THE PORTFOLIO PROCESS— START TO FINISH

"Can you start on Wednesday?" The words floated across the table. I paused for a moment before answering. "I believe I can free up the remainder of the week." (Not that I had had anything lined up.) The dean of education handed me a completed teaching schedule, shook my hand, and said, "The meetings are all day Wednesday. You start teaching on the following Monday. I'll need all of your syllabi by next week." I nodded and mumbled, "No problem." As I stood up, the dean spoke once more. "We're taking a chance on you, so don't let us down." Taking a slow breath so as not to hyperventilate, I said, "I'll do my best." I picked up my portfolio, walked out of the office, and headed back to my car.

This certainly wasn't my first job interview. I had completed the interviewing process many times before. What made this interview so nerve-racking was that I wanted the job so desperately. The expression "Never let them see you sweat" came to my mind as the adrenaline finally gave out. Then it hit me: "I'm teaching college!" I hurried to the nearest phone to call home. I couldn't wait to break the news about my new position.

So why was I offered that job? Was it my interview skills? My attire? My positive attitude? Nope! It was my portfolio—plain and simple. I had brought to the interview a portfolio of design projects that I had completed in college, plus a number of projects that I had created in my freelance business. Those pieces, together with my ability to discuss the portfolio projects and what they represented, were what got me the job.

Building a portfolio and interviewing for jobs is possibly the most intense process you will ever undertake as you begin or advance your career. Your portfolio must reflect the very best of what you can contribute to a potential employer as an artist/designer. And the pivotal moment in your interview process begins as the employer slowly opens your portfolio, allowing it to reveal the best of what you have to offer (figs. 1–1 and 1–2).

You Need a Portfolio

As you arrive for your job interview, you notice that another applicant is leaving. And when your

interview concludes and you are departing, you see that yet another applicant is waiting. Assume that each of these three candidates has equal qualifications for this job, a similar college degree, and an excellent interview. How does the company make a decision?

No doubt about it, the competition is tough in today's job market. So you cannot just say that you are an extraordinary designer. You must provide proof of your qualifications. That's the purpose of your portfolio: it demonstrates your skills and abilities. Instead of just talking during a job interview about what you have done or can do, you can show samples of your work. Your professional portfolio showcases your talents. In this way, a well-designed portfolio can help you stand out from the other candidates. It gives you the edge.

It was once thought that only fine artists, graphic designers, architects, and fashion designers needed a portfolio to get a job. Not anymore. Today, portfolios are used to secure jobs in many different areas. Teachers, interior designers, multimedia and Web designers, engineers, and journalists can all make use of a professional portfolio to advance their careers. A portfolio for each of these professionals will be unique to his or her field of specialization. The overall purpose, however, is to present a unified body of work that represents what the candidate can offer. Thus, regardless of your design background, you can develop a portfolio that highlights your accomplishments and shows off your talent. Portfolios are especially necessary for people seeking a new job, changing career fields, or negotiating for a promotion or raise.

It's one thing to say, "I have great organizational skills." But when you can back up that statement with examples, you're demonstrating that you can do the job. It's the difference between saying, "I can do it . . . really!" and showing that you can—the difference between talk and action.

Obviously, you need to feel comfortable in the job environment, and the company must have confidence in you as well. A job almost always requires a match of personalities—yours and the potential employer's. I once took an interview at a community

FIG. 1–1 Preparation is the key to a successful portfolio.

FIG. 1–2 Be prepared to discuss your art. You will be asked to explain why you created a piece in a certain way. Your ability to articulate an answer can influence how you are perceived as an artist and Web designer.

college. I had made the initial cut from 175 applicants to the final 5 who would be interviewed. The unusual thing about this particular interview was that about 20 minutes into the session, I began to notice a pattern to the questioning: certain individuals on the interviewing committee would ask certain questions. It really surprised them when I turned to the next person, smiled, and said, "I believe the next question is yours." They were slightly taken aback, then started laughing. That interview, scheduled for 45 minutes, was really good and ended up lasting almost two hours! Only a few days later, I was offered the job.

If you look up *portfolio* in a dictionary, you'll probably read something like "a portable collection of paper and artifacts that demonstrates one's experience and skills." That's pretty vague, considering that these materials can be made up of almost anything—artwork, writing samples, award certificates, even performance reviews. Other samples might include customer-satisfaction surveys or graphs that chart improvements in products or services based on your contributions (fig. 1–3). The point is, the artifacts that you include in your portfolio should always be chosen carefully to highlight your most relevant skills and achievements.

A Portfolio Must Stand Alone

Suppose for a moment that you are not allowed to remain in the room while a potential employer is viewing your portfolio. Will he or she be able to understand the pieces it contains or your participation in those projects? Think of what it's like to watch a silent movie—no sound. You have to interpret what you see using only the images. Looking at your "port" is like watching that silent movie. The body of work has to stand alone. The point is, once you have selected what to include in your portfolio, organize the pieces in a logical manner. You may decide to arrange your work by strengths or chronologically. Whichever way you choose, document your involvement with each project. For instance, if you include a brochure from a training program, make sure that the interviewer can tell

FIG. 1–3 Michel Khalil's design skills are clearly apparent; hence, this piece would be an excellent way to showcase his ability to design logos.

FIG. 1–4 This project, which I created to promote a study-related trip, demonstrates that portfolio opportunities are always available. Don't hesitate to volunteer your services as a designer.

whether you designed the brochure, attended the class, or organized the event. Add a simple caption to clarify your connection to the piece. Every project or freelance job is an opportunity to create work, as figure 1–4 shows.

Start Building Your Portfolio

The hardest part about building a portfolio is deciding where to begin. You know that you must include your best art in the port, but just how do you go about organizing the presentation? You may have several dozen pieces of your work or just a few. As you begin to develop your portfolio, you must first think about which pieces are worthy of inclusion. Your design background and history will most certainly influence this process. If you are still in college, your portfolio will more than likely contain a collection of projects that reflect the classes you have completed. In contrast, a professional in the field will exhibit a different set of layouts based, at least in part, on completed client jobs. Consider the following situations for which it makes sense to develop or enhance a portfolio.

You Are a Professional in a Related Field

You have been working in advertising but want to move into the area of graphic design. You are a fine artist who illustrates or paints, and you have a number of finished pieces but don't feel that they best reflect your current design sensibilities. In the case of the advertiser or the fine artist, consider taking one of your design projects, illustrations, or other art pieces and creating a layout that shows off the work. In other words, demonstrate the application of the piece. A good illustration will look even better as an editorial spread. A clever advertisement will look even more professional when it is presented as an "actual" ad in a magazine.

Perhaps you have worked in a related field but want to change the direction of your career. In this case, consider displaying early versions of any client-based projects. You may have lots of sketches for ideas that were eliminated in the course of choosing the final concept. I have a number of pieces I created that were never selected. They allow the viewer to see how the project progressed, from its beginnings to the final solution. Don't feel you have to hide the final piece if it wasn't the one you would have selected. (I have frequently felt that many of my initial concepts were actually better than the ones the client eventually chose.) The very fact that you have worked with a client may be enough to convey the impression that you're a "seasoned" employee.

Or perhaps, as part of your job, you were a member of several design-related work groups. Why not display the art developed by the group, then clearly define your involvement with the project? Including these concept designs in the portfolio shows your range of design abilities and the thought processes involved. In addition, they freshen up the look of your port and demonstrate that you can work effectively in a group environment.

Establish expertise and technical skills. Demonstrate that you are a problem solver. Employers want to know not only what work experience you have had but what skills you gained on the job. Explain your involvement with a project and how you contributed to its overall success. You want to be able to demonstrate that you are a top-notch designer who is both creative and self-disciplined (fig. 1–5).

You Are Still a College Student

Much of the design work you complete in college or at a technical school can be considered for inclusion in your portfolio. You may, for example, have recently finished a series of design-based classes in which your professors challenged you to prepare a variety of creative pieces to design criteria they

established. Take a good look at these projects. Many of them demonstrate your style of design. And because student portfolios tend to be general in nature, be especially aware of projects that show your area of expertise. If you are an excellent illustrator or photographer, make sure that your portfolio reflects that special talent. (Selecting appropriate projects is discussed further in chapter 2.)

You Are Searching for New Ways to Develop Artwork

Artwork prepared while you complete your basic studies is important, but you might also want to consider these additional options for generating art projects:

- Joining an art organization or a design group online or near where you live

- Participating in industry organizations, such as the American Advertising Federation, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, or the Society of Illustrators

- Applying for an internship or externship (after graduation)

- Entering a community-based contest

FIG. 1–5 Desiree Marin creates a wonderful set of stationery pieces. When seen together in a portfolio, they make an unmistakable statement about her abilities to brand a company.

Each of these venues provides an excellent opportunity to show what you can do. And the best part is that you could end up with a printed piece that demonstrates real-world experience. The point is, don't be afraid to show off.

You Participate in a Summer Program or Attend a Special Workshop

Special seminars in design are offered in most major cities throughout the year. And companies such as Adobe and Quark regularly offer free (or low-cost) demonstrations of their best-selling software. Firms that specialize in training frequently hold one-day workshops in design-related areas. Workshops such as these look great on your résumé. They show that you are going to work hard to stay current in your field of specialization.

College summer travel or study-abroad programs offer more opportunities to generate art that can enhance your résumé and portfolio. For example, as part of my master of fine arts program, I studied Native American culture and art for two summers in Santa Fe, New Mexico. During those months, I attended weeklong workshops and created a number of artistic pieces, many of which I incorporated into my portfolio. I highly recommend that you explore any opportunity to advance your

design skills. Inspect figures 1–6 through 1–10 for some design inspiration.

You Design for Family and Friends

Never miss an opportunity to generate artwork that you might be able to include in your portfolio. Perhaps your aunt is starting her own business. Offer to design her business card and stationery package. Maybe she could use some advice to help her develop some promotional materials such as T-shirts or other giveaways. And designing a professional-looking Web site with a shopping cart to allow purchases would most certainly make you her favorite relative. Likewise, your friends (especially the noncreative types) will appreciate your

FIGS. 1–7 AND 1–8 This awesome billboard and Web site interface mock-up was designed by Angelica Leon. Observe how consistently the pieces work together.

FIG. 1–6 Newsletters can be created free of charge for a local organization. A newsletter such as this, created by Nicole Weik, is a great way to develop pieces for your portfolio and (who knows?) maybe get a freelance job or two.

designing creative résumés for them. And why not create original holiday or birthday cards? In short, keep your eyes open for project opportunities that will help you build up a body of work. At a weekend art festival, I once met an artist who created the most wonderful watercolors. I ended up talking her into allowing me to create her monthly national newsletter. You never know where the next design opportunity will come from.

You Take Advantage of Freelance Opportunities

Don't overlook the chance to take on freelance work. Most design schools feature a freelance bulletin board where local companies post their need for design assistance. Check out this board on a regular basis, then contact any company of interest and offer your services. The prospect of approaching potential clients may sound a little intimidating while you're still a student, but the rewards are many. You'll generate some artwork and earn a little cash as well. If you are unsure about what to charge, there are a number of ways to research the going rates. Books such as *Artist's & Graphic Designer's Market 2013,* edited by Mary Burzlaff Bostic; *Starting Your Career as a Freelance Illustrator or Graphic Designer,* by Michael Fleishman (2001); and *2012 Photographer's Market,* by Mary Burzlaff Bostic (2011), will help you determine your costs and profits.

You Advance Your Design Skills Using the Barter System

In addition to freelancing, another viable way of marketing your design expertise is via the barter system. The benefits here are twofold: you get valuable design experience as well as some (nonmonetary) compensation. I once had a student who went to local restaurants and offered to redesign their menus. In return, he received gift cards for food from the establishments. He not only generated some great art but also got to sample some terrific food. What a deal!

You Design for Yourself

If you don't already have a personal identity package, design one. Start by designing a distinctive logo that truly represents you. Then use that logo to create your own business card, résumé, and stationery. You might also design an invoice for billing your freelance clients. Additionally, you might create a self-promotional package. Use any design strategy you can think of to create memorable pieces.

FIGS. 1–9 AND 1–10 Was this thrilling magazine editorial spread, created by Isabela Belloso, completed in college or in the field? A truly professional piece gives no hint of its origin; it simply shows off your artistic skills and abilities. This one is very unique.

You Compile Examples of Improvements You've Made to Bad Design

You've seen them: those horrible ads in the back of magazines and newspapers. Find a particularly bad one and create a series of interpretations to improve on it. All types of design majors can use a comparable strategy. Bad design is everywhere! The next time you receive a terribly designed e-mail blast, evaluate the design problem and come up with a new layout solution. Do you receive poorly designed brochures in the mail? Any one of them might provide an opportunity for you to apply a makeover. Finally, there is nothing so compelling as making upgrades and improvements to a really horrible Web site. Figures 1–11 through 1–13 are examples of potential design projects for your portfolio.

Tailor the Portfolio to Your Area of Specialization

The second step in the portfolio creation process is the most important: deciding which type of job you're interested in. Each of the design disciplines contains many different areas of specialization, and you will need to tailor your portfolio to the job you want. For example, let's consider some of the job possibilities in the field of graphic design:

- Art director and assistant art director
- Information graphic designer
- Broadcast graphic artist
- Mock-up artist
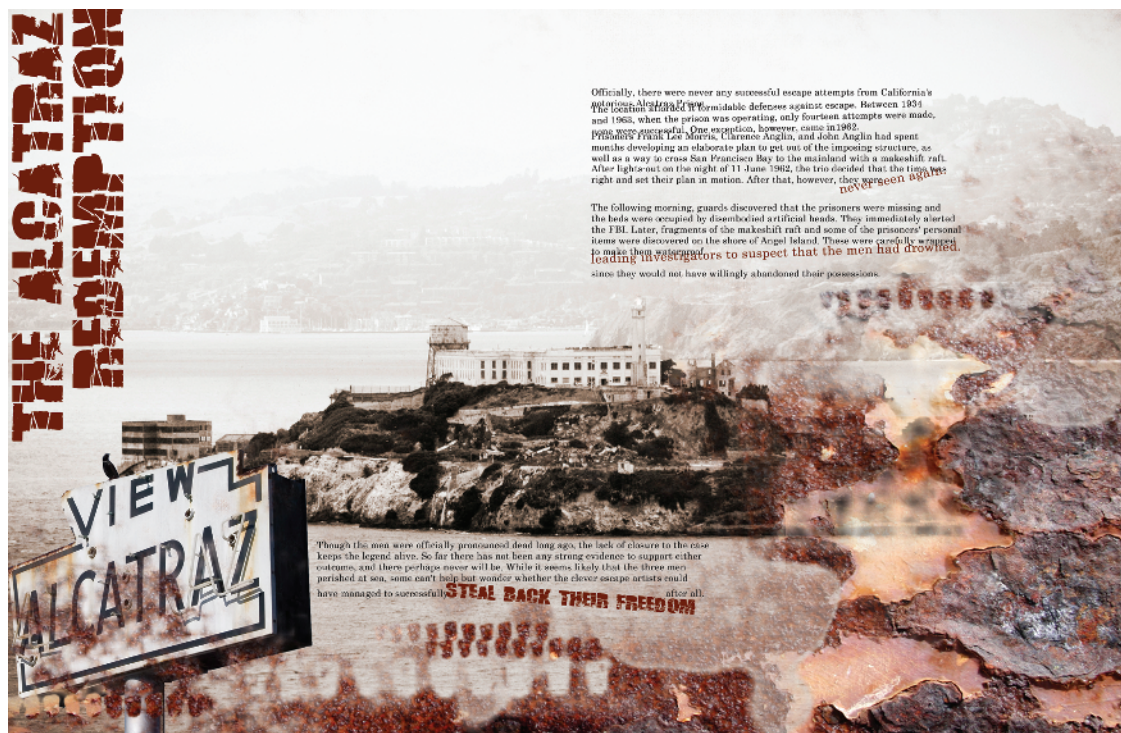- Web page or multimedia designer
- Prepress specialist

FIG. 1–11 Creating a mock editorial magazine spread is a great way to challenge yourself. This spread, by Jacqueline Thrailkill, reminds us that regardless of your background, you can develop pieces worth including in your portfolio.

- artist
- Layout or productionStoryboard illustrator
- Book illustrator/designer
- New media layout and design artist, including for iOS devices such as smartphones
- Corporate design manager
- Freelance artist
- Creative director

Similarly, the field of advertising offers a vast variety of job opportunities, including the following:

- Advertising and promotion manager
- Marketing and sales manager
- Account executive and account supervisor
- Public relations manager and public relations specialist

- Social media strategist
- Purchasing agent
- Market research analyst
- Art director
- Graphic designer
- Lobbyist (for industry trade organization, union, or public-interest group)
- Media and research specialist and planner
- Editor
- Writers and author
- Advertising sales agent
- Demonstrator and product promoter

Although every design portfolio will look different depending on the field, the basic objective is always the same: to create a portfolio that demonstrates your unique ability.

FIG. 1–12 This beautiful calendar, created by Kristalyn L. Burns, not only showcases her ability to illustrate but also demonstrates that she understands how the illustration will look in print.

FIG. 1–13 This corporate identification package, created by Debbie La Rocca, illustrates her consistent use of color, type, and design elements.

Identify Your Strengths

In order to develop a portfolio that highlights your accomplishments and shows off your skills, you must blend two different concepts. First, your portfolio must give a snapshot of your creative talents and imagination. Second, and more important, your port must represent your ability to communicate design concepts and ideas. As such, your portfolio must be an effective tool for promoting yourself (fig. 1–14). So, regardless of the job you're applying for—designer, illustrator, or photographer—include in your portfolio only those samples that match that particular job. Beautifully designed greeting cards will make no impression if the job calls for a logo designer. Remember, you can always add samples of other creative work at the back of your portfolio. Label those pieces and include them in a separate section. Or you can create a second portfolio just to show how versatile you are. I actually have two portfolios. I move pieces in and out depending on the type of job I am applying for.

The most important thing to remember when creating a portfolio is to ensure that your work

FIG. 1–14 Make eye contact and demonstrate your confidence. You would be amazed how many people cannot look you in the eye! Practice in front of a mirror if necessary, but do be ready when the time comes.

always represents your best efforts. Never include a weak piece in your port—even if it demonstrates the skills that a particular job requires. A friend once told me that a designer will always be judged by the weakest pieces in her or his portfolio. If you're not sure what to include, ask for advice. Consult with professionals and professors. Allow them to critique your work. It may make you a little

What Can I Do to Get a Job?

Throughout this book, you will find all types of techniques to assist you in your job search, including the creation of traditional paper résumés, interactive CDs and DVDs, and even Web sites. Just remember, there are still more ways to find jobs, some of which are very twenty-first century. E-mail, blogs, job search sites, video résumés, and online networking sites are just as important as your portfolio. These new methods for finding jobs are discussed as well in the upcoming chapters. Figure 1–15 is a poster I designed.

FIG. 1–15 I created this poster to promote a class in Web design. It demonstrates that portfolio opportunities are always available. Don't hesitate to volunteer your design services. It will help you to develop new port pieces.

uncomfortable, but it will help you to focus on your strengths. As you gain experience, don't forget to replace older design work in your port with newer, fresher designs; and, whenever possible, use professional work.

Decide Whether to Diversify or Focus Your Portfolio

There are a number of differing viewpoints about whether your portfolio should be diversified or focused. Many companies feel that you should diversify and show a wide range of pieces. On the other hand, I have spoken with many art directors who believe that the portfolio should highlight a well-defined style by displaying art created within that narrow range. The problem with a narrowly focused port is that it can exclude you from a number of different jobs. A port that focuses exclusively on, say, corporate identification work may not get you an interview in a company that's looking for someone to design packages. Or a graphic designer who creates art with an urban approach might be passed over by a design firm that caters to a corporate clientele. Simply put, a diversified portfolio opens you up to a wider range of job opportunities.

So do you diversify or focus your portfolio? The answer is . . . it depends. If the description of a particular job appears to ask for specific skills, you should tailor your work to the position you are applying for. However, if you are just starting out, it is better to have a portfolio that showcases the many different types and styles of work you can offer as a designer (fig. 1–16).

Some companies recommend taking a commonsense approach. Every potential employer has an idea of what should be in a portfolio, and most agree that the pieces in a portfolio should be selected to demonstrate what the designer wants to say about himself or herself. If possible, have a couple of extra pieces on hand. Perhaps the best advice is to research each company and determine what it

might be looking for in a designer. Then rotate your design work into and out of your portfolio as the job indicates.

This much is clear: your portfolio should present the best examples of your designs and concepts. The pieces you ultimately choose for your portfolio will stand as an indication of your ability to organize, conceptualize, and present. Whatever artwork you decide to include, make sure that each piece represents the best of what you offer as a designer (fig. 1–17). Keep the goal in mind: you want a potential employer to decide that he or she must hire you in order to gain access to your unique design abilities and skills!

FIG. 1–16 This wonderful and highly interactive CD, created by Maria Rodriguez, demonstrates a very highly developed sense of color and some fantastic craftsmanship
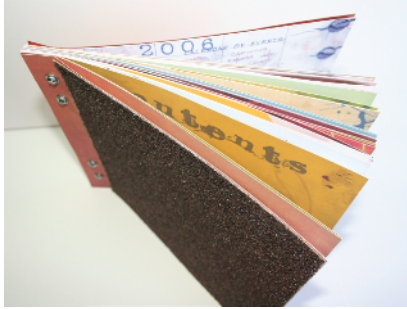
FIG. 1–17 Ilse Simon creates an inspired cover for her annual report. Soft corkboard and grommets are used to give a very tactile edge to her piece for a building company.

Be Prepared

Once you have created a portfolio, always keep it at the ready. You never know when an opportunity to interview for a new job (or a promotion) will arise. And when opportunity does knock, you will be ready to answer the inevitable question about your qualifications by opening your port and demonstrating those qualifications. "I've created a set of projects that would really contribute to your company. Here, let me show them to you." This book will help you stay prepared.

An Interview with James Kluetz

James Kluetz is the vice president and creative director for of Pinpoint Communications, as well as the creative director of Brand Tango. Mr. Kluetz graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. You can find out more about Mr. Kluetz and his work at *www. brandtango.com*.

1. What qualities do you look for in an applicant?

Typically nowadays, before we meet the person, we meet the portfolio. . . . Before I meet someone I meet their electronic portfolio . . . so the electronic port helps me to weed out the people who will not be able to succeed in this company. We are a very busy agency . . . so you need to do something extra to drive us to your site. . . . When I get those files, I want some context for what I'm looking at. How was a piece conceived? What was the budget allocated for the design? What were the influences on the design? What is that little extra something in the work? At the very least, label your work and give me a short explanation of the purpose of the piece. . . .

    If we do decide to call the person in, that person needs to be prepared to talk about the piece . . . even though the piece may not have been actually printed in the real world. I am also looking for a sophisticated design vocabulary during the interview. . . . I want to see a sketchbook that clearly shows how you get to the piece. . . . Where is the strategic thinking that goes into it?

2. In your opinion, what makes a successful interview?

There's a fork in the road when you graduate. . . . You can either do basic design work or you can really become a true creative and move fully into the design realm. . . . So first you have to get your foot in the door! [*laughs*] It's all about the whole collective team, so you will need to demonstrate how you will fit into this particular community. . . . Once you get the interview, be confident. Make eye contact . . . and take some time to make a thoughtful arrangement of the art in your port. . . . Lead with the strongest piece up front and again at the back. . . . And once again, gain the ability to discuss your work. . . . I am looking for someone who is well spoken and talks about their designs in the context of business. Understand paper, printing techniques, embossing. . . . Understand the mechanical aspects—type usage . . . widows, kerning.

    You should always have questions for the interviewer, so research the company. Find out

about the awards we've won. . . . Be prepared to say things like "I really liked some of the projects I saw at your Web site, and here's why. . . ."

This should be fun, and you should represent yourself as someone who wants to be part of the personality of the agency. Your sense of humor should come through during the interview.

3. Has the Internet had an effect on your interview process?

Absolutely! I want you to find a way to stand out from every other designer applying for the job. So create a unique self-promotional piece that will drive me to your Web site . . . a small booklet with intriguing type that teases me to visit your site. . . . Lay out a cool résumé. Send me your PDF files on a small CD and attach it to an extreme key chain design.

4. What are the five best things job candidates say that impress you during an interview? What are the five worst?

Best:

- Be able to comment on my agency's artwork.
- Be able to talk about typography. (I want to understand your taste level.)
- The emerging trends in the industry as a whole.
- Be able to explain your career goals.
- Be able to describe your understanding of the position you are applying for.
- Have questions.

Worst:

- Not be[ing] able to say why you created something.
- "I'm not good under pressure."
- No ability to discuss a piece.
- No sense of humor. . . . This is supposed to be fun . . . so relax.

5. What are the skills that really help all artists succeed, regardless of their specialty?

- Typography.
- Cultural knowledge of the world.
- The ability to spend some time conceptualizing a project.
- Passion.
- The ability to question and refine your own work.
- The quest to get better.

6. What advice would you offer to designers looking to impress you with the presentation of their work?

- Use multiple levels of presentation.
- Understand that people are busy and you need to find a way to distinguish yourself from the rest. . . . We will prescreen, so how can you get yourself to the top?
- Follow up.
- Try and then try again.
- Determination.
- Conceptualizing your approach to the job.
- The ability to market yourself.

Designer's Challenge 1

Can you produce a consistent set of magazine pages that have a similar look and feel?

Create a four-page editorial spread, using highly stylized images or your own illustrations. The designs should exhibit a sophisticated collection of colors and fonts. Don't forget to such add elements as an author, magazine name, month and year of publication, and page numbers (figs. 1–18 and 1–19).

FIGS. 1–18 AND 1–19 Cynthia Grynspan invents a great solution for this designer's challenge. Her editorial is engaging and shows a marvelous color set.

Designer's Challenge 2

Can you design a unique invitation to a party or an event? It's time to starting thinking outside the box! Research different styles of invitations. Sketch some designs and try your hand at creating an extreme invitation. Consider using multiple folds or unusual shapes. Don't forget to include the important information—such as the date, time, telephone number, and place (fig. 1–20).

FIG. 1–20 This lovely 3-D pop-up card, designed by Fran Cahoon, is a terrific way to get your name out into the industry. Add your name and e-mail on the back for instant recognition.