

# Design is One

Lella & Massimo Vignelli

A Film by Kathy Brew + Roberto Guerra

79 minutes / English / Digital (BluRay) / 2012 / Documentary



## FIRST RUN FEATURES

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## Synopsis

Two of the world's most influential designers, Lella and Massimo Vignelli's work covers such a broad spectrum that one could say they are known by everyone, even by those who don't know their names. Adhering to self-proclaimed motto, "If you can't find it, design it," their achievements in industrial and product design, graphic and publication design, corporate identity, architectural graphics, and exhibition, interior, and furniture design have earned worldwide respect and numerous international awards for over 40 years.

After Massimo brought the Helvetica typeface to America in 1965, he and Lella moved on to a diverse array of projects, including New York's subway signage and maps; the interior of Saint Peter's Church at Citicorp Center; Venini lamps; Heller dinnerware; furniture for Poltrona Frau; and branding for Knoll International, Bloomingdales, Saks Fifth Avenue, Ford and American Airlines.

Luminaries from the world of design – from architects Richard Meier and Peter Eisenman to graphic designers Milton Glaser, Michael Bierut, and Jessica Helfand – bring us into the Vignellis' world, capturing their intelligence and creativity, as well as their humanity, warmth, and humor.

## Directors' Biography

Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra have been working together on arts and social issue documentaries over the past 16 years with a particular focus on representing the vision and contributions of creative people to larger audiences. They are interested in the interface between art and reality, and in how artists respond to issues of our times.

Besides *Design is One*, they have several other documentary projects in progress/near completion: *Double Take: The Art of Seward Johnson*, an heir to the Johnson & Johnson pharmaceutical fortune, who was fired years ago from the family business and took up art instead; *Beauty Behind Bars*, about a Peruvian women's prison where a beauty contest takes place each year amidst the backdrop of the international war on drugs; *Dutch/Peruvian*, about two Dutch artists who've made Peru their home, and how that unique place has influenced their work; *Going Gray*, a look at going/not going gray and how this reflects on current attitudes about aging.

Other projects include: four short films on Chinese contemporary artists, part of the *Observer Observed* series for *The Joy of Giving Something, Inc.*; *ID/entity: Portraits in the 21st Century*, commissioned by the MIT Media Lab; a collaboration with artist Mierle Ukeles, creating a multiple-channel installation about the Fresh Kills landfill that was presented at Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island, among other venues; *Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution*. Guerra and Brew also independently produced segments for Public Television, WNET's *City Arts and Egg*, and received two Emmy awards for Outstanding Fine Arts Programming.

“...a love letter about modern design and the Vignelli couple's 50-year marriage.”

*The Atlantic*

## Credits

***Directed and produced by***

ROBERTO GUERRA & KATHY BREW

***Graphic images and support provided by***

VIGNELLI ASSOCIATES

***1972 NYC subway map provided by***

NEW YORK TRANSIT MUSEUM

***Creative Consultant***

DIANA HOLTZBERG

***Editorial Consultant***

SHELBY SIEGEL

***Titles and Motion Graphics***

HISAO IHARA

***Color Correction***

HOWARD SILVER

***Sound Mix***

PAUL GELUSO

***Post-Production Sound Facility***

HARVESTWORKS DIGITAL MEDIA ARTS

***Music composed by***

PAUCHI SASAKI

***Musicians***

JENNIFER CURTIS, VIOLIN

MICHAEL NICOLAS, CELLO

PAUCHI SASAKI, VIOLIN & PIANO

***Musicians in St. Peter's Church***

JAZZ JAUS FROM LIMA, PERU

<http://www.dwell.com/event-spotlight/article/design-one-architecture-and-design-film-festival>



## 'DESIGN IS ONE' AT THE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN FILM FESTIVAL

The Architecture and Design Film Festival kicked off in New York at the Tribeca Cinemas with the world premiere of *Design Is One*, a film about the legendary design duo of Massimo and Lella Vignelli. Filmmakers Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra's retrospective of the Vignelli's union and career covers a spans a vast array of material, in keeping with the breadth of the legendary designers' work. Played to a standing-room-only crowd, the film captured the often humorous and always insightful wisdom of design's first couple.

To leave an indelible impact on a whole nation of people is an accomplishment perhaps no other husband and wife team can claim. The Vignellis moved to New York from Italy in 1966; only a few months later, they were commissioned to redesign the New York City subway signage and map. While the map was replaced five years later, the seminal signs remain in use today (and the map itself has resurfaced for use in the MTA's Weekender app, showing that perhaps the Vignellis were ahead of their time). Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, says every time we take the subway we are entering "Vignelliland"—this analogy could be taken a step further as even those residing in Anytown, USA, come across multiple marks of their design legacy every day, whether in driving a Ford Focus, shopping at Bloomingdale's, or catching a flight on American Airlines (the Vignellis designed all three brands' logos).

Of course, this is just a small sample of their portfolio—collectively the two created branding for Knoll, Knoll's Handkerchief Chair, numerous book covers and layouts (always following Massimo's unigrid system—a method for design still practiced today), interiors, furniture, clothing, and package design. While each has their area of speciality, their works are collaborative in nature. Throughout the film, talking heads (including Michael Bierut of Pentagram, architect Richard Meier, and graphic designer Milton Glaser) spoke of the perfect balance created by Massimo and Lella. With Massimo operating as the dreamer, Lella's realist instincts tempered his ideas into the achievable.

After the film, Massimo fielded questions from the audience and dispensed sound advice: "There is no good design without discipline," and "Freebies are your best work, they're not contested by the client," he says.

A recurring theme throughout the film is Massimo's fascination with eternal life. He and Lella have ensured their name's immortality through omnipresent and timeless design. Of his career, Massimo says, "I can die any minute, very happy. But of course I hope I'm going to be here a very long time." His work continues, as he is currently producing an anthology of Lella's career. For a design fan of any pedigree, *Design Is One* is not to be missed.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/18/garden/a-new-documentary-features-designers-massimo-and-lella-vignelli.html>

# The New York Times

## The Vignellis, Benevolent Dictators of Design

By STEVEN KURUTZ      Published: October 17, 2012

Massimo Vignelli isn't interested in designing a penthouse for a corporate titan. "We like to do design that affects millions of people," he said, referring to Vignelli Associates, the firm he and his wife, Lella, founded more than four decades ago.

The Vignellis, Italians who moved to New York in 1965, have succeeded wildly in that regard. Their corporate logos for American Airlines, Bloomingdales and Ford are still among the most recognizable in the business world. The signs directing New York's subway riders also bear the Vignellis' imprint (and Mr. Vignelli's signature typeface, Helvetica). Then there are dishes, office interiors, books, furniture and countless other products the couple have designed for Knoll, Heller and other companies, all carrying their clean-lined aesthetic.

A new documentary, "Design Is One: Lella and Massimo Vignelli," directed by Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra, traces the couple's influential partnership. The film premieres tonight to kick off this year's Architecture and Design Film Festival in Manhattan.

While design students will come away quoting Mr. Vignelli's stiff-necked pronouncements ("From a bad client you get a worse client"), the film is all the more poignant because since its completion Mrs. Vignelli, 78, has grown increasingly ill with aphasia and is no longer able to work.

On a recent afternoon in the couple's chic, black-and-white East Side apartment, Mr. Vignelli, 81, schooled a visitor on bad clients and what makes good design and talked about how the partnership has changed since his wife's illness.

### **You tell design students not to work for a bad client. What in your view is a bad client?**

A bad client is a client that doesn't understand the role of the designer. Designers are like doctors. When you go to the doctor, you don't tell the doctor what you want — you ask the doctor to give you what you need.

### **Shouldn't the client have a say in the design they're paying for?**

Sometimes you might have alternatives. But we usually do not give alternatives. Period. We go through the alternatives ourselves. Because then the client is going to say, "We like this top and that bottom."

**The film really showcases your long working partnership with Lella.**

I was the guy with the pencil most of the time. Lella had a very good critical sense. So she would come and say: "It's good. It's bad." Or it would be an interior job and she would take over and take care of the whole thing.

It was a great partnership because she had a very great sense of criticism, up until a couple of years ago.

**How has your approach changed since you no longer have that counterbalance?**

I don't have it. I just don't have it. But we've lived all our life together. There is a symbiosis that happens after a while, so now I perceive her in a symbiotic way. Whatever I do reflects, somehow, both aspects.

**Does a well-designed product need to be functional or attractive?**

Both. There are many ways of making a knife, and more or less all knives cut. But some knives cut better, and some knives not only cut better but are beautiful objects. Integrity is beautiful.

Things that are ugly, it's because they have no integrity. And this is true in people and it's true in design. A beautiful girl could be terrific, but her eye will show her shallowness, let's say. And if you get her, you made a mistake. Which is exactly like buying an object that has function but not integrity. That is the way it goes, you see.

**Is every object in your home well-designed?**

I wouldn't have it if it wasn't well-designed. I wouldn't spend the money.

**Is there anything you would like to design that you haven't?**

The corporate identity for the Vatican. I would go to the pope and say: "Your holiness. The logo is O.K., but everything else has to go." Not that I haven't tried. I've tried, but unsuccessfully.

<http://urbanomnibus.net/2012/10/screenings-2012-architecture-design-film-festival/>



## Screenings: 2012 Architecture & Design Film Festival

The 4th Annual Architecture & Design Film Festival is coming to New York City's Tribeca Cinemas this weekend, running from October 18th through the 21st. This year, over 25 films exploring different facets of architecture and design, many of which are premiering for the first time, will be presented along with a series of panel discussions and an "Audi Architecture Tour" of Tribeca led by a tour guide from the Municipal Art Society (MAS). The films are curated into larger programs, twelve in all, combining larger features and short clips. Below are a selection of programs Urban Omnibus readers might enjoy.

**Design is One:** Lella and Massimo Vignelli (directed by Kathy Brew and Roberto Guetta) reflects on the illustrious careers of Italian-born designers Lella and Massimo Vignelli. Over 40 years, the duo has created masterworks of modern design across fields, including industrial and product design, graphic and publication design, corporate identity programs, architectural graphics, and exhibition, interior, and furniture design. They brought the Helvetica typeface to the New York Subway System (see previous UO coverage here); created identity programs for Knoll International, Bloomingdales, Saks Fifth Avenue, Ford, and American Airlines; designed furniture, clothing, dinnerware, and more. The film aims to "bring us into the work and everyday moments of the Vignellis' world, capturing their intelligence and creativity, as well as their humanity, warmth, and humor." A Q&A with filmmakers Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra will follow each screening.