Ai Kawabata has loved drawing since she was a child. Looking up at the play of colors in the late evening sky, Ai would wonder how she could express the depth and richness of what she saw. She layered colors on her drawing pad in an attempt to recreate the experience on paper. Her grandfather provided her with inspiration too, telling her that if she was passionate about drawing, she should use her gift and become a designer. Ai took his advice to heart, and now works as a designer and illustrator in Tokyo.

After years of creating catalogs, pamphlets, and packaging designs, today she focuses on commissioned illustrations and web design projects, and is also writing a book on Adobe Illustrator. More focused on digital output than print, her work conveys her natural curiosity about the world around her. She finds inspiration in action movies, novels, music, good food, and the nearly 3,000 photographs she takes a month. Clients benefit from her inquisitiveness, keen attention to detail, and ability to combine multiple elements into a unified, clearly conveyed idea.
How I work

Whether working on designs or illustrations, I focus on that first spark of inspiration. Later, during meetings or when I’m doing research, I already have a rough idea in my head, so I can devote the rest of my time to experimenting and refining my ideas to create the best possible result. Research is an essential part of my process because I believe that you have to really understand your subjects or the topic to represent them accurately in the final design.

In everyday life, I encounter so many colorful and beautiful things—flowers, birds, landscapes, candies, animals—and I’m always excited about the possibility of drawing them. I collect a lot of reference materials for things I might want to draw, and have taken as many as 1,000 photographs in a single day.

I start each project with a blank new document in Illustrator. Composition is important, so I put a lot of thought into where to position elements on the artboard. Even simply shifting things a few pixels can change the overall impression and feel of an illustration.

My favorite part of a project is thinking about the mix of colors that I want to use to bring the creative vision to life. Freely creating colors and adjusting their hue, brightness, and saturation is exciting and helps me uncover new perspectives to bring to projects. I love working with beautiful lines and exploring subtle changes in color and composition. When the image that finally appears on screen is the same as the image that originally appeared in my mind, then I know I’m done.

“Seeing all the elements come together during a job is one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of being a designer.”
Getting started

The many beautiful and colorful sights that surround us every day always inspire me, and I often feel compelled to draw them. Recently, when I was approached about producing sample art using my favorite program, Adobe Illustrator, I decided to draw a courtesan (Oiran) from one of the most colorful eras of Japanese history, the Edo period.

The fashion worn by courtesans at that time was quite elaborate and extremely unique, even for the time period, which was known for its elegance and refinement. The women wore distinctive hairstyles and kimonos in patterns that most people—then and definitely in modern times—would never even dream of wearing. They also adorned themselves with an excessive amount of ornamentation. When I draw figures that represent part of our rich history, I reference as many materials as I can and do my best to avoid inaccuracies. For this project, I did extensive research on Japanese clothing and kimonos, as well as the hair styles of the Edo period. For the illustration, I focused on bringing out the intricate, beautiful patterns and detailed layering and interplay between the kimonos.

Creating the courtesan and her kimonos

Once in Illustrator, I transformed the Adobe Ideas sketch into guidelines, and using the Pen tool, I first drew the courtesan’s body. The soft curves of the woman are truly captivating.

After drawing the contours of the woman’s body, I added the kimonos: the undershirt (kosode) and collar, short-sleeved robe, front-facing obi belt, and formal robe. I drew the areas for all of the shadows, and then added gradients and set the blending mode for the objects to Multiply and Screen to create deep shading on the kimono.

The sketch

Normally, I don’t rely upon rough sketches to work on an illustration, but in this case, I felt having a sketch would help me achieve the exact level of detail required for this project. Using my iPad and Adobe Ideas, I sketched out some concepts. By uploading the Adobe Ideas document to Adobe Creative Cloud®, I was able to open it directly in Illustrator. How convenient!
Accurate ornamentation

The courtesan’s hairstyle is a distinctive style known as “datehyogo,” where the hair is securely fastened in place with the help of hair oils. I applied a gradient to a stroke that had been modified using the Variable Width tool to create the sheen on her hair.

Courtesans use special hair ornaments, with specific rules governing tortoiseshell hairpins (kanzashi) and combs (kushi). I created the hair ornaments in separate documents and then combined the parts.

The designs on the tortoiseshell hairpins and combs should really vary according to the season, but I decided to combine a variety of flowers, including cherry blossoms, wisteria, lotus, and spirea. It was incredibly difficult to recreate each look accurately.

The kimonos and hair style are complete. These hair ornaments must have been incredibly heavy to wear.

Use of shadows, highlights, and strokes

Next, I drew her face. Using the Pen tool, I added fine shadows and highlights to create the curves of her face. Rather than focusing on creating a completely accurate human face, I emphasized the feeling that you get from the original sketch. I used the Variable Width tool to create the eyebrows and eyelashes.
Leaving the courtesan for a moment, I started to draw the peonies.

It happened to be spring at the time and all of the flowers were in bloom, including peonies, so I went out to take some photographs. After taking about 800 photos, I selected the peony with just the right shape and used that photograph as the basis for my sketch of the flower.

Knowing that I could change the color later, I first drew the petal shapes and added grayscale shading. I only used two types of gradients: light to dark for the flower petals and dark to light for the shadows.

I drew the cluster of stamens at the center of the flower using the Appearance panel to create multiple strokes of varying thicknesses and blending modes on a single path.
Using the Assign mode of the Recolor Artwork feature, I deselected the colors used in the center of the flower, and then switched to Edit mode to change the gray gradients in the petals to red.

Using the same methods, I drew a total of four peonies and positioned two each in the original illustration.

Latest features add interest, save time

Next, I created the background. I placed circles reminiscent of halos or the moon behind the courtesan and used the Appearance panel to color them with a checked pattern fill along with multiple gradient fills with different blending modes. After drawing circular gradients ranging from black to deep gray in Draw Behind mode, I used the Color Dodge blending mode to combine the gradient circles in a way that represents light. Lastly, I turned a cherry blossom flower motif into a symbol and arranged the flowers using the Symbol Sprayer tool.
I wanted to add more ornamental detail to the background and thought that this would be an opportunity to try out the new Images in brushes and auto corners for Pattern brushes in Illustrator CC. I created a gold raster image in Photoshop® CC and trimmed it to a square shape. I next created a design for the pattern I wanted in Illustrator, loaded it into Photoshop to create a vector mask, and output the resulting image in PNG format.

Finally, I applied the new Pattern brush to the object in the background. Using auto corners for Pattern brushes along with Images in brushes helped me generate corners that match my strokes perfectly, with no extra work. "I always created Pattern brushes with corners, but it took a lot of effort. The ability to have corners created automatically with pattern brushes in Adobe Illustrator CC is incredibly helpful."
There are many examples where the Ukiyo-e artist Jakuchu Ito, from the mid-Edo period, used chickens and roosters as a theme in his work. Chickens also appear in Japanese kimono patterns. I quite like them, so I decided to use one in this project. I first drew it in a separate document based on a photograph.

“I think the true value of Adobe Illustrator CC is in the fine-tuning that makes it even easier to use.”

Starting with a photo I took of a candy wrapper, I created two different types of images, one blue and one silver. I placed them in Illustrator and embedded them. Using images in brushes, I created new Art brushes with images and used them to paint on the tail feathers of the chicken. I applied a Variable Width profile to each of the brushes to add dimension, then added a blue-green gradient with the Blend mode set to Hue to add color variation to the stokes.

I created a new Graphic Style with the modified brush and applied it to the tail feathers of the chicken.
After copying the image and pasting it into the illustration, I drew flowers and added them to the kimono pattern. The feathers from the chicken on the obi belt jut out for an artistic touch. I have the peony layer temporarily hidden at this moment.

With all of the elements complete, I turned on all the layers to reveal the finished image.

“Red is the color of passion, and it’s one of my favorite colors. People are naturally drawn to red. It can be shocking, and it infuses an image with excitement and brightness.”