How to design a small poster

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To design it, use *bold images* and *high contrasts.*

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A good poster is simple and bold. It connects quickly and releases its information easily. Words tell the viewer *what, where* and *when.* The design, in this case, must convey *drama, mystery* and *tradition.*
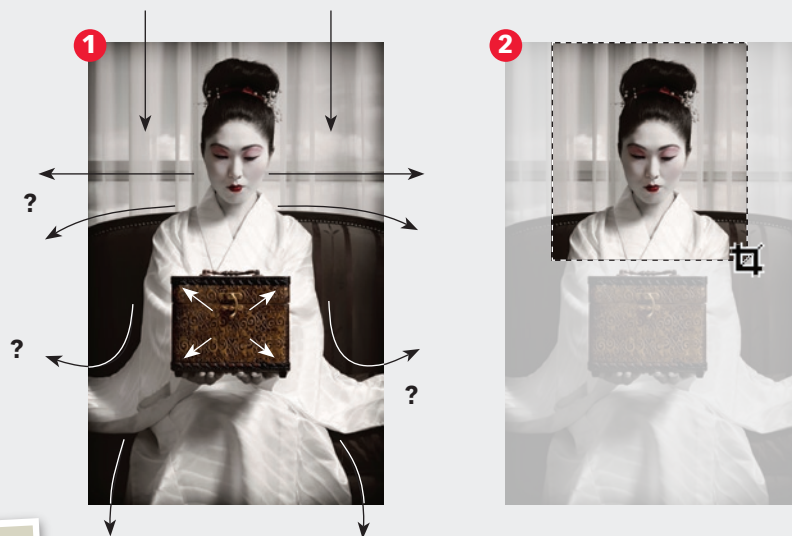
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A tabloid page, two average images and brief copy are where the job begins. The first step will be to look closely at what the photos have to say.

11″ x 17″

From: Sanji Yosho
Subject: **January Events Poster**
Date: October 15, 2006 3:27 PM PDT
To: Dexter Mark Abellera

Dexter,

Here's the copy for our January event. The pix were too big to e-mail, so I've uploaded them to our FTP site; you already have the access code. I'm not thrilled with either pic, but the board felt that they were pretty iconic so would serve well for the show. The poster needs some drama – and some mystery and tradition would be good, too; the geisha culture has a pretty interesting history. Tabloid-size, portrait format; we figure we'll display a couple dozen around the campus starting late November. The show will be pretty nice; I think you'll like it.

You may e-mail me anytime.

With regards,

Sanji

Head: Geisha
Subhead: A unique world of tradition, elegance and art
Info:
Roe City College, LH Horton Gallery
January 20-23, 6 p.m.
Free & open to the public

Evaluate the photos

As a rule, you want the photos to carry most of the design load. To do this, you must first find their strengths, then work with the "story" they have to tell.

What's in the pictures? The fan (left) is a simple image with a bold silhouette and a plain background—all good qualities—but it's too generic to anchor the poster; instead, it may be useful as support. The geisha (**1**) *should* convey the story, but the image is weak; it has two focal points (face and box) and many distracting lines and shapes that send the eye to and fro. But she has an interesting face that we might work with. Cropping (**2**) eliminates the weak parts and retains the strong center of interest.

Her face tells a deep story
Mask out the remaining background, and the image is transformed into one with real power. Now we begin to see elements of line and contrast that we didn't see before. Many ho-hum originals have similarly strong images inside. The key to discovery is to *make it simple,* and *make it big.*

Where do you put it?

The characteristics of a photo help determine where it belongs on a page. In this case, every line points down and toward the center . . .

Motionless in the center
The image is highly triangular. Her shoulders and head form a triangle; her face is triangular; eyes and mouth form a triangle, and the lapels and folds of her kimono are triangular. Her gaze, eyes, eyelids and eyebrows all point down and toward the center.

Such *symmetry* is naturally motionless and without tension. To mimic that in layout, the photo should be placed at the bottom center, where it's "on the ground" at rest. In contrast, note (inset) that offset and in the air is a tense, unstable position, where photo and layout are not working together.
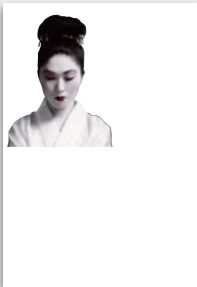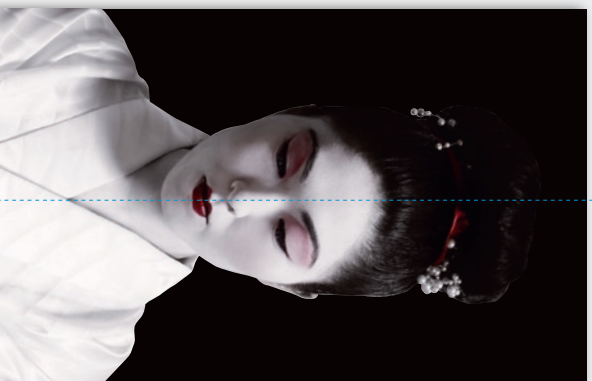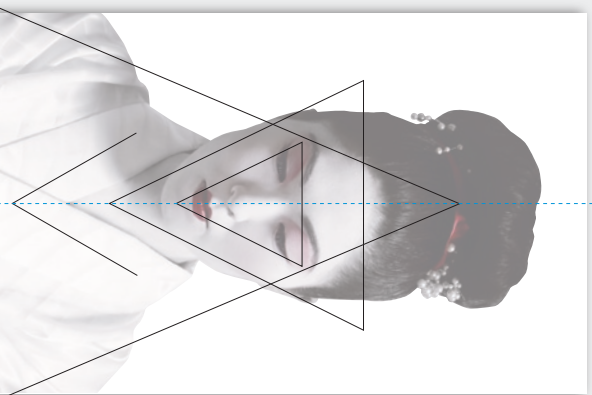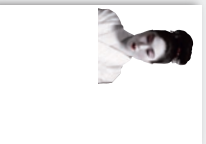
Black adds drama
Turning the background black adds silence, power and incredible contrast. Her black hair now recedes, while her white face and kimono become the "canvas" against which her black eyes, brows and red lips stand out in arresting relief. Note her head is centered in the poster, which is the strongest position and amplifies its power. *The story is in her face,* which now has our undivided attention.
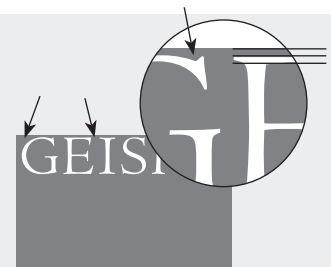
Select and set the headline type

Because a poster has only a few elements to do the work, type plays a bigger-than-usual role in the design, so pay close attention to its style and setting. What to consider:
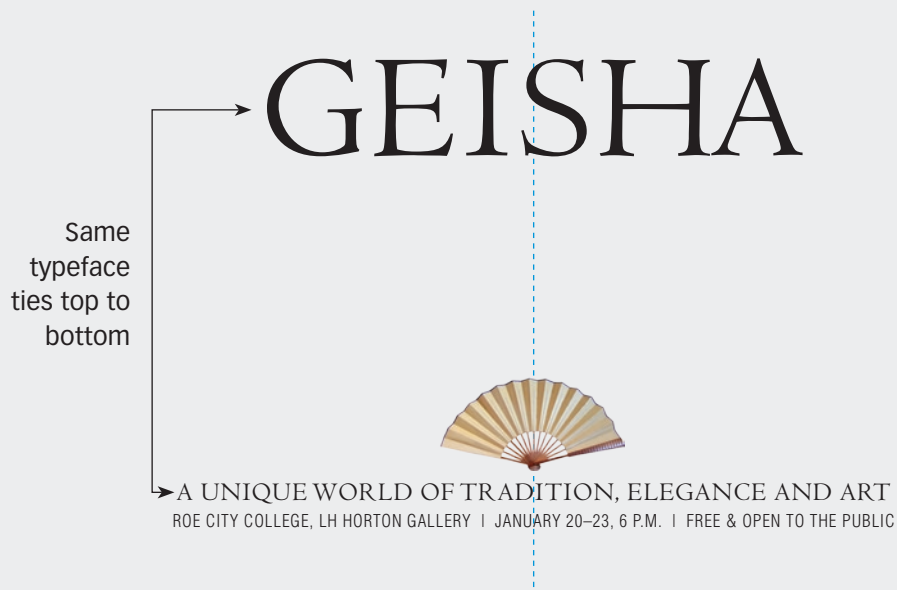
Where? Centered and motionless.

GEISH

迎 GEISH

GEISH

What typeface? A typeface has many jobs to do—one of which is to be read! It must convey the tone of the event (a pictoral history), reflect the style of its subject (the Japanese geisha), have visual similarities to the photo, and work with, not against, the layout (centered and motionless). Beautiful Centaur does all of this. At a glance, Centaur looks like an ordinary Roman typeface. But it is full of warm idiosyncrasies. Note the serifs circled above are all different—two are cupped, two are bowed, one curls back; and the letter strokes vary in soft, irregular ways. These are earmarks of a human hand (which categorizes Centaur as a *Humanist* typeface) and echo the hand-brushed strokes of Japanese characters.

How big? Large size usually conveys power, but the biggest possible setting (above) introduces something we don't want: tension. Its close proximity to the edge "connects" them like water drops joining across a gap and creates dozens of fussy, irregular shapes. This happens because the letter strokes and the gap are now the same size (inset). The solution is to reduce its size just enough to disconnect it from the edge (left).
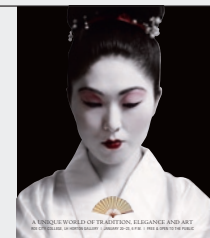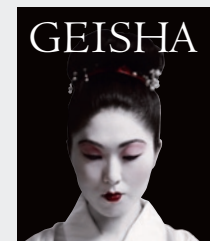
Finish with the supporting detail

The supporting detail is the small stuff that can be read only up close. It includes a fuller description of the event, the *what, where* and *when,* and a small graphic.

Same typeface ties top to bottom

GEISHA

A UNIQUE WORLD OF TRADITION, ELEGANCE AND ART
ROE CITY COLLEGE, LH HORTON GALLERY | JANUARY 20–23, 6 P.M. | FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

The supporting detail completes the poster. It includes a subhead that finishes the story started by the headline; a line that gives the where and when, and the fan, which visually conveys "tradition, elegance and art." Subhead and headline—two parts of the same thought—are set in the same typeface, while the utility line is in a plain, readable sans-serif (above). All of it is centered (stable and motionless like the image) and *directly in her line of sight.* Very strong.

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One story, two stories This poster is actually two "stories" in one. The top half is the big story (face and headline), while the bottom half is the small story (face and supporting detail). You can see below that one is as important as the other.

GEISHA

Same elements, two bold variations

Scaling the photo up or down intensifies its drama. As you arrange elements, remember to work with, not against, the photo. Center the layout; get color from the image.

Boldly small, boldly large
Bold design is usually good design.
(**1**) Make the geisha daringly small, and black becomes the dominant element. Black conveys silence and mystery and here suggests a glimpse into a distant, inscrutable culture.
(**2**) Make her very big, and the image becomes intimate, yet her downward gaze remains detached, professional, inaccessible. In both cases, note that all text is at the bottom in her line of sight.

1

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2

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Lip color ties eye shadow, lips, fan and subhead together. Note the fan is the size of her lips, an intentional similarity that strengthens the "line."

Article resources

1a

3

1b

2a

4

5

1c

1d

2b

6

1e

1b

2a

Typefaces

1 (a–e) Centaur MT | a) 370 pt, b) 53 pt
c) 226 pt, d) 48/60 pt, e) 220 pt

2 (a–b) Helvetica Condensed Light
a) 35 pt, b) 35/53 pt

(All text has +50 letterspacing.)

Images

3 iStockphoto.com

Colors

4 C**30** M**30** Y**30** K**100**

5 C**0** M**0** Y**0** K**50**

6 C**30** M**90** Y**58** K**43**

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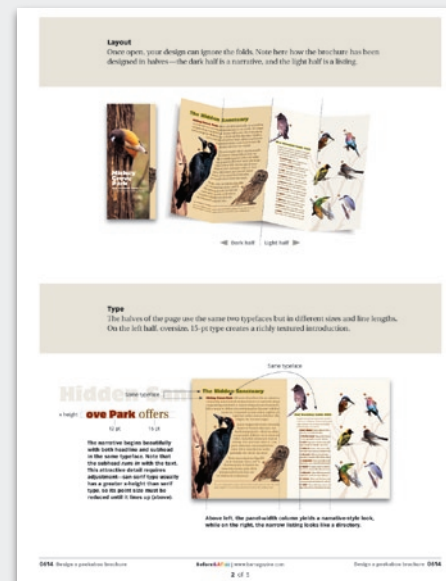

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Page Size: Fit to Page

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Presentation format or
Paper-saver format

For paper-saver format
Print: (Specify pages 11–15)

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poster

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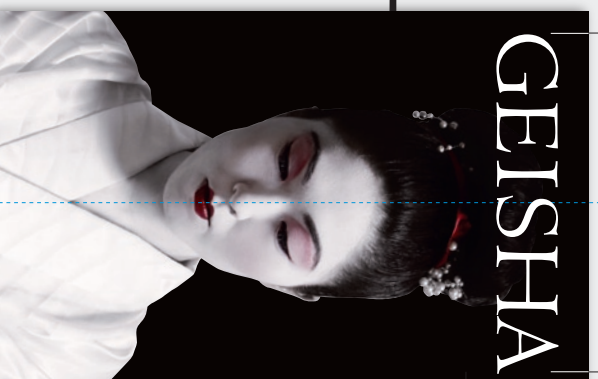
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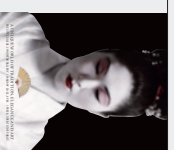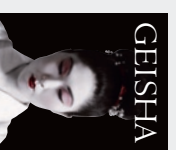
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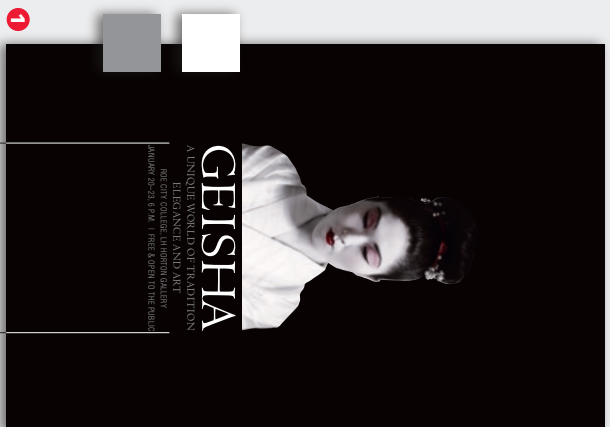
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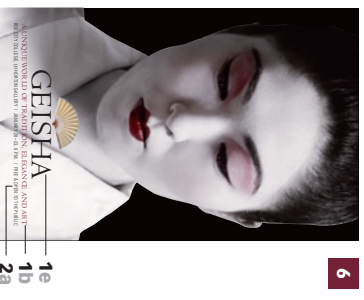
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Images

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Colors

4 C30 M30 Y30 K100

5 C0 M0 Y0 K50

6 C30 M90 Y58 K43

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