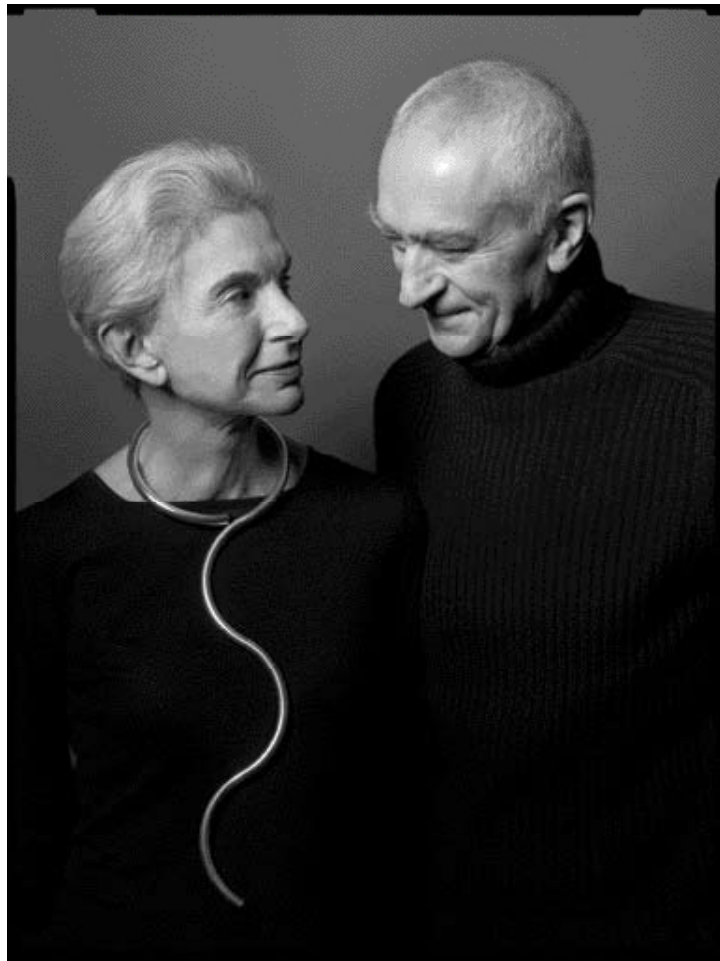


Agents^{of} elegance

*Graphic design legends Leila
& Massimo Vignelli*

interview : anna carnick



Italian-born, New York-based designers Massimo and Leila Vignelli have done it all. Pillars of the graphic design community, the breadth of their work is incredible: industrial and product design, graphic, furniture design, packaging design, book, magazine and newspaper design, interior and exhibit design, and even Web design.

Coupled with their combined and individual design experiences is a sophisticated, continual, intellectual analysis of design. And they happily share their knowledge; both teach, lecture and write. January's online publication of the Vignelli Canon is every design student's dream guide. Beyond all this, though, they are truly graceful people.

At their Manhattan apartment and studio, surrounded by samples of each of their life's or lives' work, we had the pleasure of speaking about how they met, their legendary careers, quality design, passing on their legacy, and the future of publishing...

Tell me, how did the two of you meet?

Massimo: We met at an architecture convention.



This page, from top: *Stendig calendar*, 1966, measures 100x140cm, and is part of the MoMA permanent collection; *Wild Places calendar*, 1975, unfolds like a book and doubles in size; *Nava calendar*, 1976, is a perpetual calendar with pages that must be turned daily, and measures 30x30cm.

Opposite page: *Knoll International graphic program*, 1966-1980. The Vignellis designed all printed matter for the international furniture company for many years. The catalogs, price lists and brochures became benchmarks for furniture companies around the world.



Leila: I went with my father, as a student...and he [Massimo] had to babysit.
 M: I was a student of architecture and I was one of the helpers.
 L: They were taking us around.
 M: And so we met and then we kept going [laughing].

How long have you been married?

M: 51 years.

Wow! Congratulations.

L: I was 17 when I met this guy.
 M: Sometimes I feel guilty. [laughing]

How would you describe your creative, collaborative process?

M: Our collaboration is not really based on holding a pencil with two hands, as much as sharing an intellectual platform or cultural platform or background.
 L: We generally know what the other is doing. We show each other what we are doing: so either saying, 'this is good,' or 'it's no good,' or perhaps 'I will do this,' etc. Also this happens because we've been together so long that we enjoy the same sorts of things: traveling, looking at this and that, so we sort of share the same way of thinking.

How has that changed over the years? You obviously get to know one another better.

M: There are things she does on her own, and things I do on my own, and then we discuss... There are collaborations with two guys or couples where they might sit together at a table. But even with the Charles and Ray Eames situation, it wasn't like that. It was more like us. They were each doing certain things, and the two together were sharing a life, and that way of sharing life was finding an out-

let in the work they were doing... That was a byproduct of living together. And the same is here. We have a similar taste for things and a similar way of thinking and a similar way of looking at things that makes cohesiveness and cooperation and collaboration last. But it's more in terms of intangibles than it is in terms of tangibles. That is the best way to describe [it].

That makes sense. How has your approach or understanding of design changed over the years?

M: From the very beginning, we develop[ed] ourselves a certain way. Then eventually this certain way finds its own language. Design is its own language. So we've been designing that language, facing whatever questions might come into us. It's like a filter. So the whole of reality goes through that filter.
 L: We have a lot of languages.
 M: We are affected by things around us, obviously, by what other people do. There are things we like, things that we don't like, and we talk about that... There are designers we can't stand and designers we love very much. Of course, we tend to absorb something from the ones we like, and reject anything from the ones we dislike. So we are both absorbing and impermeable...

Which probably explains why you're able to be successful in different creative fields.

M: And also why we keep going. We have our own way. We're never out because we're never in.
 L: We are not trendy. So things last over the years.
 M: We have designs that were done 50 years ago that are still around... [pointing around the room] Look at that couch... there are plenty of things that we live with... this was designed in '85, those in late '70s, these chairs in '87. So, there are books that I've



doing now. Now, it doesn't mean I'm not changing. That has more to do with the fact that I have my own language than being affected by what's happening outside.

L: We are conscious of what goes on. We keep informed, especially now with the computer. Sometimes, you get interested by new material. We don't copy it, but we are aware. In a sense, that could change our own design, but we keep our own point of view.

M: There are new materials, new technologies, and of course we may see something that is the byproduct of these things and we like it... so that's how things move. But anytime we are affected by a trend, we try to get rid of it. Sometimes we can't help it; sometimes we just love it so much, we let ourselves go. We just play with it. But as I said, the reason we're always in is 'cause we're never out. But also, we're always in because we're never in too much.

Is there anyone out there now who's very trendy or popular that you enjoy?

L: There's Philippe.
 M: Philippe Starck is very good. A genius.
 L: But he has his own way of appropriating some other design. You know, he is sparking new materials, transforming things, but it's something that was there already.
 M: He's very talented, very good; I like him very much. He's probably the one I like the most of that generation and even younger.
 L: The whole way that he works is very intelligent.
 M: There are many interesting personalities in the field of design and architecture... [but] the designers that I still like the most are the great icons, like Dieter Rams—I love Dieter Rams. Or Charles Eames. I would say that Charles Eames and Dieter Rams are the best designers of the twentieth century... all the furniture of Charles Eames is so alive today, even more today than when he was designing... because it takes time for manufacturers and people. They're using more Eames furniture today than they were in the time of Eames... That's great. I hope something like that will happen to me, too...
 In a sense, we're much more concerned with permanence than

we're very aware of yesterday. We believe that history is very important—history of yesterday, history of a thousand years ago, whatever it is. And then to design in such a way that it's going to last, because we feel a responsibility toward the client and toward the user. Designing something that is going to last, rather than be thrown away. We do not belong to the culture of waste... we despise the culture of obsolescence, and we are in favor of permanence. However, having said that, we love the fact that there are trends, because trends are the sparks.

L: Yes. Sparks for the fire.
 M: Trends are the sparks; permanence is the fire. The sparks make the fire brighter, pleasant to watch... and so there is room for both. There is room for permanence and there is room for trendiness. Then each one decides what fits best for him. For us, permanence is more interesting; for others, trendiness is more fun. As a matter of fact, you could even say there is a certain permanence in trendiness. For example, look back at things done 50 years ago, 70 years ago, or think of people that were in fashion but still valid today—like Coco Chanel, who was innovative then, but is still very good today.
 L: There are things which are very trendy, but because of the period, and thus the period element...
 M: ... They are testimonials of a time.

You've both done so much. Are there any dream projects still out there?

M: Yes. We've both done a lot... but we still like to do it.
 L: You know, when we do a piece of furniture or flatware or whatever it is, we always try to do something [with] a reason, not just a shape that is fun. We try to work a meaning into the design.

To have purpose?

L: It should say something. It should be something different; not just for the sense of being different, but in the sense of being perhaps better, and also considering it in a certain price group, so it doesn't get too expensive. We are very realistic about our design... We feel that the designer has to give that. When you see a designer do

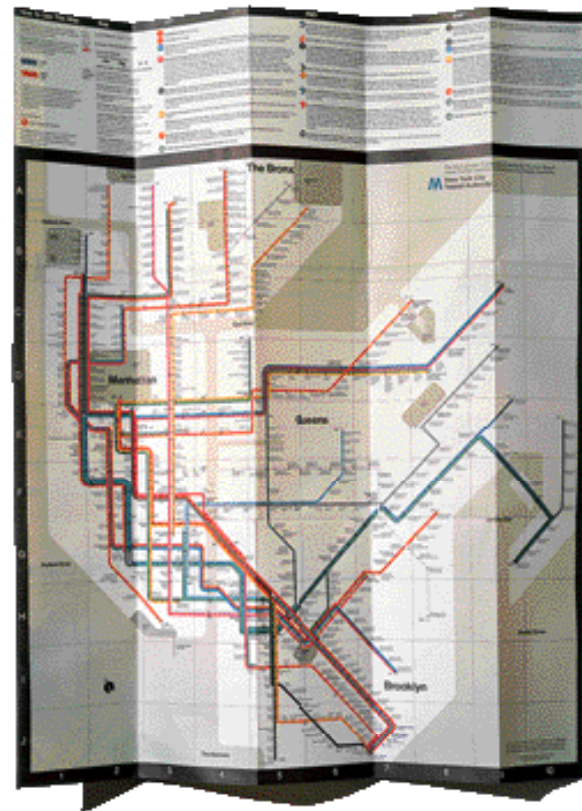
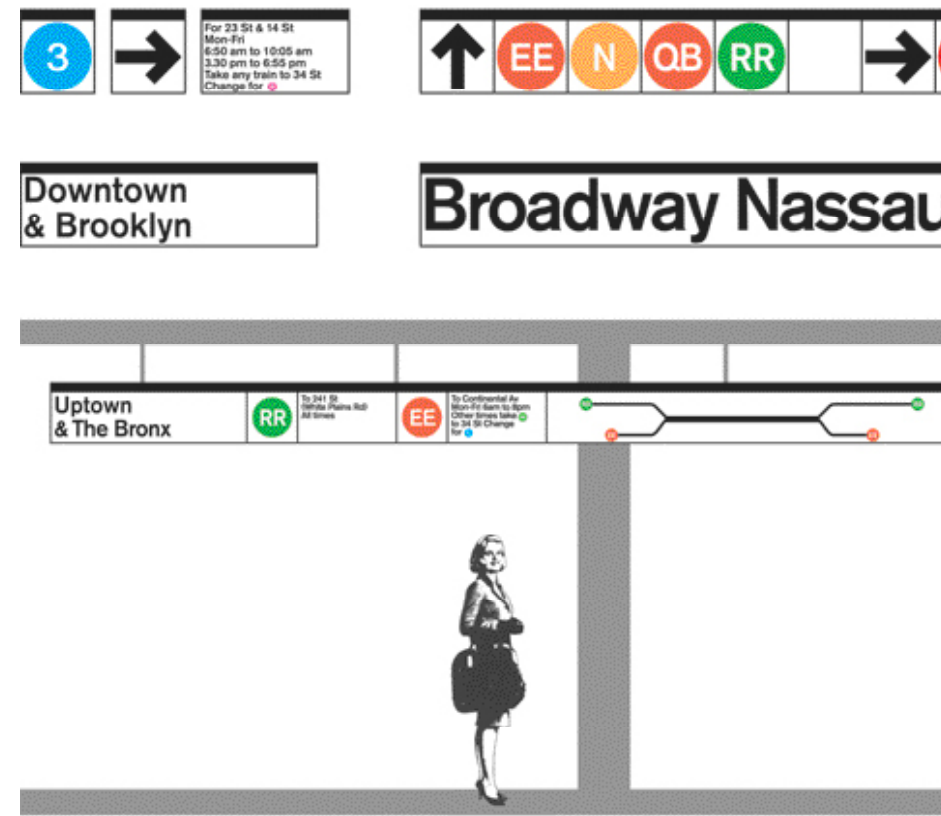
“Massimo’s signature gestures—the expressionistic black stripes in the print work, the surreal contrasts of scale in the architecture, the inevitable intrusion of sensuality in the product design—[are] utterly intuitive, almost indulgent, and clearly as impossible for him to resist as breathing.”

-Michael Bierut, Pentagram Design



American Airlines corporate identity, 1967. The logo, half red, half blue, in plain type stresses the professional, no-gimmicks attitude for the company in the colors of its home nation. Still in use today, this logo is one of the few worldwide that needs no change.

New York Subway



Left: New York Metropolitan Transit Authority, *Subway Sign System*, 1966. Contrary to the customary design tradition existing at the time, Vignelli Associates devised a modular system of panels that could combine any kind of appropriate message to make any kind of subway sign. Right: the iconic 1974 *New York City Subway Map*.

something that costs a lot of money, but you cannot sit on it...you think, okay, that is art, if you want to call it, but that is not design. A designer has a responsibility to the public, to the manufacturer—that he doesn't do something too expensive or something they cannot sell—so something...

M: ...something very balanced. This doesn't prevent us from looking for gestures. But to look for a gesture in whatever you do—it may be a graphic thing, it may be a three-dimensional thing—beyond the function, it has to have a character. So we take that into consideration. We try to have it, but we don't like a gesture that is contrived. You can see when it is contrived. We like to see a gesture that belongs to that object in a natural way.

It's like this [with] people, too. You like a certain amount of extravagance here and there, but not too much. You like elegance better than extravagance...I think it was Shakespeare who wrote, 'Be elegant, not extravagant.' I understand that, and I like that. We treasure intellectual elegance much more than intellectual extravagance. That's why we like permanence rather than trendiness. Trendiness is extravagance by nature, whereas permanence has to be elegant. Otherwise, it doesn't survive. So elegance is a sublime state of intelligence. It's not something that you add; it's something that you get by taking away—by subtraction, not by addition. The moment that you add to things, you can't get to elegance. You can get to extravagance, because extravagance is the byproduct of addition, and elegance is the byproduct of subtraction... [laughing] Wow, that is a good line. You want a chisel or a piece of marble?

But that is important for us, and is important to know. Now, this has nothing to do with becoming a celebrity. You could become a celebrity by being extravagant, and probably much quicker than by being elegant. Because extravagance is perceived by everybody, because there's a certain level of vulgarity to it. It's very accessible. Elegance is not accessible, because it requires intelligence and culture, but that's not very popular to begin with. So you have to have an elegant mind to appreciate elegance.

Never could a vulgar mind appreciate elegance; they would never know what it is. They would find it boring. And all these issues, when you dig into it, they—intelligence and culture or no culture, elegance versus vulgarity—they're all linked to the same thing...What you have on one side you have on the other side, in the opposite way. And this is fun. Of course, when you are a designer like we are, that's what you think all the time. That's it. You don't think of anything else. You have to be very, very focused. That is true in every profession—every one—even the oldest one. [laughing]

Without focus, you cannot reach anything—any expression, any language. You cannot have a language. Being focused is a necessary requirement for being creative. Now, a lot of people can be creative...

L: ...but they just jump from one thing to another.

M: But that kind of creativity I find just so shallow. And that is what is driving us all the time. When I look back and I think, 'Do we have a style?' I don't think we have a style.

M & L: [in unison] We have an attitude.

M: We don't pursue a style, because I am a strong believer that either you have a style or you don't. Either you have it by nature, and it is expressed in everything you do, in terms of quality—not in terms of recognizable style.

Style for us is quality, so it could have many forms. You know, one guy has a style in one way, and another guy has a style in the opposite way. So this is what's great about the world; there are so many manifestations. And the only yardstick to measure them is quality. If they have no sense of quality, it doesn't matter how different they are.

L: And there is a lot of that in the world.

M: Of course. Because there is less control, less awareness, less education. Not that there was more education before—this is the most educated time we have in history.

Speaking of education, I hear you are donating some of your work to RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology).

M: RIT is the first university that got involved with history and theory and criticism in graphic design...They've been collecting archives of all the modernists in graphic design, so we decided to give our archive to RIT. We have worked a lot, so we [also] had to design a building for everything.

That's RIT's new wing?

L: That's for the school of design. [What] made us decide to give them our archive is that they really use it for education. If you give it to a museum, perhaps they give you an exhibit, but RIT does an archive that is perfect. The people working there are great. The students have to work with [the design objects] for writing papers, which is really important, because it makes them understand what they saw, you know, criticism—like it or not, what did they learn, etc. So that is really good. Then the teachers can ask the archive to take out things, and then they give a lesson...so [the students] come to know the history of all modern design.

M: They can see samples, not just images in a book.

L: Not just behind glass... So the students can even trace—it's very different than seeing it on the TV. The [usage] quality of the archive is very impressive, and very important for the education of the students. And it's not just one piece; they have collections.

They have three-dimensional [objects] in the design collection, which is fantastic—clocks, furniture, interior design, everything. So in a sense, it's what we did. We worked with all the successions... That will be important because, for example, in Italy, an architect [ure student] does everything that he wants—chairs, jewels, flatware. But this was some time ago. Now they start getting directly into the design... So at RIT, we can have something more interesting there for the students... They could make a school like another Bauhaus...

And any other upcoming projects?

M: A restaurant, books, furniture. One Richard Meier book just came out. We are working on the last volume in that series. And our book about design, the *Vignelli Canon*. We publish[ed] that book on the Internet only. We [ve] put it on our Web site...because I'm a strong believer that books or publishing is dead. It's not because publishing is dead; it's because of distribution... because the book-stores are dead.

L: They also don't make enough copies, so [books] can be difficult to find.

M: So then the publisher is paying for nothing. The book goes out of print. It's stupid. So it's just our canon. You read it, you want to keep it, you print it.

Can you describe the *Vignelli Canon*?

L: It's about what design is, and the steps that you take in order to produce.

M: If the publisher wants to print it, that's okay with me. But in any case, I want to make it available. I'd like to also take our other books online.

If you live in Timbuktu, and can't get it, you just look online. So people from all over the world, if they want to see the book, they can download it. This is the way we're looking to the future, to all the advantages the computer can bring about. We do Web sites; we're doing the new Richard Meier site...and that will be the right way of doing books. The Meier site will be better probably than any one of the books. It has everything. All the best pictures, items—everything is there. So you can just call for whatever you want: just the buildings, just the essays. That is the new way of doing things. And that is the balance.