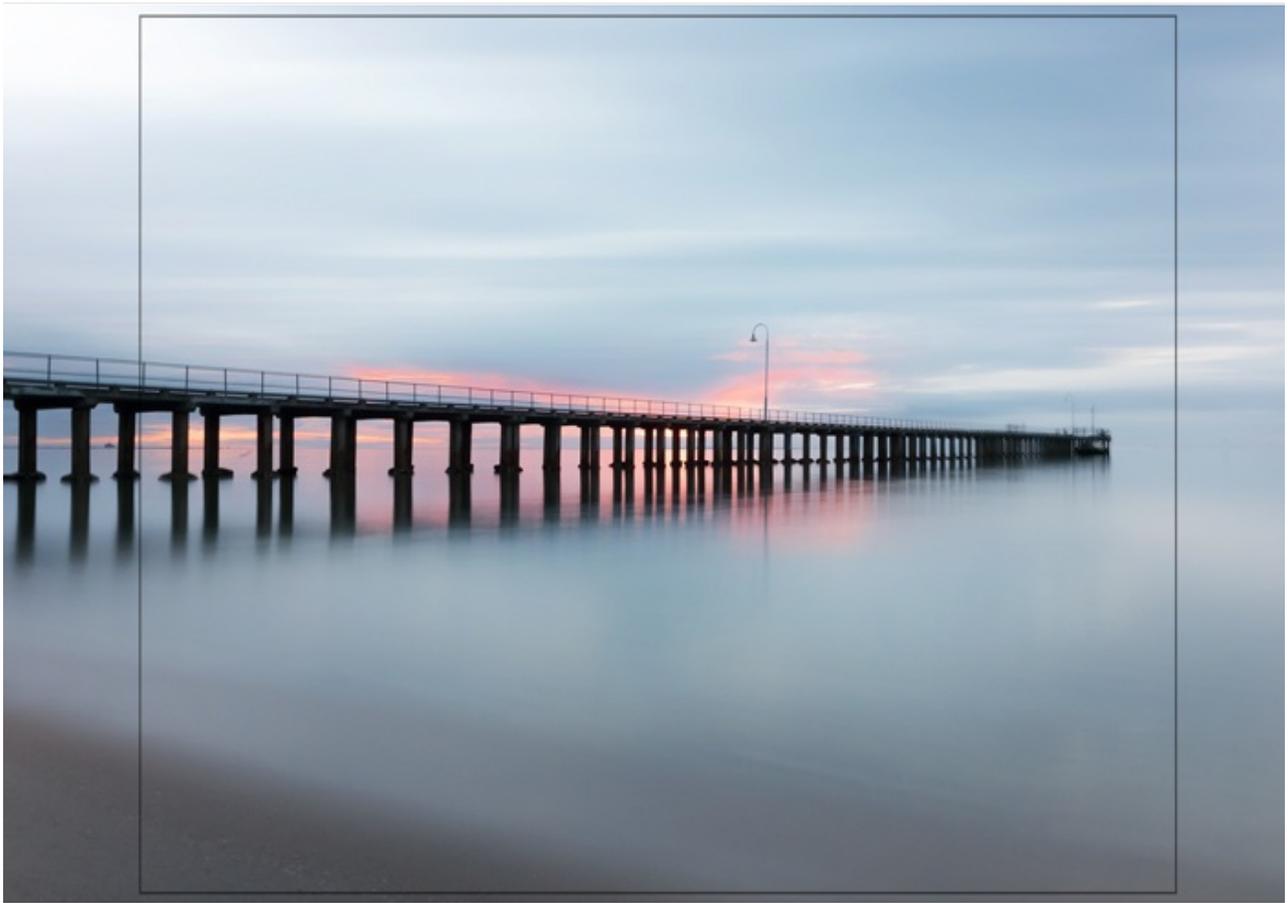


- Open a photo.
- Get the Move tool.
- Holding down the Shift key, click and drag the photo onto the image.

Note: The boundaries of the photo need to be larger than the boundaries of the mask image.
To resize the photo bigger:

- Press Ctrl T (Mac: Cmd T) to get the Transform options.
- Click and drag from a corner handle of the bounding box to resize the photo. (PS: Hold down the Shift key while resizing.) Do not click and drag on the side handles.
- Click the checkmark to commit.

Note: The lines indicate the boundaries of the mask image.



In the Menu Bar, choose Layer > Create Clipping Mask.

It is very likely that you will need to move the photo around to look better in the mask. To do that:

- Press Ctrl T (Mac: Cmd T) to get the Transform options.
- Click and drag inside the bounding box to reposition the photo. To make sure the boundaries of the photo stay outside the boundaries of the mask image, you may need to resize with the corner handles again.
- Click the checkmark to commit.



Get Ready for Part Four

- Sort through the download folder from Part One and the additional masks you found in Part Two. Find more images that pass the Transparency Test and separate them out, like into a new folder or rename them.
- Clip photos to the passed images to see how they look.
- Try clipping patterned papers to the complex masks instead of photos.

In Part Four of this series I'll show you one super-cool way you can rescue the failed images from the Transparency Test.

This is gonna be BIG!

Credits

Photo: Stock

Paper: Grey Stripped Paper by Katie Peritet