**Adding a Realistic Tattoo the Easy Way with Photoshop**

[Dennis Dunbar](http://psd.tutsplus.com/author/dennis-dunbar/) on Sep 28th 2009 with [71 Comments](http://psd.tutsplus.com/tutorials/photo-effects-tutorials/adding-a-realistic-tattoo-the-easy-way-with-photoshop/#disqus_thread)

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The end goal of a good retoucher is to make their work appear invisible while creating some alternative reality. In this case we’re going to look at one method I use for adding a tattoo to an image while making it look like it’s really a part of the original photo.

This method involves placing an Illustrator file (the tattoo source image) as a Smart Object, using the Free Transform/Warp Tool, adding a Gaussian Blur (to adjust the ‘Focus’) and then finishing it all off with a lighting effect created from a Channel Pull. Ready to begin?

**Final Image Preview**

Take a look at the image we’ll be creating. Want access to the full PSD files and downloadable copies of every tutorial, including this one? Join [Psd Plus](http://tutsplus.compsd-premium/) for just $19/month. You can view the final image preview below.



**Video Tutorial**

Our video editor [Gavin Steele](http://www.gsteele.com/) has created this video tutorial to compliment this text + image tutorial.

**Introduction**

The image we’re going to begin with is part of a series of images photographer Richard Radstone created featuring models representing various mythical creatures. The creature being represented here was a Celtic war goddess, Aerten.

In addition to the more exotic makeup we thought she needed a little something extra so we added a tattoo to finish off the look. She does make a beautiful warrior, doesn’t she? Now let’s get started.

**Step 1**

Open the file we’re going to add the tattoo to. The image below is the one we’ll be using for this tutorial. [Psd Plus](http://tutsplus.compsd-premium/) members will find it located in the “final.psd” file located in the “source file.” Also, you’re welcome to use an image of your choice.



The basic retouching and clean-up has already been done on the image so it’s all ready for our tattoo.

**Step 2**

Now we’re going to use Photoshop’s Place command to place the Illustrator file of the tattoo in the image. Go to File > Place and choose “Tattoo1.eps” (which for [Psd Plus](http://tutsplus.compsd-premium/) members is located in the source folder) and hit Enter. You will then see the tattoo appear in your image as another layer named “Tattoo 1.” By default Photoshop CS4 makes this layer a “Smart Object.”

Photoshop’s Smart Objects are really files within files, which gives you a lot of advantages. Since the original file for the tattoo is embedded within the Smart Object any work done using the Free Transform Tool while it’s a Smart Object will refer to the original file and re-render every time you make a new adjustment using Free Transform. This means you can play with the placement and sizing of the tattoo without worrying about losing any quality as you decide where to place it.



**Step 3**

Now click on the “Tattoo1″ layer and bring up the Free Transform Tool by going to Edit > Free Transform and rough it into place on her neck, as shown below.

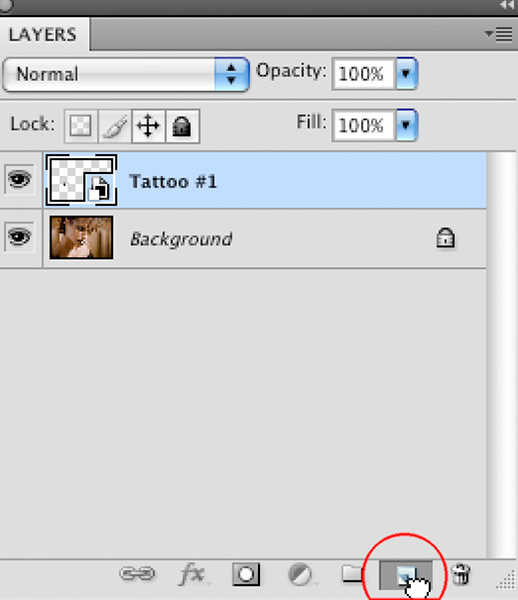
t



**Step 4**

With the tattoo roughly placed we can see that it needs some work to get it to follow the contours of her neck. The muscles of her neck make the surface a little uneven, it’s not quite a smooth round cylinder shape. This means not only will we need to rotate it, but we’ll need to add some Perspective (it should get slightly smaller as it recedes around the neck) and we’ll need to give it a little Warping to get it to really follow the shape just right.

Since our layer is a “Smart Object” we’ll need to render it as a normal layer. *Photoshop still doesn’t offer the ability to do as much to Smart Objects as I’d like.* To render the Smart Object into a regular layer make sure you’ve chosen that layer in the Layers Palette and then make a copy of the layer by dragging it down to the Create a New Layer button (so we have the original to go back to just in case).



This will give you a layer named “Tattoo 1 copy.” This is the layer we’re going to work with next. Since we made a copy of a Smart Layer the copy will be a Smart Layer too. Changing this to a regular layer is as simple as going to the Layer Menu and choosing Rasterize > Smart Object.

**Step 5**

By taking advantage of the Transform Tool’s flexibility we can rotate and warp the tattoo so that it looks like it’s really following the contours of her neck all in one operation.

Select the “Tattoo 1 copy” layer we just made and bring up the Free Transform Tool by going to Edit > Free Transform (Command + T). Now rotate the tattoo by moving the cursor near one of the corners, (you’ll see the cursor change to a bent arrow), and then drag it in a clockwise motion.

When it looks about right (don’t hit Enter yet!) switch to the Warp Tool by holding down Control and clicking outside the Transform window. This will bring up a submenu listing all the available options for the Transform Tool. Choosing Warp will bring up the handles and control lines for the Warp tool. Continuing with this tool drag the corners and handles around until you are satisfied the tattoo is now following the contours of the neck.

You can hide the Transform Tool to get a better preview by invoking Photoshop’s Hide command, press Command + H on your Keyboard.

Below is a screen grab of how it looked on my version.



*Note that I pulled the upper-left corner up and to the left a little, then I pulled the lower-left corner down and to the left a little. Next I pulled the upper-right corner down a little and moved the lower-right corner up and to the left a bit to make it look like the tattoo was following the curve of the muscle on her neck. Finally I grabbed some of the points inside the tool’s window and moved them around slightly to give more of a slightly wavy look to the tattoo.*

**Step 6**

We’re almost there! Now the tattoo should look something like the image below.



Looking at the image above we can see that the part of the neck the tattoo is on is a bit *soft* or blurry. To make it look like the tattoo is really there it needs to match the *softness* of that section of the neck. Luckily we can do this easily by adding a small amount of Gaussian Blur to the tattoo layer.

Just to make sure we can easily go back and change things if necessary, let’s first make a copy of the tattoo layer by going to the Layers palette, selecting the layer “Tattoo 1 copy” and dragging it down to the Make New Layer icon as we did before in Step 4. This new layer should now be named “Tattoo 1 copy 2.”

Making sure this layer is selected in the Layers palette now go bring up the Gaussian Blur filter by going to the Filter Menu and choosing Blur > Gaussian Blur. With the Gaussian Blur dialogue open be sure to click the Preview option so you can judge how much blur is needed to match the softness of the neck where the tattoo is placed.

*Since the Gaussian Blur filter’s strength is rated by pixels the amount of blur needed will depend on the actual resolution of the image you’re working on.* When you’re happy with the amount hit Enter to apply the blur.

You should have something that looks pretty close to the image below now.



**Step 7**

With the tattoo warped and softened up to match the model’s neck it’s looking pretty close now, just two more things to think about before we’re done.

So far we’ve worked on getting the tattoo to look like it’s following the surface of the neck, and we’ve worked on getting it to match the focus of the image, but it still looks like it’s just sitting there. Looking closely we can see that our tattoo lacks the highlights and shadows that define the shape of her neck.

Since the tattoo is a very dark color we really just need to add some matching highlights. To do that we’re going to use a technique many retouchers call a “Channel Pull,” that is we’re going to copy one of the channels from the background image and use that to create the highlights we need.

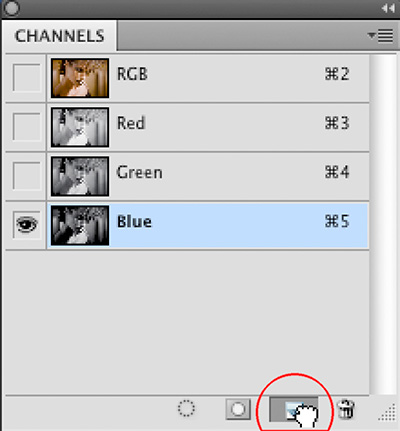
So turn off the “Tattoo” group and then go to the Channels palette to look at the individual “Red,” “Green,” and “Blue” channels to see which one has the best potential for giving us the highlights.

The image below shows the individual channels side by side.



We’re looking for a channel that shows the best contrast between the highlights and shadows on her neck, and from the channels we see here the Blue channel looks like the one we’re after.

After deciding to use the “Blue” channel as the basis for our lighting effect, make a copy of the Blue channel by going to the Channels palette and clicking on the “Blue” channel. Then with that highlighted drag it down to the New Channel icon in the Layers palette as shown.



This will give us a new channel named “Blue copy.” Below is what our copy of the “Blue” channel looks like.



Let’s take a closer look at the area where our tattoo is.

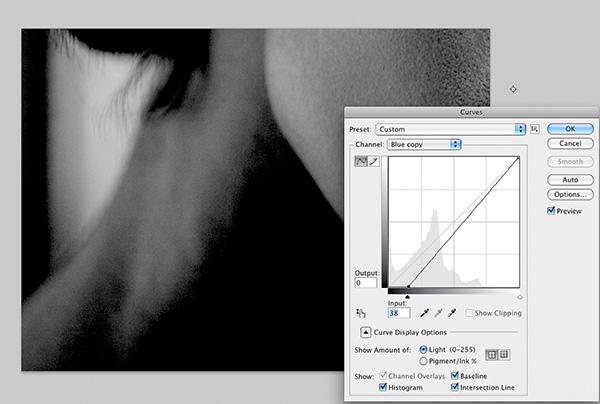


An extra benefit we’ll get from using this channel comes from the fact that the “Blue” channel almost always tends to be the noisiest channel of the image. In this case the noise will help us out by giving our tattoo some nice skin like texture when we use it to add the lighting.

**Step 8**

To boost the effect of the lighting we’ll create a little more contrast in our “Blue copy” channel by using Curves to push the black values up a bit. Since we want to use the noisy texture in our lighting effect we’re only going to work on the Black point part of the Curves. Pushing the White point value around, or using the mid-tone areas will tend to make our noise texture block up.

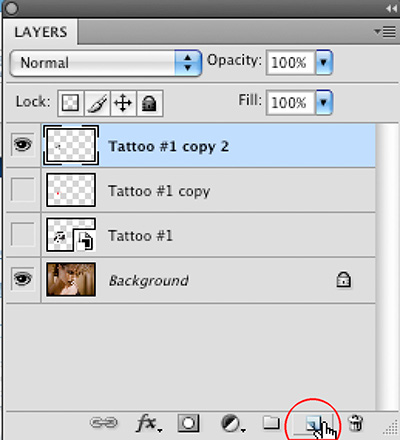
Bring up the Curves dialogue by using the Command + M keyboard shortcut. Now click on the Black Point of the curve and pull it over to the right just a little as shown.



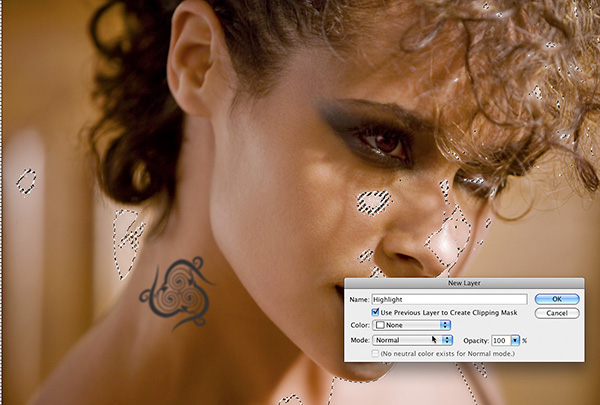
*Note how the black area on the right grows a bit, this will restrict our lighting effect to the lit part of her neck and keep it out of the shadows. If you look closely you can also see this move emphasizes the noise in the channel a little as well, which will help give a textured look to our lighting effect.*

**Step 9**

Now load the “Blue copy” channel as a selection by going to the Channels palette and Command-clicking on the icon of the channel we just manipulated. Next go to the Layers palette and make sure you’ve highlighted the warped and blurred tattoo layer “Tattoo 1 copy 2.” Then add a new layer holding down Alt while clicking on the New Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers palette.



Name this layer “Highlight” and make sure to choose the Use Previous Layer to Create Clipping Path option. This will make sure our highlight only affects the tattoo.



Now make sure you have White chosen as your foreground color and fill the selection with White using the Alt + Delete keyboard shortcut. The image should now look like the image shown below.



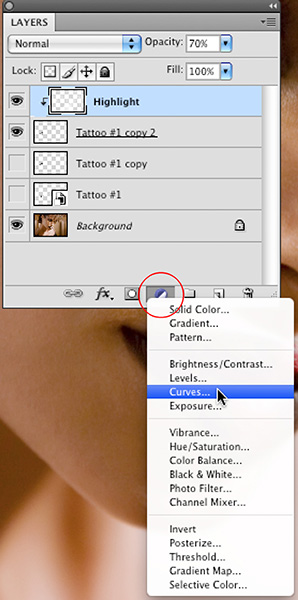
The tattoo now reflects the same lighting pattern as the neck and looks more like something that was in the original shot. Plus if you look very closely you’ll see that the lit part of the tattoo now shows the same texture as the skin around it. This is very important if we’re going to make  
our illusion believable. Below is a close-up of the tattoo showing what I mean.



**Step 10**

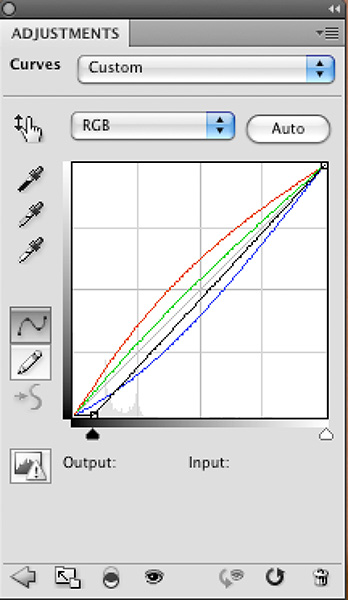
The last step left to complete our image is to adjust the color of the tattoo. While tattoos can be almost any color most of the single color ones I’ve seen have a little bit of a greenish tinge to them so we’ll add a Curves Adjustment layer to the tattoo layer to push the color in the right direction.

To make the Curves Adjustment layer go to the Layers palette hold down the Alt key click on the icon at the bottom of the palette that looks like a half-white/half-black circle. This opens up the Pop-up menu where you can choose what kind of Adjustment layer you want to add. For this step we’re going to choose Curves.



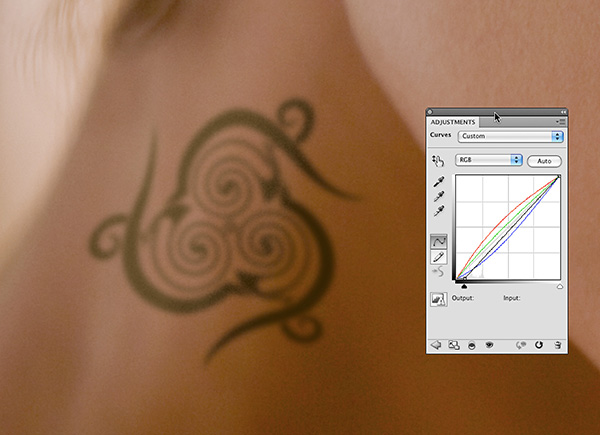
Holding down the Alt key also brings up the dialogue box where you can name your layer and choose the Use Previous Layer to Create Clipping Path option, which as we’ve seen previously will make sure that this layer only affects our tattoo.

With the Curves layer created you’ll now want to adjust the Curves (as shown below) to give the tattoo the desired color.



From this screen grab you can see that I moved the Black Point of the Master curve over to the right a little, this darkened the tattoo. Then I moved the middle of the Red curve up some, added a little Green as well and finally took some Blue out by pulling down on the Blue curve.

Below is a wider shot showing the Curves dialogue and the adjusted image as well.



Finally with the tattoo in place, rotated and warped to follow the contours of the model’s neck, and with the lighting and color adjustments made, your image should now be complete, as shown below.



**Conclusion**

So in the process of adding this tattoo to our Celtic Warrior model we brought in an Illustrator file as a Smart Object, then used the Free Transform and Warp tools to work it into place, added some Gaussian Blur to make it match the softness of her neck and then added some lighting and texture by using a copy of the “Blue” channel and lastly adjusted the color of the tattoo with a Curves Adjustment layer. Not bad for a day’s work, eh?