

On the site

Learn this technique using the supplied files

Essentials

Works with



Photoshop CC, Photoshop CS6 and above

What you'll learn

Pen and Path tools, shape attributes and blending modes

Time taken 4-5 hours

Expert



Kirk Nelson

"Whenever I see an interesting artistic effect, I immediately begin to think about how I can replicate it using Photoshop. The current trend of low-poly art was no different. I'm a professional graphics artist with nearly 20 years of experience in photomanipulation and illustration, but at heart I'm just a friendly graphics geek!"



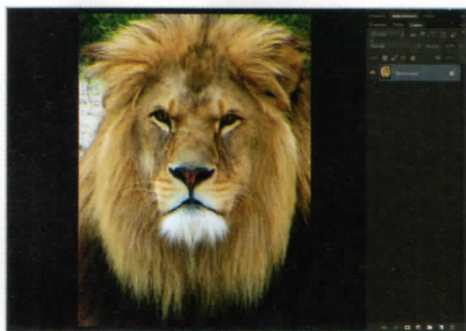
Create low-poly art

Learn the tools and techniques for creating this popular low-poly art form

One of the trends in design currently receiving a lot of popularity is the low-poly effect. The basic idea behind the effect imagines that an object were created in a 3D-modelling program, but using a minimum amount of polygons to capture its familiar characteristics and shape. The approach encourages us to find the true form of the subject matter, because it prevents us from concentrating on the unnecessary details and rather look at the wider image.

Generally, these effects are done in a more vector-oriented way, using a program like Illustrator

for example. However, here we have found a way of completing the process entirely in Photoshop to give the same great, low-poly result. This pushes the program's sparse vector features further than normal, but it is more than capable of the task. We have even made use of Photoshop's other strengths, by using creative shading effects without having to individually alter the fill colours of hundreds of tiny triangles! The piece you will create is original and unique, so grab the start image off FileSilo, launch Photoshop and let's get started on our creative low-poly project.



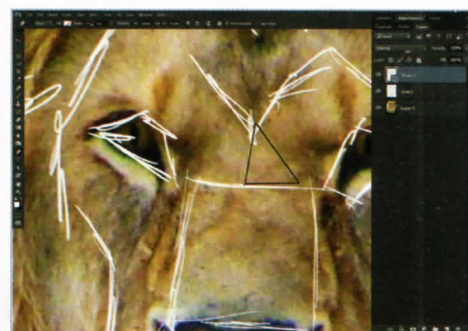
Download the lion

01 The technique used in this tutorial will work with almost any subject and because of the nature of vector shapes, resolution isn't a concern either. However, to follow our steps, find the high-resolution lion image we used on FileSilo>StarterLion.jpg.



Start with a sketch

02 Add a new layer and name it Sketch. Use a small-tipped brush with white paint to roughly sketch out the major forms of the lion's head. Try to think in terms of large polygons, as if the form were chiselled out of a solid block.

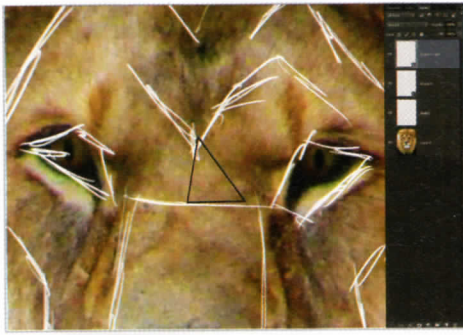


Begin drawing

03 Use the Pen tool and set the Mode to Shape. For the shape attributes, set the Fill to None and the Stroke to black with a Width of 1px. Then draw the first triangle to fit the space just between the lion's eyes as shown.

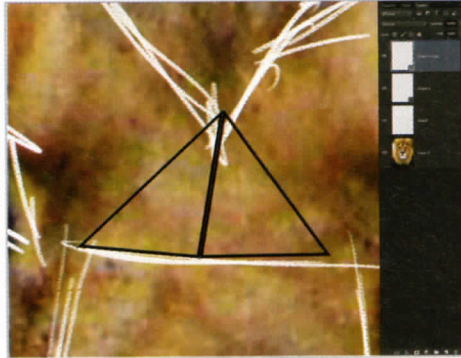


Tutorial Create low-poly art



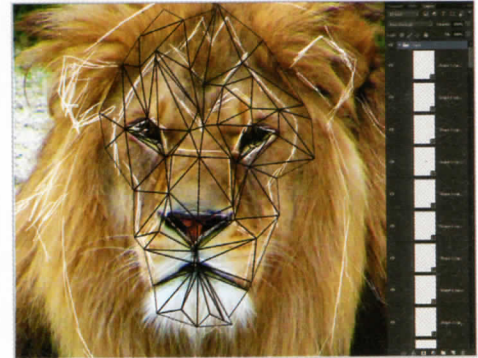
Duplicate the shape

04 Tap the Esc key until the shape's path is no longer highlighted. It is important that the layer is selected, but not the path. Press Cmd/Ctrl+J to duplicate the shape. There will be no visible change on the canvas, but there will be another shape in the Layers panel.



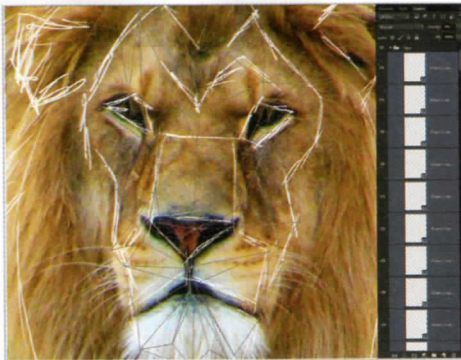
Form an adjacent triangle

05 Use the Direct Select tool – white arrow behind Path Select tool – to grab one corner of the new shape and move it to form an adjacent triangle. The method of duplication and repositioning ensures a tight border between the two shapes.



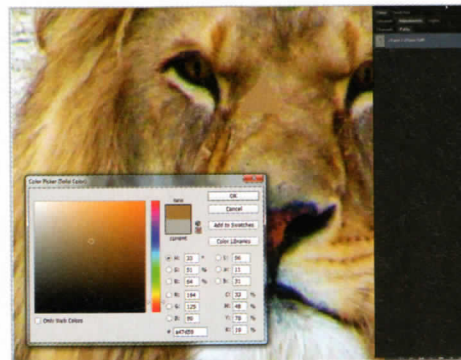
Outline facial features

06 Using the sketch lines as a visual reminder, continue duplicating shapes and moving points along the facial contours. Focus on rendering the major form rather than the details at this point. Place all the shapes into a single Face group.



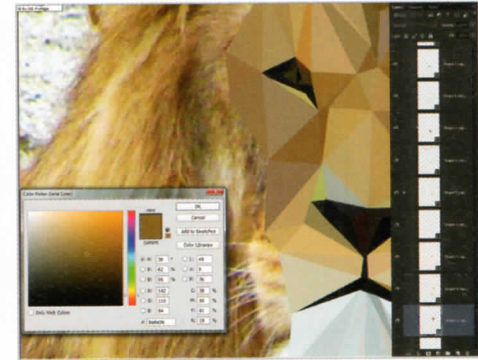
Create invisible shapes

07 Select a shape and change the attributes to No Stroke and a Fill of a solid colour. Ctrl/right-click the thumbnail and select Copy Shape Attributes. Then select all shapes, Ctrl/right-click to Paste Shape Attributes and set the Opacity to 0%.



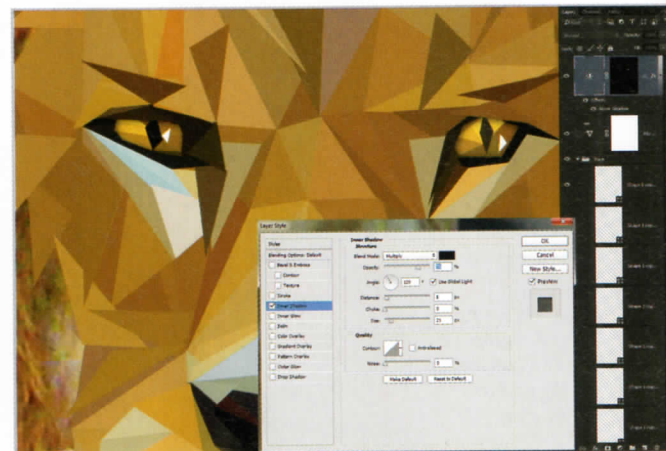
Quick-fill technique

08 Use the Path Select tool to grab a shape. That shape is then selected in the Layers panel. Double click the thumbnail to select a fill colour. Sample a colour from within the shape bounds. Hit OK, then tap 0 to return the Opacity to 100%.



Fill in the face

09 Continue to select and fill the triangles of the face. When sampling the colour, the eyedropper sample size can be changed. Use a larger size to get a more average colour tone for an area and a smaller sample size for smaller polys.



Add details

10 Once the basic facial features are complete, begin adding additional triangles to create more detail and further refine the shape of the features. The colour can be enhanced by adding a Vibrance adjustment layer with the Vibrance set to 75 and Saturation set to 17.

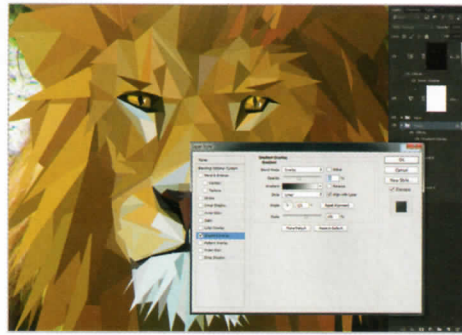
Focus on the eyes

11 Create a polygonal selection around the irises and add a Brightness/Contrast adjustment layer with the Brightness set to 95. Then add an Inner Shadow Layer Style to the adjustment layer with a Distance of 5px and a Size of 21px.



Form the mane

12 Use the same triangle generation technique to form the mane. The mane should have more visual chaos, so limit the number of perfectly shaped borders. Layer the triangles so the shapes close to the head overlap the outer ones.



Work on hair styles

13 Group all the shapes of the mane together, then add a Gradient Overlay Layer Style to the group. Set the blend mode to Overlay, the Opacity to 42%, the gradient as Black to White and the Angle to 121. This gives a subtle lighting effect to the mane.



Tweak the colour

14 Select the Face group and hold down the Opt/Alt key while going to Layer>Merge Group. This places a merged copy of the group as a single layer above it. Select that layer and change the blend mode to Soft Light. Reduce Opacity to 20%.



Adjust the lighting

15 Add a layer to the very top of the stack called Face Shading. Set the blend mode to Overlay and then use a large soft brush with black paint to add subtle shadow areas. Switch to white paint to add highlights and then adjust the layer's Opacity as needed.



Add a poly background

16 Finish off the piece by adding some large triangular elements into the background. Approximate a gradient by adjusting the poly colours to progress from dark to light. Then sit back and enjoy your low-poly lion!

DIRECT POLYGON EDITS

Use the Direct Selection tool to select and edit individual polygons or the intersection of many.

FOCUS ON FEATURES

Increase details by using smaller triangles tighter together, but only on focal elements that need to stand up to scrutiny.

SKETCH FIRST

Resist the urge to dive right into the poly creation. Use a sketch to keep you from drowning in a sea of details.

Closer look Crafting the low-poly effect

Capturing the essence with endless triangles

HELPFUL LAYER AUTO-SELECT

Selecting a poly with the Path Selection tool automatically highlights the individual layer, so there is no need to scroll through hundreds of poly layers!

