

The Art of Creating Custom Art Brushes

On average, I get one call per month from artists with questions about Art Brushes. The conversation usually goes something like this, "I know that there are a lot of Art Brushes that come with Illustrator," the artist says, "but I can't seem to find exactly what I need." I answer, "Well you can create you own custom Art Brushes and it's easier than ever in Illustrator CS2."

In this tutorial, I will discuss using Live Trace to turn a scanned "brush stroke" into vector, Expanding the Live Trace object to make it usable in the process of creating a Brush, options involved in designing an Art Brush, applying an Art Brush to a path, and adding finishing touches.

STEP 1: What Exactly Is an Art Brush?

A definition is a good place to begin this tutorial because, if you're new to Illustrator, some of the initial steps will make a lot more sense. According to Adobe, a Brush lets you "stylize the appearance of paths." Even though they are not in the Effects menu, Brushes are Effects, in that, they change the Appearance of a path without altering the vector of the path in any way. There are four kinds of Brushes: Calligraphic, Scatter, Art and Pattern. In this short tutorial, we will concentrate on Art Brushes which work by stretching vector art along a path.

One major use of Art Brushes is to simulate "real life" media such as ink or paint applied by various kinds of brushes and pens, as well as charcoal, chalk, and pencil. We will be creating an Art Brush that simulates crayon. Don't worry, it's not hard. The steps are so surprisingly simple, I guess you could say, creating a Crayon Brush is kid stuff.

STEP 2: Start with a Dose of Reality.

Find some dark color crayons to use. If you don't have crayons, use a blunt color pencil. Draw a bunch of straight lines varying your pressure within each stroke from light to hard. Experiment using different colors because some colors seem to apply better than others for a more "crayon like" look. And at this point, the look is far more important than color. After filling a few pages, select the crayon lines that you like the most and scan them at 300 ppi, convert to CMYK and save as a Photoshop file.

STEP 3: Place and Trace Your Crayon Scan.

In order to use your crayon scan to create a custom Art Brush, first it will have to be converted into vector art. To do so, we're going to use Live Trace, a great new feature in Illustrator CS2.

First go to File > Place, locate your selected crayon scan, and press the Place button. With the scan still selected, go to the Options (arrow) menu next to the Live Trace button in the Control palette. Select "Tracing Options" at the bottom of the menu.

STEP 4: Overwhelming Options, Simplified.

The first time I opened the Live Trace Options dialog window, I have to admit, I was overwhelmed. Then I discovered Presets which help simplify the process by getting you started. In the Preset popup menu A, select "Color 16." Then under Max Color B, raise the maximum number of colors to 30-35. This will render enough detail to make your traced scan maintain its realistic crayon look. All other settings can remain at the defaults set up by the Preset.

STEP 5: But Where's The Vector?

Live Trace creates the Effect of vector objects, but it's still an Effect. This is a very powerful feature, because it allows you to go back into options and change your settings at any time. That's where the "Live" in Live Trace comes in.

But you still need to access the "real" vector paths to use them in your Art Brush. To do so, you have select the Live Trace object and click on the Expand button in the Control palette.

STEP 6: Eliminate Paper White.

Live Trace traces everything, including the white background of your scan. This paper white background has to be eliminated before we make our Art Brush so it will not be included in a stroke when the Brush is applied to an object. There

also may be white objects within the crayon stroke. These should be deleted as well because they would stand out like a bright light anytime the Brush is used on a path that's over a background color other than white. To select ALL of the white, click on the background white object and go to the Select menu > Same > Fill Color. With all your white object selected, press the Delete key on your keyboard.

STEP 7: Turning a Crayon Into a Brush, As If By Magic.

Like much of the magic in Adobe Illustrator, creating a New Brush is as simple as Drag and Drop. So select your vector crayon art with the Selection tool and Click-Drag it to the Brushes palette. When the palette is highlighted in black, release your mouse and a New Brush dialog window will open. Select New Art Brush, click OK and an Art Brush Options window will open.

STEP 8: Knowing Your Options.

The default options are probably exactly what you would want for your Art Brush, so you could just name the Brush and click OK. But what are these options about? "Direction" determines which direction your art will be stretched across your path. It's Left to Right by default, which leaves the art unchanged and the Brush is rendered in the same direction that the Path was drawn. Right to Left will Render the Brush in the opposite the direction that the path was drawn. The up and down options render the Brush stretching the width of artwork to the length of the path. It's really strange. Try it to see for yourself.

The next option, "Size," will determine how the art is sized to a path when the Brush is applied. At 100%, the default Width, the width of the Brush will measure exactly the same as the original crayon art when it is stretched along the path. Lowering the percentage will decrease the width from the original. And, you guessed it, increasing the percentage will make the Width that much wider than the original. Proportional will keep your Brush art in the same proportion as you original art. So the longer the path is the wider the Brush stroke will be, maintaining the same proportion of the original vector art.

Flip is exactly what you would expect it to be. It's used to flip the Brush vertically or horizontally from the original vector art.

STEP 9: A Crayon of a Different Color.

The last section in the Art Brush Options dialog window could be the most important, in that, it allows you to change the color of your Art Brush using several different Methods. Choosing "None" leaves the color unchanged from the original vector art. Selecting "Tints" renders the Brush using Tints of any Stroke color that's been applied to the Brushed path. "Tints and Shades" will render the Brush using both Tints and Shades of the path's Stroke color. Hue Shift will change Brush's color so that the "Key Color" (the most prominent color) in the art will be rendered the same color as the path's Stroke color. All other colors will be rendered with color related to that Stroke color. The Key Color can be changed by clicking on the Eye Dropper in the dialogue window and then clicking on a color other than the Key Color in the Brush preview.

After choosing all your options, click OK and your custom Crayon Brush is all set to use.

STEP 10: Brush It On.

To apply your crayon Brush, select a path and click on the Brush in the Brushes palette. To make your Brush thicker or thinner, increase or decrease your Stroke value in the Stroke palette (Window > Stroke).

STEP 11: Some Finishing Touches.

Most of the finishing touches, such as altering the Brush's Color or Direction, have already been explained in Steps 8 and 9. To edit a Brush, just double click on the Brush in the Brushes palette and the Options window will open.

Another factor to take into consideration that will make your Brush look more realistic, most media such as ink, watercolor, and even crayon are slightly transparent. Select your Brushed path, and change the Opacity and or the Blending Mode in the Transparency palette (Window > Transparency). Sometimes the results can make the brush look amazingly realistic. For some surprising results, just play with it. After all, drawing with crayons is kid stuff.

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