

ALTER EGO AVATAR



Although its only 50 x 50 pixels, those tiny “buddy icons” that appear in instant messaging windows can say a lot. Here’s how to make a tiny graphic head shot of yourself that’s personalized and expressive.



CASE STUDY: STEPHEN NGUYEN

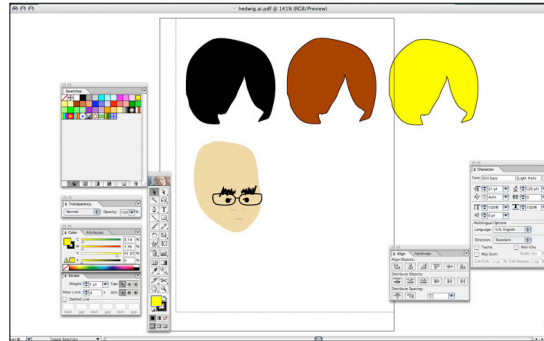


Stephen is an artist living in Brooklyn, NY. He has exhibited his paintings and installations internationally. He has done design work for the Ministry of Casual Living, Victoria, British Columbia and the University of Victoria among others.

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I wanted to completely personalize my computer and workspace and not be dependent upon other people’s artwork. I wanted to have a hand in the creative design of my computer layout. I like to draw caricatures or animals so creating a personal icon of myself seemed fun and funny. When drawing a caricature I try to distill an image of a person or animals to the most notable features. In the case of my self my hair and glasses are the most notable features. I had a previous understanding of how to use the tools of photoshop and illustrator so I used these tools to create my icon. When the image is resized in the process of converting the image to an icon, some of the detail, such as small lines of the mouth or other facial features are lost or reduced. I didn’t mind this loss because the essential features are still readable. I would suggest really exaggerating the features that characterize the face or identity of the person or animal that you are drawing. Keep in mind that whatever you draw will be reduced proportionally and when any image becomes really small it is ultimately reduced to only a few pixels that are only an approximation of what you may have drawn in a larger scale. This is the limitation of digital, especially web optimized images.



PROJECT:

Overview:

This project offers the creative freedom to generate your own personalized icons, images, and graphics. The end project is extremely versatile and can be used in a variety of online environments as well as on your home computer. As a vector drawing, it is easily editable and can be updated to reflect your changing moods and graphic needs. Through this project you have the flexibility to create an online persona of your own making and personalize the iconography of your own computer.

REQUIREMENTS:

time: around 2 hours

gear: Illustrator, a home computer, Instant Messaging program, a photo of yourself to trace or reference as needed.

budget: Zero out of pocket costs. Once you have the software, it's free and reproducible.

level: **advanced**

There is more than one way to create an image for your icon. Options include a true to life representation or a graphic of your alter ego/online persona. Depending on what you want you can either draw your image freehand without a photo (as Stephen did), draw an outlined image of yourself from a real photograph, or use photographic image of someone else as inspiration. Remember, self-portraits don't have to be faces and heads. You can experiment with drawing your favorite shapes, animals, and other graphic elements to represent "you". Options also including playing with angles and views, profile, aerial, etc.. Take artistic photos of yourself and start from this if you would like.

Step 1: Find a Source Photograph, Import a photograph or image that you want to work with into Photoshop or other image editing program. Crop to size to work with.



original source image 500x483



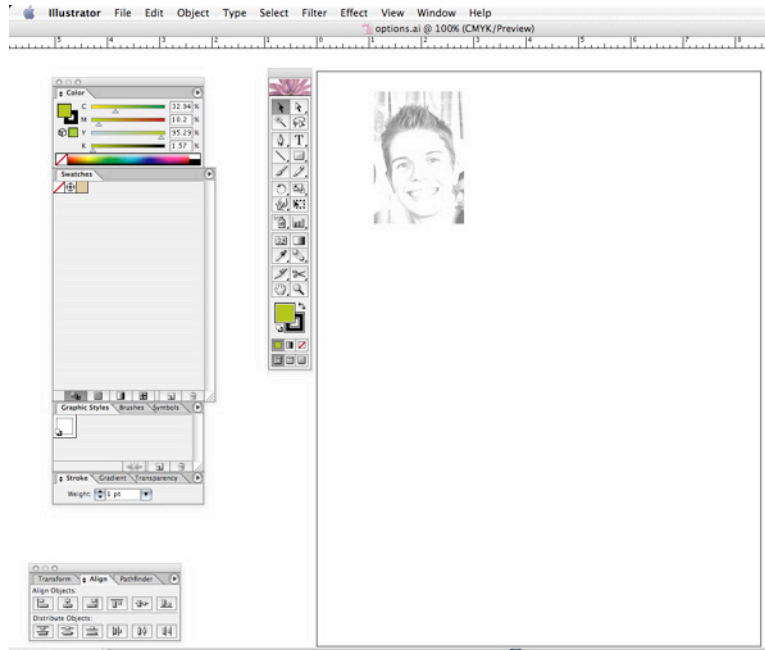
124x182 cropped image from source



Step 2). Change your cropped image to the black and white mode in your image editing program. This will flatten the image and make more dominant features begin to pop out. Details that wouldn't be detectable in a small icon will begin to drop away.



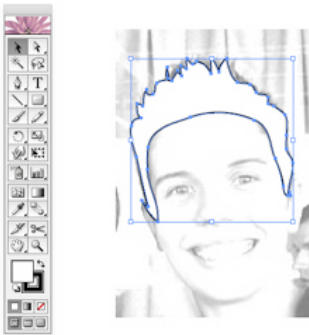
Step 3: Increase the contrast and brightness of the image: Turning up the brightness and contrast of the image will further increase your ability to begin to see the features that will become your icon. It will visually simplify the image. Manipulate these tools until you only see eyes, a line for a nose, lips, and hair. Less important details will disappear and the most distinct features will be come easily apparent.



Step 4. Bring your new image into a vector drawing program such as Adobe Illustrator. This is the program you will actually draw in and create your icon. You can do this by opening it or importing it within the program..

Step 5) Create a new layer and begin to draw: Now you get to start to play and have fun with your image. You will be drawing on top of your photographic image.

*NOTE: You can draw at a bigger size than the tiny size that the icon will become. IM software programs resize your drawing to the appropriate default icon size. You can draw on a typical 8.5x11 size tablet. If you do this the image can be reused and easily resized for other projects, such as letterheads, icons, personal logos for print and the web.



5) Start to Draw. On a new layer you can experiment with brushes, stroke width, and color. Use the pen tool to outline the structure of your face and dominate features present on the photo below. Experiment with the fill and stroke tools to color your hair and skin with various shades and thicknesses.



6) Delete the photo below and fine tune:

Once you have enough detail filled in you can delete the photo from the bottom layer. Then you can see more clearly what you have created and fine tune the image by

adjusting colors and shapes. I chose to do a more expressive abstract rendering of my sister. I took a few creative leaps by not filling in the skin tones on her neck and ear. Feel free to be as detail oriented or expressive as you would like.

7) Finalize the icon, square it off: When you have a final design that you like it is a good idea to make the icon into a square. Since no one's head is a perfect square it makes sense to work in a vertical format up to this point. Choosing a background color and border to accent your icon can be a great addition and add more visual interest to the final piece.

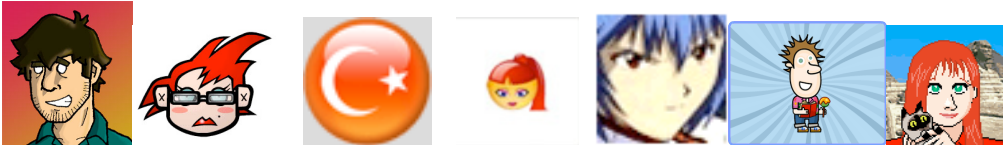


8) Export When you are done export the file from a vector drawing program (such as Illustrator) as a .jpeg or .gif to be icon/web ready. Save both the icon in its new format and the original .ai file for later incase you want to update or change it. Your icon is finished!

TIPS:

- Draw in only distinct visuals. Less detail is more, you only need to invoke a likeness of yourself.
- Export the vector drawing into an image format to become ready to apply as an icon. (such as .jpg or .gif)
- These icons are tiny. Account for small size when drawing in facial features and details. This is the actual size that your icon will be.
- Your computer will resize the graphic to its default icon size, you don't have to resize. If you draw the image big it can be reused for other projects (letterhead, business cards etc.).

GALLERY:



SUPPORT:

To assign an icon to your IM account or lchat click on the default image and choose “edit picture”. Navigate to where you new icon has been saved and choose it. That’s it.

To assign graphic to desktop icon or folder:

MAC: http://www.askdavetaylor.com/how_do_i_change_my_mac_os_x_hard_drive_icon.html

PC: <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,1895,1847172,00.asp>