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For my project I decided to take a new approach to history posters for classrooms in an attempt to spark students' interest in American history. I created an educational series of six posters that focused on different cornerstones of early U.S. history. My poster topics include Columbus' landing on the island of Hispaniola, the settlement of Jamestown, the Boston Tea Party and the creation of the Constitution. I partly wanted to focus on the first portion of American History because I have always been intrigued by the events that shaped the beginning our country. I also chose these four topics because I wanted to focus on well-known history topics that are covered in the classroom so that students would have a basic knowledge of the content. This would allow them to be drawn in by familiarity and then be able to think more deeply on the subject. These events are also important because they represent major turning points in the founding of our country: Columbus is often described as a key figure in discovering the Americas, Jamestown was the first permanent British colony, The Boston Tea Party was a major event leading to the American Revolution and the Constitution is the document that made our government and country what it is today.

When I first started thinking about my integrative project I knew that it would have something to do with my love of history. I was fortunate enough to have an amazing 9th grade history teacher who was passionate about the material he taught and encouraged his students to feel the same. History came alive in his class and my preconceived notion of history being boring and irrelevant to the present was completely changed. Ever since then I have been enthralled by early American history, learning about the trials, tribulations and successes that made our country what it is today.

I wanted to find a way for people to revisit American history as something not set in stone in a boring textbook, but as a living breathing thing that welcomes contemplation, investigation and even disagreement. When I began to think of how I could get people more interested in history I tried to find the problem, the influences that propagate the bad stereotypes about history being boring and only relevant to the past.   I found that early on children are not surrounded by the necessary tools in the classroom that could nurture an interest in history. This led me to tackle the classroom poster, because I felt as an artist that there is a great potential in the use of visuals to promote learning. As a graphic designer, I believe that most of these educational history posters perpetuate history as boring because of static grid formats, large blocks of text and square black and white photographs (Fig. 1) or they are completely overloaded with cliché images (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1

(Poster found on www.instructionalimages.com, author unlisted)

Fig. 2

(Poster found on www.AllPosters.com, design by Southern Media Design & Production Inc.)

As you can see in Fig. 1, the composition is not even considered. The photos are packed in square formats with blocks of text so that there is little white space, which prevents any kind of clear starting point or navigation through the poster. The fact that the photos are black and white signals that something is in the past and students can read this as being too old to matter to them in the present. The other failure of this poster is that the only color used is on the title, which is unneeded because the title is already emphasized by its large scale.

In Fig. 2, it seems that the intent of the poster was to be exciting and visually eye catching by using a variety of colors and freeing some of the images from generic boxes, like the airplanes that look like they are flying over the poster. Even though the designers were well intentioned, this

example shows how a poster can go overboard. They tried to include everything about WWII on a 24" x 36" piece of paper. When they cram in tons of information they have to make each component stand out as something different and in doing so everything cries out at once, leaving the viewer, like in Fig. 1, overwhelmed and unsure where to start. Even though a couple of the images are somewhat incorporated with the text, most of the images seem unconsidered in the way they are haphazardly arranged in a square format. Some of the images are even cropped in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish what the photo is of. The composition for the most part separates the text from the images and the text is too small and too crammed in one block, which makes it difficult to read even with the color coded key. These and the issues mentioned about Fig. 1 prevent a student who is not initially interested in WWII to be drawn in enough to want to read the text. Students, like most people, will probably make a snap judgment when they see something and if the text looks too lengthy or hard to read they simply won't read it no matter how interesting it could really be.

Another issue for students is that history can seem irrelevant to their present day frame of thinking. They believe that something that happened so long ago to people who lived, dressed and acted differently than the people they know in their present day, has no affect on them. Using visuals that appear old and dated like the stagnant use of black and white photos and plain black text only strengthens this idea of a student not being able to relate to something in the past. I truly believe that students need to see the connection between the past and the present, how certain actions and decisions made our world what it is today. By encouraging them to confront

their country's history and to ask questions of past events they will feel more involved in their own learning and become more connected to the material.

The first step in this project was the research, which I was very excited about since I love learning new things about history. In the beginning I focused on reading texts that were written by historical scholars for adult readers so that I could get a good sense of the facts surrounding each topic. I found that most accounts were the same since I was dealing with well researched famous happenings, so what did intrigue me was the more detailed accounts. While researching Columbus I was drawn to a particular book, *Las Casas on Columbus: Background and the Second and Fourth Voyages*, edited and translated by Nigel Griffen. It was about the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas who went to Hispaniola 10 years after Columbus, in 1502. During his time there he became an avid protestor against the unfair treatment of the native people and he wrote many volumes about Columbus and his affect on the Indies as well as specific lists of the inhumane acts the Spaniards perpetrated. When I found myself getting sucked into something detailed and specific I realized that my posters needed to have this kind of structure. When I researched Columbus, Jamestown, the Boston Tea Party and the Constitution I realized that no one poster is going to perfectly represent an incredibly complex historical event. I didn't want to take on the role of the teacher, but rather introduce one interesting fact that a student could wrap their mind around and be inspired to reflect on its historical relevance. Focusing on one tidbit also allowed me to use minimal text to avoid the previously mentioned overcrowding and uninteresting blocks of text. To get more in the mindset of how much information to include in these

facts, I started looking more at historical books geared toward 8th and 9th graders like current American history textbooks and the Smithsonian Children's Encyclopedia of American History.

I wanted the students to feel that history was real, tangible, alive, everyday and yet beautiful. I wanted to avoid flat posters that felt soulless and empty. So I designed posters that incorporated images that seemed as though you could reach out and touch them and in this way these images would draw the viewer in. A poster by David Guarnieri, Fig. 3, for a gallery-boutique opening is a model of how text and image can be incorporated (Typography 27, 137). In this case the object used is one of the art pieces that was at the gallery show and the text describes the event details. In the same way, I focused on one object that pertained to the historical event I was showcasing and I used minimal text to describe the event. Another example that inspired me in a similar way was a series of posters, Fig. 4, done by Jua Lee for a class project at Southwest Texas State University (Typography 24, 255). Even though there wasn't a description of the project in the book, I think the posters were meant as a promotional series for an exhibition. The important concept I took away from the posters is the way that Lee integrates the text with the image by making the text look like it is being squeezed by the real objects. I found that the use of a clean white background in both of these examples was refreshing because it directed all of the attention to the main text and image. I felt that using a white background in my poster series was needed to create more eye catching visuals for students, since they are already overloaded with bright and chaotic imagery from their daily influences like video games and T.V.

advertisements. Because so many visuals are packed with loud imagery,

using a white background immediately sets my posters apart from others.

Allowing the poster room to breathe provides a place of entry so that a

student can be drawn in by the image and easily navigate through the poster.

Fig. 3
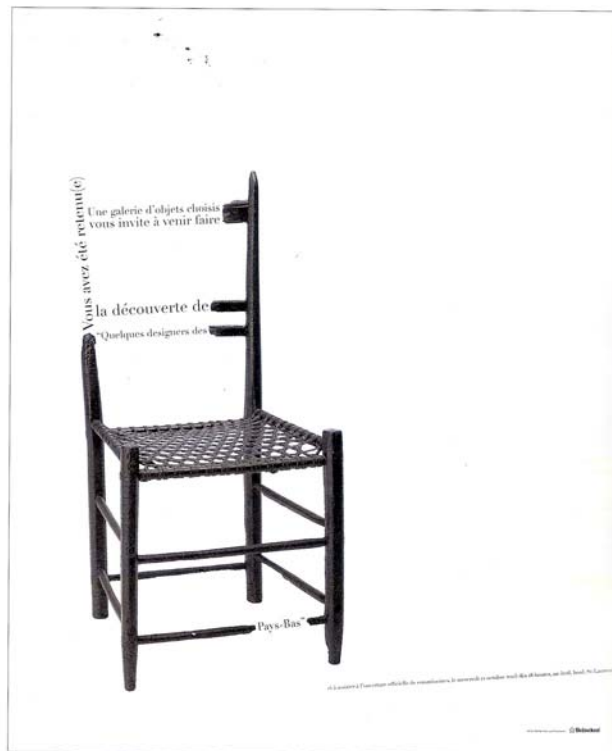
Poster by David Guarnieri
for Commissaires,
a gallery-boutique.
Image from the Annual
of the Type Director's Club:
Typography 27, p. 137

Fig. 4
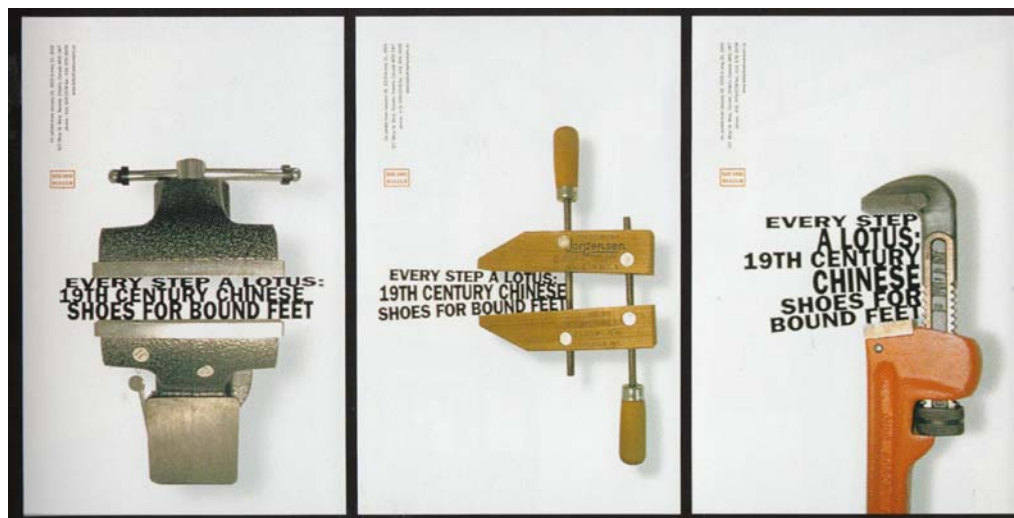
Poster series by Jua Lee
Image from the Annual of the Type Director's Club: Typography 24, p. 255

I felt that my Jamestown poster, Fig. 8, was the first poster to successfully incorporate tangible objects, the rope and ribbon, in a way to visually represent the text. My previous iterations, Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, were designed before I decided to use actual photos and seem very flat without real objects to give them dimension and texture. In the end I worked more on the Jamestown text so that it would be more incorporated with the image. Instead of treating the text like a left over and cramming it in the bottom right corner, I had it react and flow between the rope and the ribbon. For the content I decided to pare down the information from my previous drafts so that the message would be more concentrated.   I wanted to show the disparity between the people who first settled the Jamestown colony. I focused on occupations and not on other important issues like the absence of women, because I wanted my main message to be clear that the poor decision of bringing more wealthy gentlemen than laborers foreshadowed the future struggles of the colony. In the grand scheme of things I wanted to show that even the most revered historical events are not perfect and like today, people have made a lot of mistakes in the past.
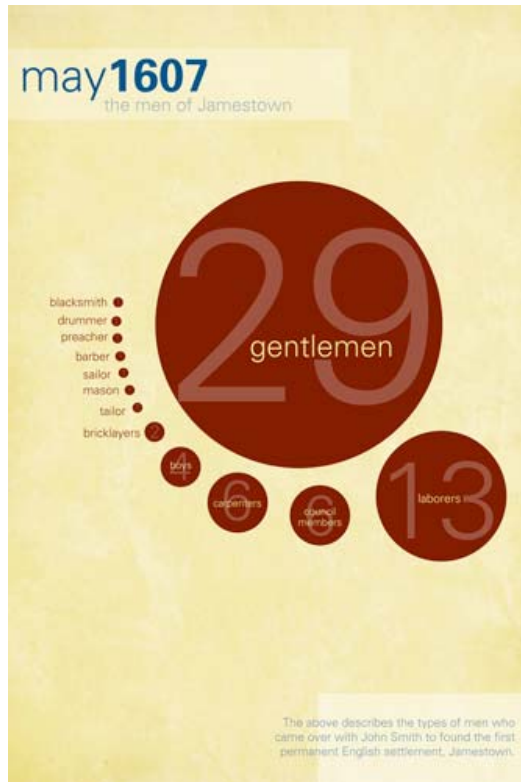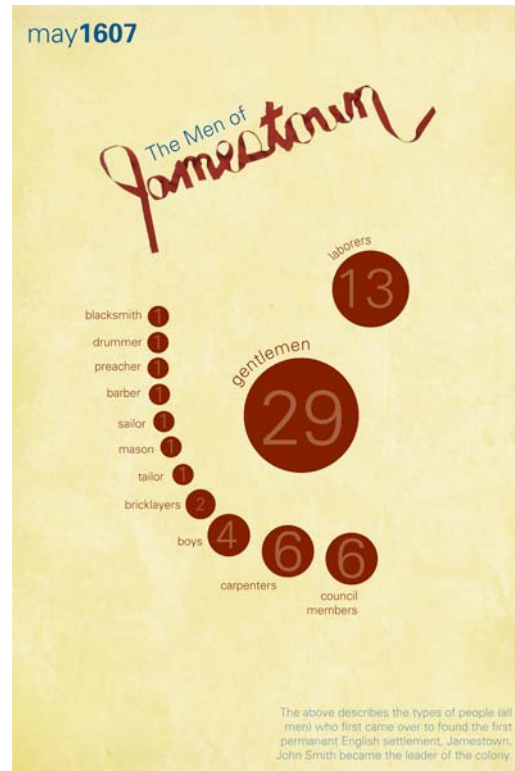
Fig. 5   **Fig. 6**

Taking what I learned from my Jamestown poster, I was able to create a formula for my series so that the posters would relate to each other in a cohesive way. The tangible photo of a real object was key in each of the posters to combat the previous failures of static square black and white photographs. By using images that were recognizable I was able to breathe a contemporary feel into the historical events they were representing to show students metaphorically that the past is still relevant today. In the Columbus poster, Fig. 7, I used sand as a metaphor for people and had the text mimic the sand as if it were pouring out of the circle to portray the feeling of loss. In the Jamestown poster, Fig. 8, I used the tightly wound rope to represent the competency and hard work of the laborers and the chaotic red ribbon to represent the wealthy, disorganized gentlemen. I portrayed the

feeling of rebellion by making a mess with an overflowing cup of tea for the Boston Tea Party poster, Fig. 9. And finally, I represented the intensity and passion that went in to creating the Constitution by using ink spatters to make a dynamic image, Fig. 10. I used wet ink to metaphorically represent the fact that the Constitution is still relevant today.

I also treated the text as much an integral part of the poster as the image to make the text more inviting to read. The text takes on characteristics of the image or in some way reacts to the image, as in the Columbus poster. The way the text is arranged provides an entry for the viewer, starting from the top right. How the text is grouped also provides a pacing for the viewer, when Columbus arrived (the red text at the top right corner), what he brought with him (the diseases and destructive words in the circle of sand) and finally the outcome of this (the falling words describing the death of 98% of the native Taino people of Hispaniola over the span of 60 years). I incorporated both text and image in the Boston Tea Party poster in the way that the text mimics the flow of the spilt tea. In the Constitution poster I made the text blue to give it a little extra weight since the image was so bold.

Because I am targeting Jr. High students as my audience I felt it was necessary to get their feedback on my posters. Since I still stay in touch with my 9th grade history teacher, I was able to enlist his and his class' help. I took them drafts of my posters and they were able to give me suggestions on how the visuals were working, if the concepts made sense, as well as answer other questions that were on my mind.   Most of the surveys came back positive, "yes," the visuals were eye catching, "yes," I understand the

message of the poster, etc. A couple of the responses were no help at all, because I think those students were confused by some of the questions. Probably the best indicator that my posters were on the right track was how one student responded. One of the survey questions asked if the Jamestown poster looked interesting and if they would be intrigued enough to read the text. This boy answered, "yes, it would probably catch my eye but to be totally honest I'm really not that interested in the history, just the artwork." This was great, because it showed me that for those students who are not inherently interested in history, they are at least being drawn in to the posters by the visuals and are reading to find out what they mean.

This experience has taught me that I really value the exploration and process of my work and that I need stop letting the fear of perfection keep me from trying new things. Once I let go of trying to create the perfect poster, I was able to put together a series of posters that I am really proud of and that I believe will better aid students in the classroom. I've decided the best way that I can make my posters available to anyone and everyone is to make the files available online for free, which I have done on my website at www.laura-nichols.com. This way my pursuit of getting students interested in history will not be in vain and I can actually reach beyond the single classroom that I got feedback from. I want to inspire students to not accept everything at face value, not even their own country's history. I want them to be inspired by something new and thought provoking so that they have the drive to ask questions. Hopefully they will realize that a lot of the questions that people faced long ago are still being asked today.

Fig. 7
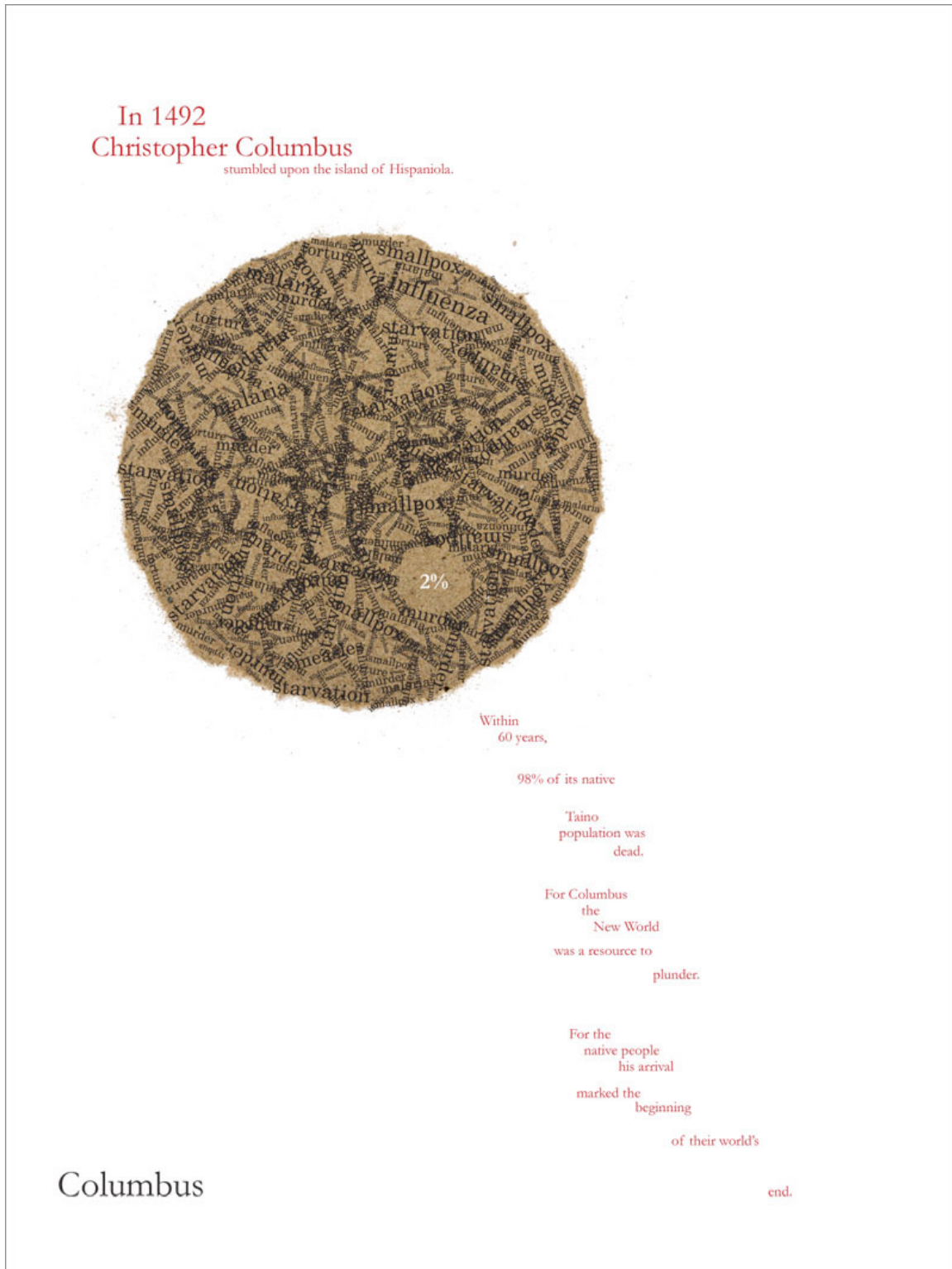
Text: In 1492 Christopher Columbus stumbled upon the island of Hispaniola. Within 60 years, 98% of its native Taino population was dead. For Columbus the New World was a resource to plunder. For the native people his arrival marked the beginning of their world's end.

Fig. 8

In 1607,
65 Englishmen

13 laborers

sailed to present
day Virginia.
Of that first group,
29 were wealthy
upper class gentlemen
and only 13 were laborers.
The others were
craftsmen and tradesmen.

This lack of foresight
foreshadowed many problems
including starvation,
lack of adequate shelter
and conflicts
with the native population,
which contributed to years
of hardship for all
inhabitants of the colony.

29 gentlemen

Jamestown

Text: In 1607, 65 Englishmen sailed to present day Virginia. Of that first group 20 were wealthy upper class gentlemen and only 13 were laborers. The others were craftsmen and tradesmen. This lack of foresight foreshadowed many problems including starvation, lack of adequate shelter and conflicts with the native population, which contributed to years of hardship for all inhabitants of the colony.

Fig. 9

Text: In 1773 the equivalent of 24 million cups of tea were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean in an act of ultimate defiance against Britain and its tea tax. This rebellion propelled America down its road to Independence.

Fig. 10
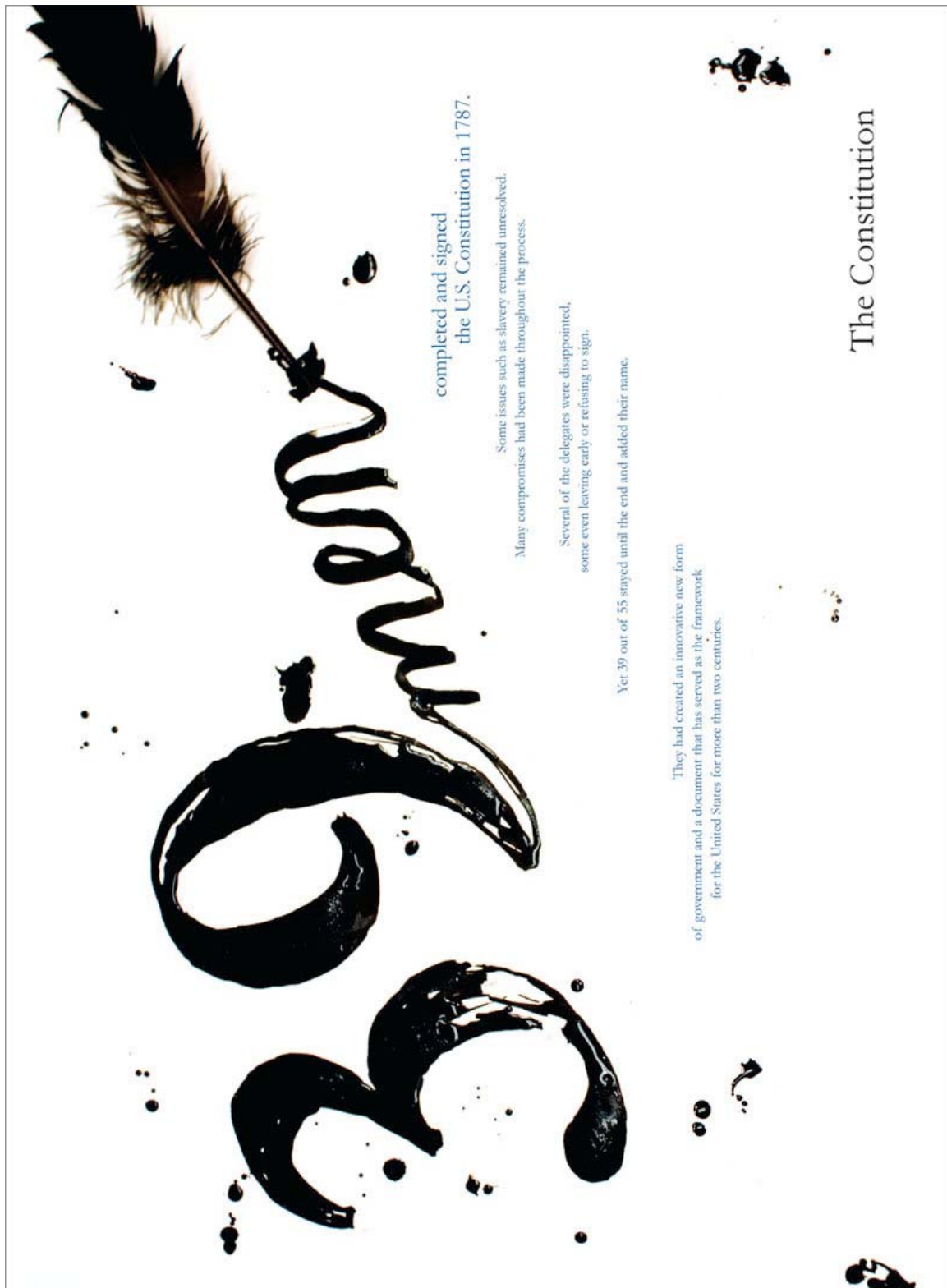
Text: 39 men completed and signed the U.S. Constitution in 1787. Some issues such as slavery remained unresolved. Many compromises had been made throughout the process. Several of the delegates were disappointed, some even leaving early or refusing to sign. Yet 39 out of 55 stayed until the end and added their name. They had created an innovative new form of government and a document that has served at the framework for the United States for more than two centuries.

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