Illustrator CS2 or later

Create stunning papercuts the easy way

Use traditional paper-cutting techniques with digital processes to add originality, writes Jonathan Chapman

I'm often asked how I go about starting a papercut design, and people don't usually expect me to use software or computers at all. As all my designs are hand-cut with a scalpel, people expect me to create all my work by hand too, but sometimes technology can speed certain things up – creating beautiful curves that echo natural elements, for example.

In this tutorial I'll show you the basic tips and techniques for creating a silhouette template for a papercut, and will then explain the process of creating the papercut itself. Once complete, the design can be used in a variety of contexts such as promotional postcards or prints, and with these specific tips you can go on to develop your own ideas and concepts in this traditional style.

Jonathan Chapman
—— Chapman, AKA mrYen, creates custom papercut art and illustrations. Taking inspiration from nature and the natural form, his papercuts are used in a variety of contexts. Find out more at www. mr-yen.com

On the disc
The files relating to this tutorial can be found in DiscContents\ Resources\Papercut

Time needed
5 hours

Skills
—— Creating silhouette templates
—— Specific paper-cutting techniques
—— How to cut paper for graphic use

01_____After having looked through some reference material, I sketch ideas out, making sure to keep things simple and solid. The smaller the details are in my illustration, the more difficult the design will be.
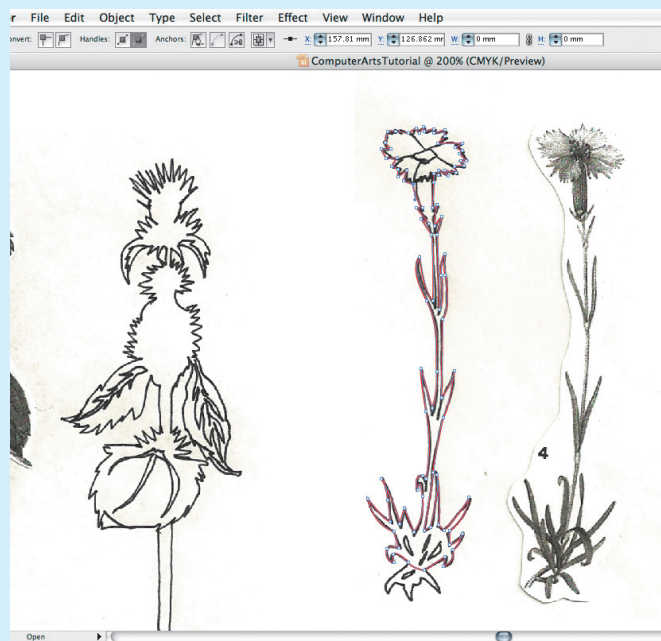

02_____I then scan in my illustrations and open them up in Illustrator. Using the Pen tool, I trace over sections of my drawing using a red outline without a fill colour, to create a basic, visible silhouette of my illustration. I do the same to the other areas of my illustration that I want to include.

03_____Now I have my individual woodland silhouettes, I can create a larger silhouette, incorporating them all. Firstly I make sure all the elements are filled with black and have no outline fill. Then I add some grass illustrations to connect all points of the illustration together to form a single silhouette. I ensure the shapes are simple and stylised, and that I've got the silhouettes' fill colours and outlines black.   →
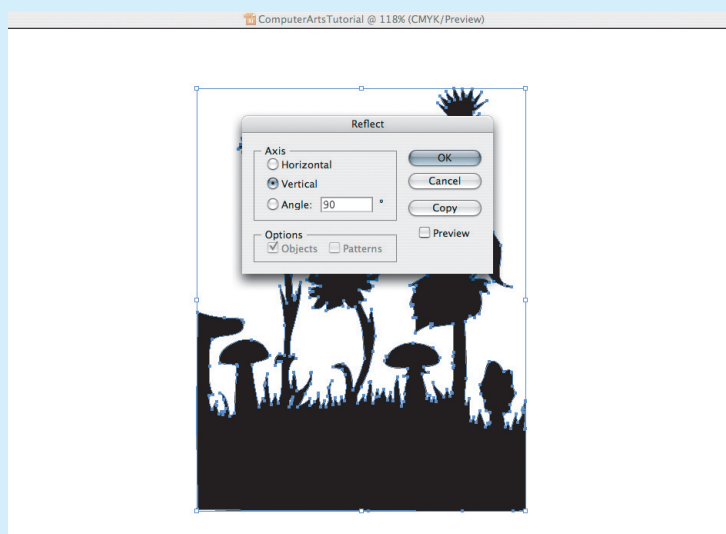
04___I select everything, and copy and paste. I then go to Object>Transform>Reflect and flip the design vertically. The mirrored and original designs need to line up and slightly overlap, so I move the mirrored version along, then go to Pathfinder>Merge and merge all the individual sections together to form one silhouette again.
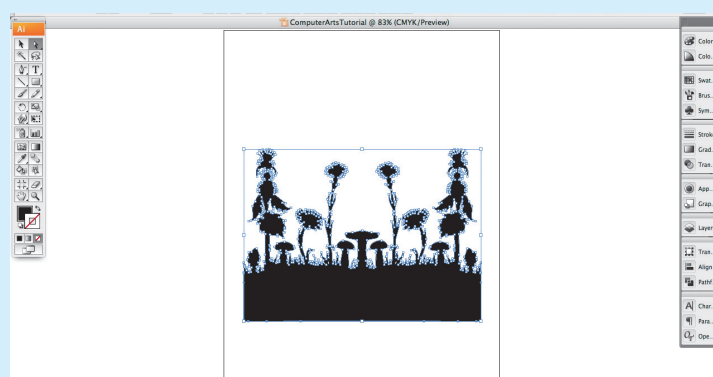
05___I look over my whole silhouette to make sure that everything connects where it's supposed to, or that it's independent from specific areas if needed. This will be what determines if something will be positive or negative, and what will be cut away and left behind.

06___I select the Type tool and choose an appropriate font. Once this is done, I change my typography to outlines by going to Type>Create Outlines. I then remove the counters in the typeface by using the Direct Selection tool, selecting them all and deleting them. I then change the fill to Outline.
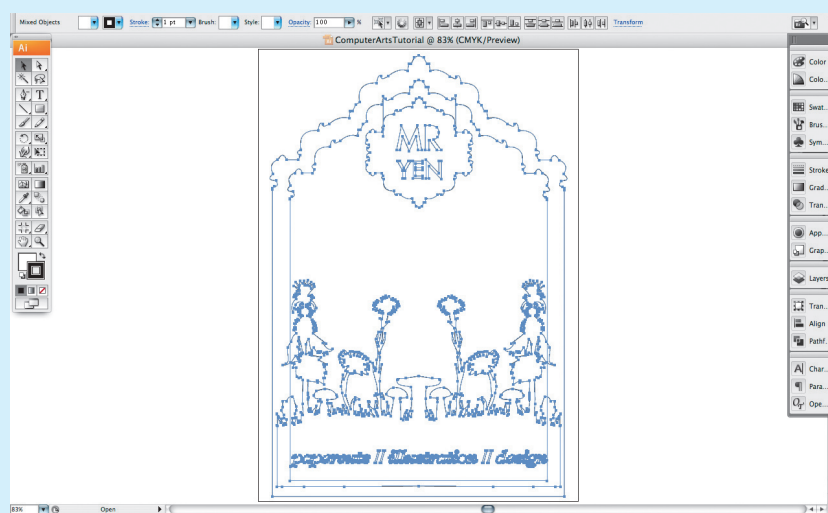

07___Now you can bring all the elements together (including the frame design on the disc) and add your logo, with short lines connecting it to the frame. Next, Select All (Ctrl/Cmd+A) and change everything to black outlines with a white fill colour.

08___Print out your template and choose a paper that's not too fibrous or thick to cut – I use 150gsm Daler Rowney Canford paper. Attach your template with paper clips, which will give you flexibility to check what's been cut through or needs adjusting.

09___There are a variety of blades and handles available, these being my select few. I use a pointed blade regularly, which I find gives a smoother transition between angles and curves, and with a flat handle, which I find easier to grip. The rounded handle gives slightly less control when handling and tends to roll in your hand.
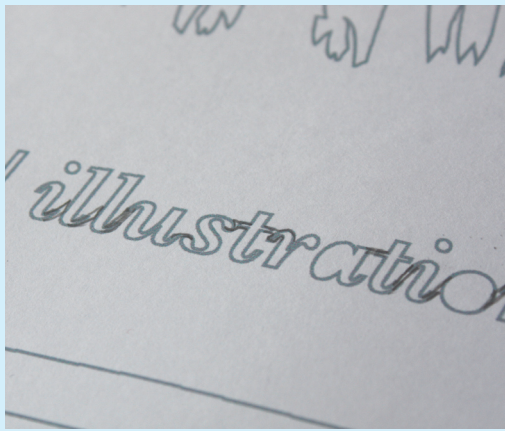
10____ I now adjust certain areas of the typography I want to connect (I do this by hand because I find it quicker). When cutting circles or curved sections, it's best to hold the blade at a slight angle and move it in short intervals. Conversely, when cutting angles and straight areas, it's best to hold the blade straight up and cut the whole area in one confident movement.

11____ Start cutting the small, delicate parts first. This way, if you go wrong it will hopefully be on the smaller, fine details – you don't want to have almost finished your design and then accidentally cut something off.

12____ Next, I cut out the larger bits of the design while removing sections of the template off-cut to make it more obvious as to what has already been cut. Also, I find it better to move the paper around to suit my hand position, as this gives me more control.

13____ I complete the design and remove the template, taking care to separate the two. Now I can see if there are any small pieces that haven't been fully cut and then delicately trim these fibrous bits away with a short stabbing motion.

14____ Once all the small bits are trimmed off and the template is removed, the papercut is now ready to be photographed. Place it on a coloured paper background of your choice, photograph it, upload the image to your computer to edit and then apply to your chosen promotional context – a postcard, for example.

Visual CV
In pictures: a guide to the career and work of our Technique writers

MrYen
Five favourite works from the designer's back catalogue

Papercut postcards – 2009
These postcards were my first-ever papercuts and were created in the same way as the image in the tutorial. It was my response to a university brief.

Typographic quote – 2009
This is an exploration of what I could create using just a single piece of paper, a quote and some experimental typography.
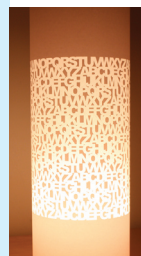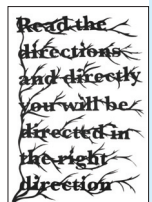
Lampshade – 2010
This piece for a university brief involves experimental lampshades that explore how light interacts with the positive/negative cut-out space in the typography.

Book covers, university brief – 2010
These are papercut book covers for the book *Alice in Wonderland*, which also had accompanying papercut bookmarks.

Geometric greeting cards – 2010
When experimenting with geometric illustrations, I wanted to translate them into papercuts while having a useful context.