

Adobe Illustrator

# Craft an original character

Combining a pinch of imagination, a dash of doodling and the wizardry of Illustrator, **Alexis West** reveals how to create a character from scratch

Finding inspiration can sometimes be an arduous task when trying to conceive an original character design. But instead of stretching to the far reaches of the wacky and the inexplicable, try taking a step back to the everyday – it can make all the difference.

This project explores the idea of sourcing inspiration from everyday experiences, and reveals how a touch of imagination can forge an original and exciting character from scratch.

Once you've created your character, flip to page 64 for top tips and expert advice on designing its native environment.

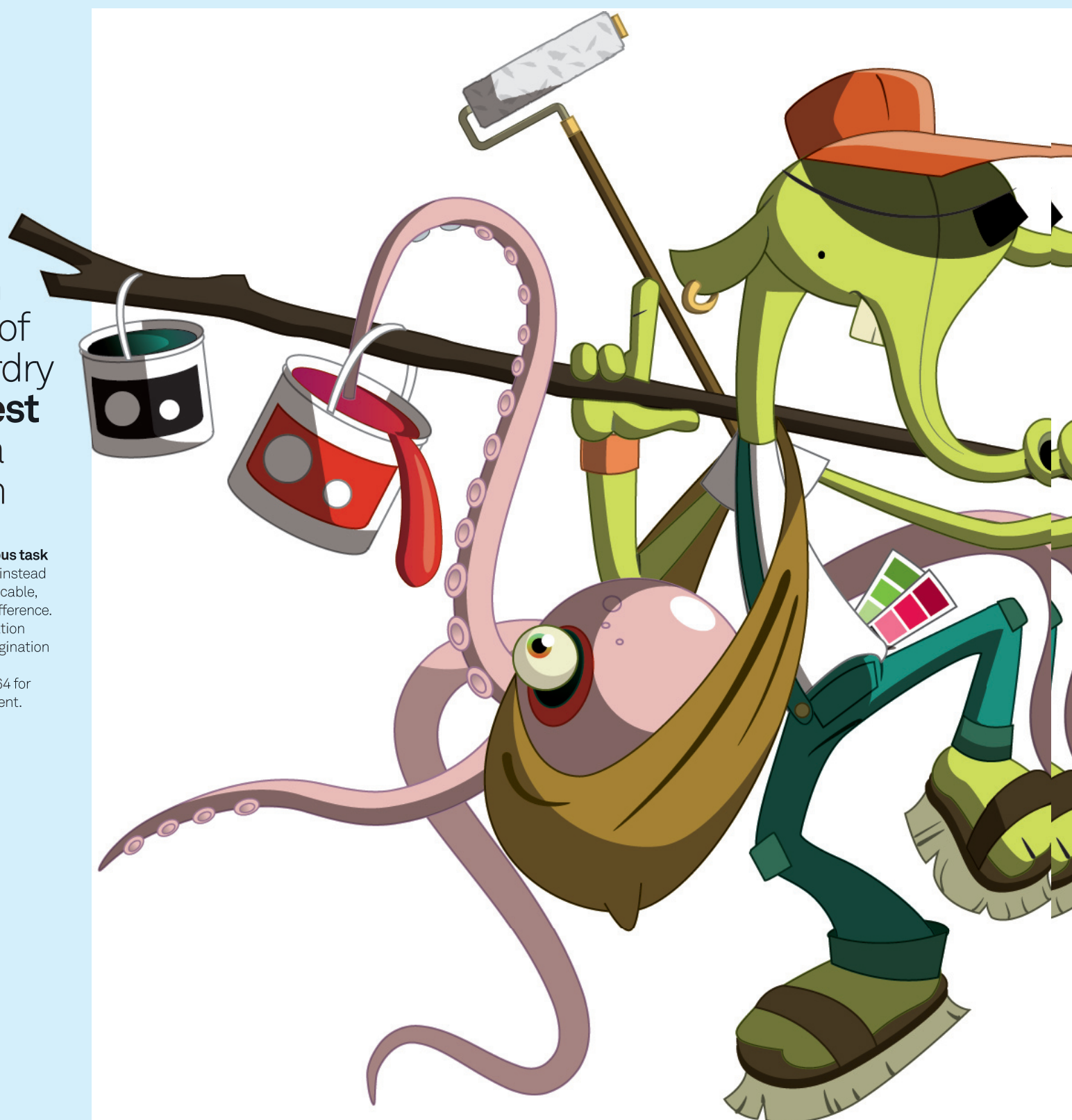


## Alexis West

A Cardiff-based designer by day and a freelance illustrator by night, West has a creative preference for all things involving character design. [www.theswingingseesaw.com](http://www.theswingingseesaw.com)

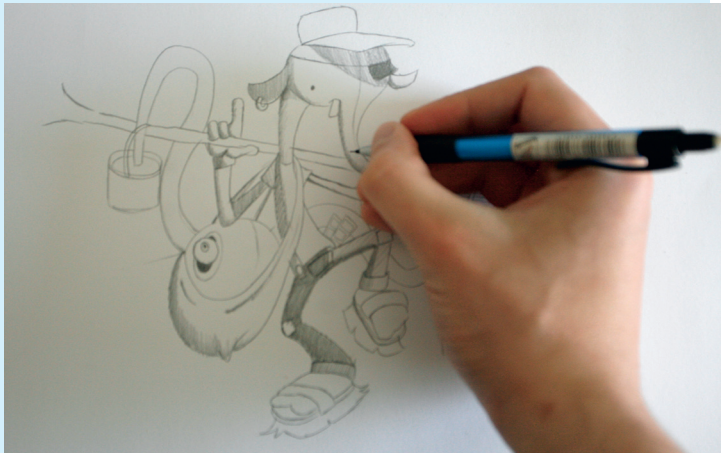
## Skills

- Learn effective pathing techniques
- Get to grips with custom brushes
- Master transparencies and handy shape-creation shortcuts

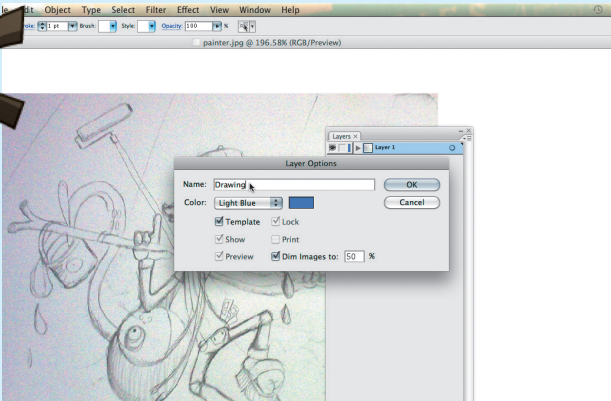




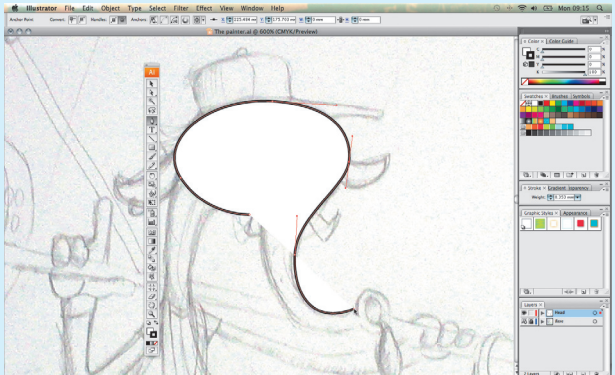
**01**\_\_\_\_\_ A great character design can come from the simplest of everyday inspirations – just think of the most routine job that you can. Painting and decorating are things I've been doing a lot of lately, so I decided to design a character to reflect this. To create your own, grab your pencils and paper and get drawing, letting your imagination flow straight onto the page.



**02**\_\_\_\_\_ After a good visual brainstorm, you should find that you have loads of ideas. I've finalised my character with lots of little details to reinforce that he's a painter: he has a trunk that can be used to spray paint, and he carries an octopus in a bag that mixes bespoke colours with its tentacles, for instance. I've also sketched details such as brushes, brush shoes and colour swatches for detail.

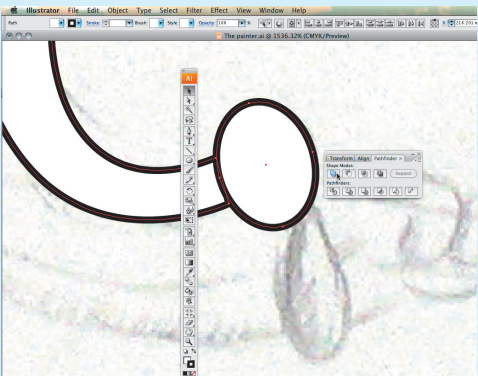


**03**\_\_\_\_\_ When you're happy with your character, fire up Illustrator (I've used CS3), scan your image, and import it into the program. Create a new layer in the Layers palette, give it a name, check the Template box to lock the layer, and knock the Opacity back by 50%. It's good practice to use layers for your illustrations – it will make things much easier later on when it comes to editing your character.



**04**\_\_\_\_\_ Create a new layer, name it Head, and zoom in to your character's head so that it fills the whole screen. Select the Pen tool, and use paths to start tracing the head. To get the best results from the Pen tool, always plot the first point at a join in your image, then click the next point at the visual halfway point of your curve. Without releasing your mouse/tablet pen, pull the handle bar of the path to perfect the curve. Repeat this process until you have precisely traced your character's whole head.

**05**\_\_\_\_\_ As well as the Pen tool, use Illustrator's Shape tool to build up elements of your character. For mine, I've used the Ellipse tool to create the end of the trunk. This looks a little geometrical at the moment, and I want to join it seamlessly to the rest of the head. To do this, select both the ellipse and the trunk with the Selection tool, and then go to Window>Pathfinder to open up the Pathfinder palette. With both shapes selected, click on Add To Shape to merge the two shapes into one.

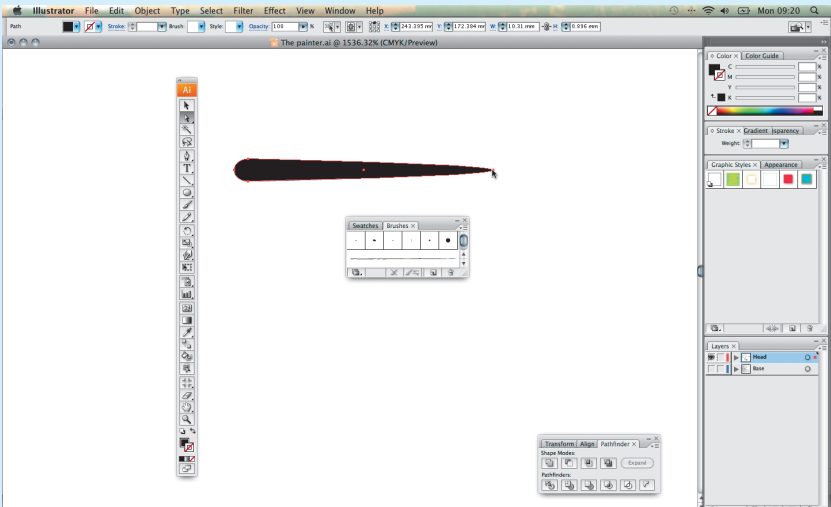


### Explore ideas

The best place to start for any good character design is with a good tune, a coffee, and a pencil and paper. It can be tempting to jump straight onto the computer, but doing so risks yielding bland, unimaginative results.



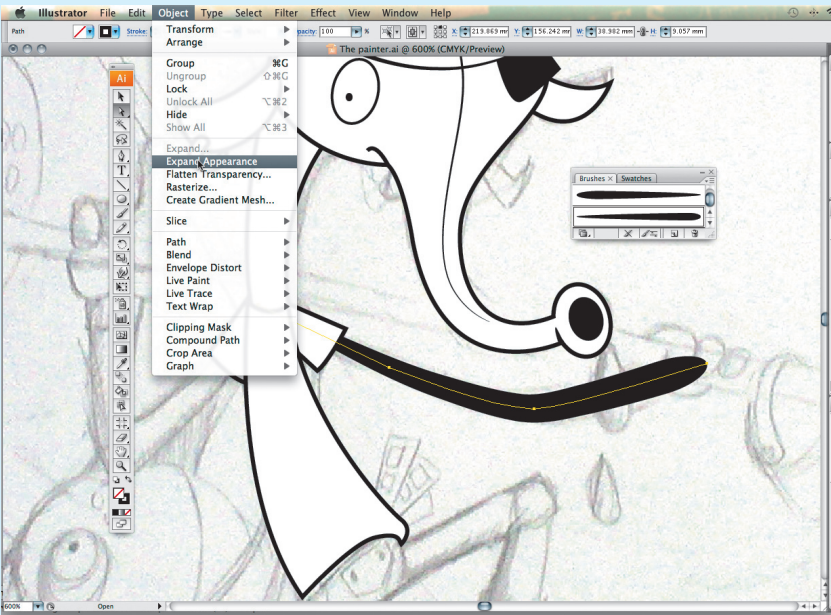
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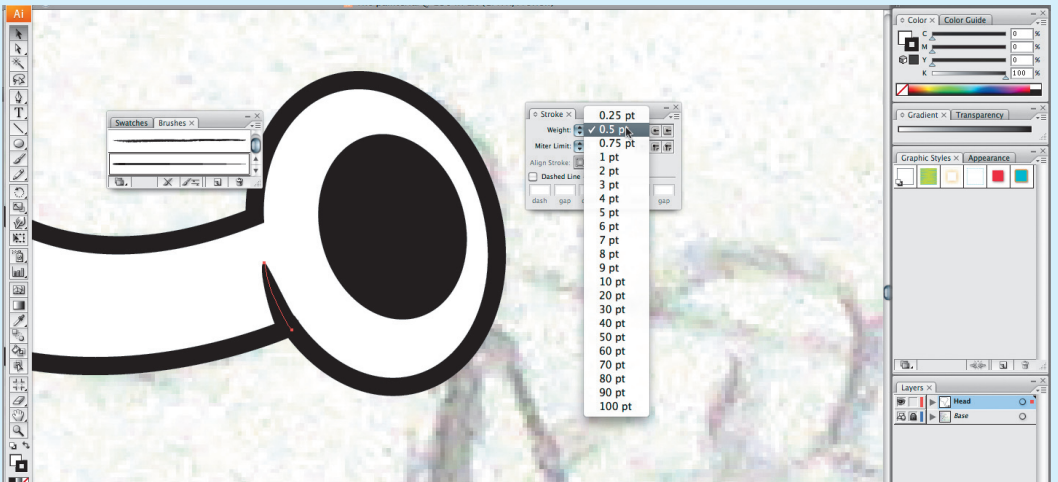
06 Now that the shapes are merged, the result looks a little flat, but detail can be added using a custom brush. Use the Ellipse tool to draw a small circle, ensuring the fill colour is set to black. Choose the Direct Selection tool, highlight your circle, press Shift, then click the right anchor point of the circle. Holding Shift down, drag the point as far to the right as you can to create the shape seen above.

Experiment with keylines

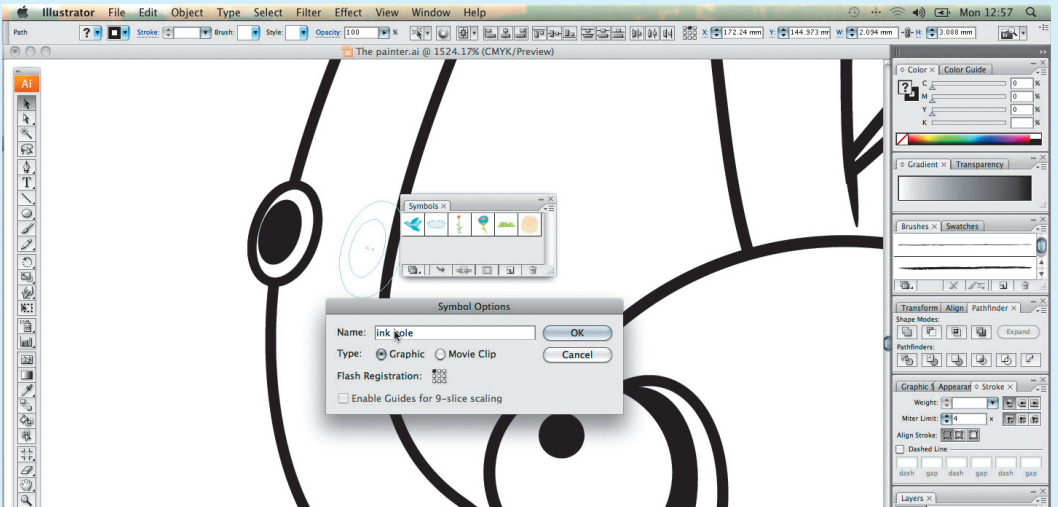
Using keylines on your characters can really help lift and make them stand out. For this illustration I didn't opt for pure black keylines, because I wanted a slightly softer look. Instead I used the same colour as the main shapes, and added between 60-80% black. Experimentation will give your characters a different feel.



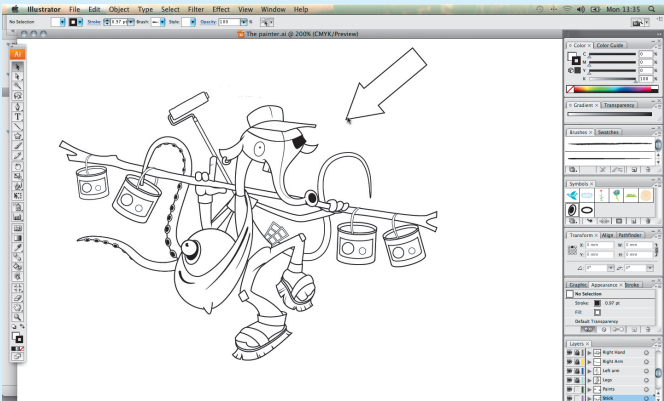
08 Sweeping shapes such as arms can be created using brushes, which will make for a far more elegant and consistent curve. Create a new brush using the same method as shown earlier, making the circle approximately the same width as the widest end of your character's arm. Using the Pen tool, plot a simple one-line path through the middle of your character's arm. Next, select your new brush to pad out the path, and go to Object>Expand Appearance to turn it from a stroke line into a shape. Complex elements such as the octopus' tentacles can be created with this method.



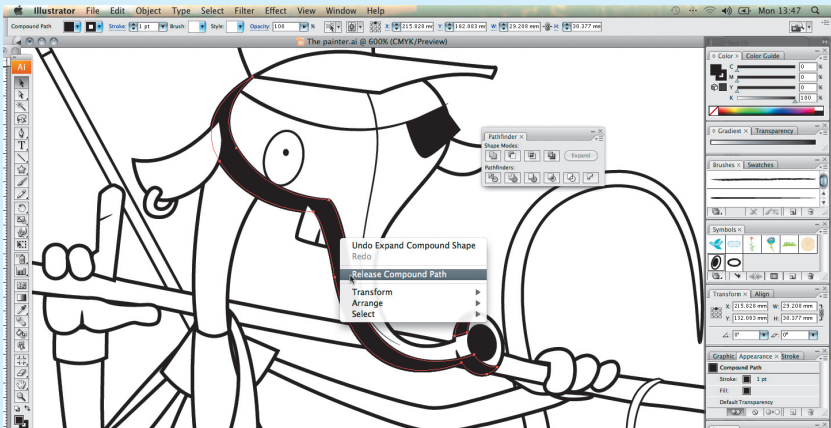
07 Go to Window>Brushes, and drag your new shape into the Brushes palette to create a new brush. Select New Brush>New Art Brush, name it in the Options pop-up window, and ensure the Colorization window is set to Tints. Go back to the illustration and, using the new custom brush, draw a small accent to create a brush stroke that separates the snout from the trunk.



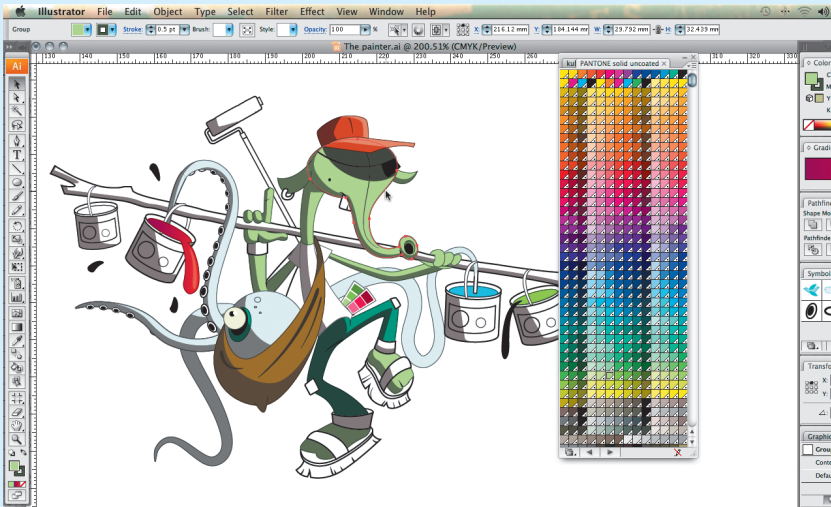
09 If any elements of your character are identical – such as the suckers on the octopus here – you can use symbols instead of having to cut and paste them. This has several advantages, one of which is mass editing. Using the Ellipse tool, craft a sucker for the tentacles, then go to Window>Symbols, select your sucker shape, and drag it into the Symbols palette. The new symbol can be dragged onto your canvas to give the octopus as many suckers as you like.



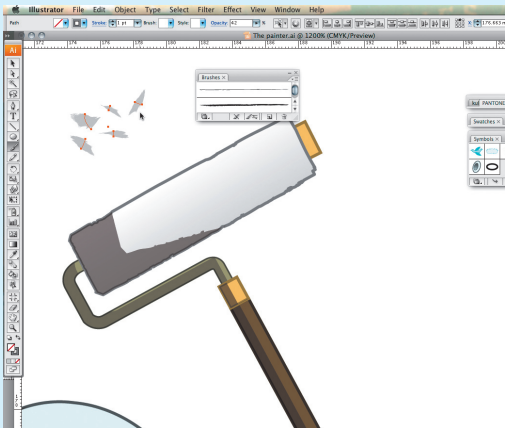
10 Using a combination of the methods explored so far, continue building up your character until you have a completed black-and-white line drawing. Your character should now be looking great, but it will need fleshing out. I often add shadows to my characters to bring them to life. Firstly, decide where your light source is going to come from. I plan to have this character outdoors selling his paints on a spring day, so I've opted for sunlight coming in from the top right of the canvas.



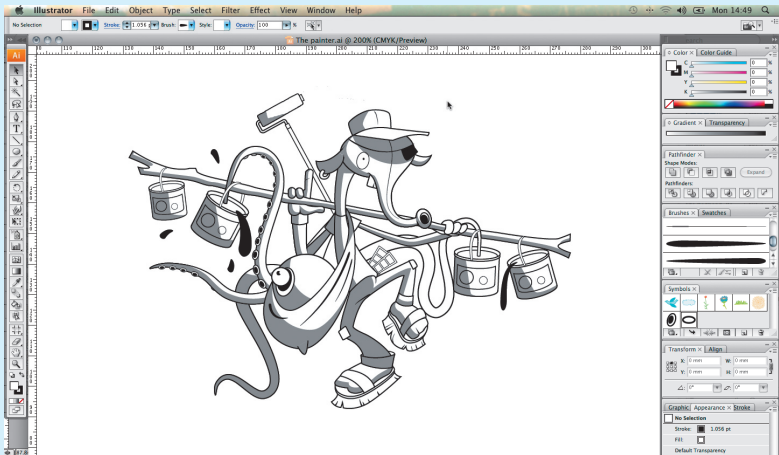
**11** Go back to the Head layer, select the head shape, and go to Edit>Copy. Go to Edit>Paste In Front, and set the fill of the new shape to black. Reposition the first shape on top of the black one, and offset it slightly to the right to reveal the black shape underneath. Select both shapes in the Pathfinder palette and select 'Subtract From Shape Area'. You will now be left with a cut for a shadow. Any stray bits can be cleaned up by Ctrl/right-clicking the shadow, and selecting Release Compound Path.



**13** Now that your character is complete, it needs colour. Think about your character – what it's doing, what time of day it is and what mood you want to create – when choosing your colours. As my painter character is going to be outdoors on a spring day, I wanted to use colours that would convey this.

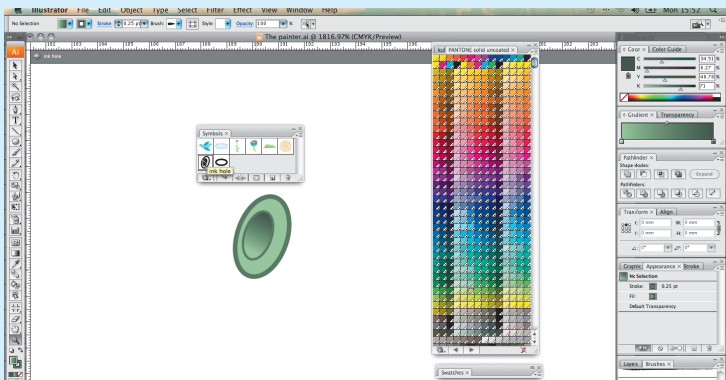


**15** As well as using flat colours to build up the character, you can add pattern details with swatches. Using a generic brush from the Brushes palette, make some small, random brush marks, select them, and drag them into the Swatches palette. Select the paint roller, copy it, and go to Edit>Copy>Paste In Front. Select the new shape, and fill it with the new pattern swatch to give the brush a shaggy effect.



Time-saving techniques

Using custom brushes is a great way to add detail to your character illustrations – they can really define a style and help lose that processed 'computerised' look that can sometimes plague vector illustrations. Custom brushes are also a great method for saving time by creating seemingly complex details in seconds.

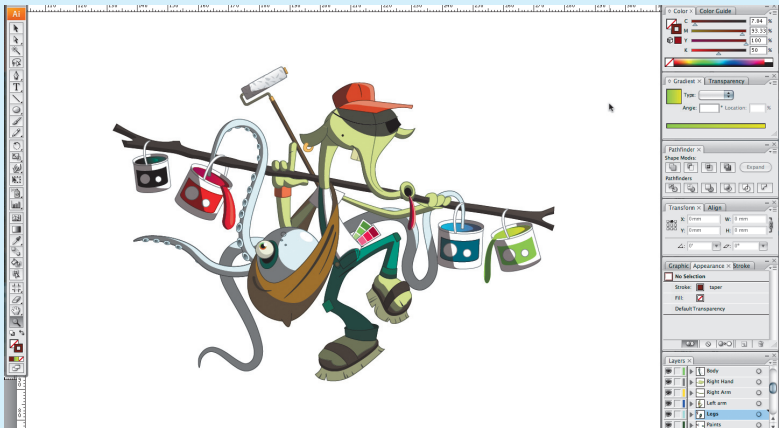


Use a limited palette

Colour plays a key part in creating a great character: choosing the right hues will help convey and carry your character convincingly. Try not to use too many ranges of colour as this can detract from your illustration, and aim to be as harmonious with complementary palettes as possible. A Pantone book is useful, and Illustrator sports several preset palettes.

**12** Treat the entire illustration with the pasting method used in step 11, and experiment with the various options in the Pathfinder palette to Merge, Subtract and Intersect shapes to create shadows on your character. Change the opacity values to reflect your desired lighting effect – my character will be walking in the sunshine, so I've kept the shadows dense.

**14** When colouring your image, this is where the advantages of the symbol method we used in step 9 come in to play. Double-click the octopus's sucker in the Symbol palette to access it. Here you can change the colour and add more detail. Your changes will be made universally throughout the illustration, saving the time (and patience) you'd need to edit them individually.



**16** Now that your character is fully coloured, you can really digest it. Stand back, and then edit, tweak and make any changes until it looks perfect and is bursting with character.