How I Use Illustrator to Create Illustrations

In the past, I used Photoshop to create my illustrations, but it has been a bit more than a year since I decided to switch to Illustrator.

I had to switch because creating animations is way easier when you work with vector shapes.

The transition was a bit tricky, but I'm not looking back. My speed has increased, I optimized every single part of the process, and I still can sketch and draw naturally using Procreate.

Here is my new workflow.

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1. **Setting up the artboard**
   I usually work with one single artboard that has the same proportions as the required image. If the size is small (less than 1500px wide), I double its size to work more comfortably and precisely.
2. **First layer: guides & color background**
   I use the first layer to place a temporary color background using the *Rectangular shape*. On top of that, I create the guides within a click using the GuideGuide Plugin. I always compose my images using my particular version of the thirds theory.
3. **Second layer: basic structure**
   I create a second layer where I start creating the basic structure of the illustration using geometric shapes and the pen tool with a thick stroke. This helps as I begin

working on the composition and the color palette.

4. **Color palette**
   I limit my color palette to just a few colors, and I force myself not to introduce new ones unless it’s absolutely necessary. The process of choosing the colors is very organic and a bit chaotic, and I usually continue tweaking the color palette until the image is completed. I use the swatches panel to store the colors.
5. **Tweaking the shapes**
   I start transforming the very basic shapes by moving the anchor points and the bezier curves. I add and remove points if needed. I also use the Pathfinder to merge or divide several shapes. At this point, I start dividing the illustration into different layers, grouping the elements together.
6. **Polishing the illustration: trial and error previews**
   As I only use one artboard per document, I save different versions of the image as I keep working on it. I then export previews of each version to compare the changes. I usually go back and forth using this trial and error system to make sure I’m heading in the right direction.
7. **Final image**
   At the end of the process, I still do some tweaks to the colors, composition, and proportions to make sure I get the most of the image.

Tips and Tricks for Illustrator

Here are a few tricks for Illustrator I use to improve my workflow:

- I use shortcuts for every tool and action. If there are no default shortcuts available for a certain action, I create it in *Edit > Keyboard Shortcuts*.
- I use a few scripts by Hiroyuki Sato to merge and transform shapes. (Thanks Tommy for the recommendation!)

- I disable the *Snap to Pixel* option, but keep the *Smart Guides* active. They allow me to be more precise and work on details freely.
- The option to round corners is a good way to refine the shapes and make them more curvy and soft.
- The *Smooth tool* is another gem that helps with the refining process.
- I make the colors global in the swatches panel, so every time I change a color it is changed on all the elements of the image automatically.
- I also use the *Recolor Artwork* option to adjust and tweak the colors.
- I use the following file structure when working on my images. I increase numbers when there is a major and important change on the image, and use incremental letters to track minor advances.
  – illustration1a.ai
  – illustration1b.ai
  – illustration2a.ai
  – illustration3a.ai
  – illustration3b.ai
  – illustration3c.ai
  – …

Conclusions

I still have a lot to learn, but after a year using Illustrator, I feel that’s a more effective tool than Photoshop to create my illustrations.

Illustrator has simplified the process and the involved tools. I no longer need a graphics tablet to create my final illustrations; I only need my MacBook. That adds a lot of flexibility to my workflow and helps me to travel light, but most importantly, it has made working on animations possible.

Long life to Illustrator!

Do you use Illustrator and work in a different way? Let me know your workflow, tips, and tricks in the comments !