

The Vignelli Legacy

Daniela Enriquez (March 19, 2018)



The Embassy of Italy in Washington, D.C. is currently hosting a photo exhibition on the design legacy of the Vignelli's. The exhibition presents several of the most iconic designs of Massimo and Lella Vignelli, whose influence is worldwide. The opening was last Friday, and it included a lecture by Roger Remington, Professor of Graphic Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a very good friend of both Vignellis, as well as a video by Letizia Airos of I-italy TV featuring an interview with Massimo Vignelli. Emanuele Amendola, Director of the Italian Cultural Institute of Washington D.C. and co-creator of the project - together with the Rochester Institute of Technology - gave an introduction on the importance and influence of the Vignellis.

Both the lecture and the video were priceless fonts of information that allowed the audience not only to learn about the Vignellis' contribution to the development of design worldwide, but also, and most



importantly, to better understand the couple through the telling of stories and anecdotes about their social and private life. Did you know, for example that [Massimo Vignelli](#) [2] designed all the signage and maps for the iconic New York City and Washington, D.C. subway systems? And what about the brochures you get at each of America's National Parks? Yep! Also a Vignelli design. The video was introduced by [Renato Miracco](#) [3] – previous Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York City and Washington, D.C. – who gave a heartfelt speech recollecting his friendship with the Vignellis.

Thanks to the words of Professor Remington, we learned that Massimo Vignelli was heavily influenced in the early years of his career by the Swiss designers – and gained from them a love for the [Helvetica font](#) [4], which he preferred above all others. A slide show helped illuminate the lives of the Vignelli's from their wedding, to their daily life in New York City, to their frequent trips to Italy. Other interesting anecdotes abounded. When Massimo was asked by Ms. Airos why he decided to leave Italy for American, Massimo answered that he left a provincial place because of his hatred for provincialism!

Attendees at the Embassy came away with an understanding of the interconnection, and compensatory balance, that characterized the Vignelli's relationship to one another. While Massimo was the king of graphic design, [Lella](#) [5] elevated him by critiquing his work and making it far better. On the other hand, she was the queen of furniture and jewelry design. Together, they worked on many projects: from packaging design, to interior design, to corporate works.

What emerged from the lecture was also a sense of the profound love between Massimo and Lella. It was a love which often made Massimo so annoyed by the lack of recognition for Lella's work that he would hide from her all of the newspaper accolades that failed to add her name when discussing the works they did together. Also of note: Lella was the pragmatic side of the couple, the one who would stay home taking care of the bookkeeping while Massimo may have been out at some event in the city.

What characterizes the Vignelli's design was their goal, which, as Massimo articulated it in the video interview, was to use design to bring elegance to the masses. Clear examples of this include the brochures for the U.S. National Parks, as well as the design for a number of modern newspapers. Massimo was convinced that design could be applied to everything, and make everything better: even a newspaper could be transformed from something people throw away to a piece of art when the information is easy to find. According to Massimo, the major folly of modern advertising is that it gives people what they want: the Vignelli approach is, instead, always to give people what they need rather than what they wanted. That could on occasion cause them some problems and misunderstandings but, most of the time, was a very successful approach which Massimo compared to [Steve Jobs'](#) [6] design role at Apple.

The evening ended with some Italian focaccia and cheese, accompanied by a very good Nero D'Avola. During the post-presentation mingling, attendees could admire both the photo exhibition, as well as the famous interview chairs which the Vignellis designed in the 80s for TG2 – one of the main Italian news channels.

The exhibit will be on view until April 29, and if you happen to be in Washington, D.C. is something you shouldn't miss!

For more info on the exhibit please click here [>>](#) [7]

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Links

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/img4200jpg>

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massimo_Vignelli

[3] <https://www.celesteprize.com/renatomiracco>



[4] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helvetica>

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lella_Vignelli

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Jobs

[7] https://iicwashington.esteri.it/iic_washington/en/gli_eventi/calendario/the-vignelli-legacy.html