

The Vignelli Legacy on Show in D.C.

Tommaso Cartia (March 15, 2018)



There's an Italian hand behind the iconic designs of the New York and Washington subway maps and lettering, or the logos of companies like American Airlines and Bloomingdales: it is the hand of designers Massimo and Lella Vignelli. The Embassy of Italy in Washington, the Italian Cultural Institute and the Rochester Institute of Technology, celebrate the genius of the Vignellis in an exhibition opening on March 16 that will be on view until April 29, 2018. The opening event will include a lecture, among the others, by R. Roger Remington, Professor of Graphic Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a video-interview with Massimo Vignelli by the Editor in Chief of i-Italy, Letizia Airos introduced by Renato Miracco, Cultural Attaché of the Italian Embassy in Washington. We had the chance to talk with Emanuele Amendola, Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in DC, who shared with us his enthusiasm about the exhibition and the influence of the Vignellis on modern design.

"The idea was born a long time ago from a series of conversations that took place at [Rochester](#)



[Institute of Technology](#). [2] an important university where the [Vignelli Center for Design Studies](#) [3] is." Told us [Emanuele Amendola](#) [4], Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Washington, when we asked him how the idea of the homage to [Massimo and Lella Vignelli](#) [5] came about.

The Vignelli Center for the Design Studies was founded in 2010 after the Vignellis donated their archives to RIT, and it holds their creations. The chair holder of the design department is [Professor R. Roger Remington](#) [6]. "With him, we began thinking of an event that we called, The Vignelli Legacy which is a symbolic name because the figures of Massimo and Lella are so important not only to the history of Italian design, but also to global design." Continued Amendola.

The Vignellis moved to the United States at the start of the '60s, and with the birth of [Unimark International](#) [7] and then Vignelli Associates, they worked on a series of projects that redefined the meaning of industrial graphics in the States. "There is so much pleasure to organize an exhibition about something that has such strong ties to the U.S. territory." Said enthusiastically the Director.

"Not everyone knows that the hand behind the iconic New York City and Washington D.C subway maps were the ones of Massimo and Lella Vignelli. Also, few people know that they created the iconic logos for important American companies, like [American Airlines](#) [8], and [Bloomingdales](#) [9]."

The Vignellis Poetic

Director Amendola shares the same aesthetical approach to design Massimo and Lella Vignelli had: "Truth be told, the American Airlines logo was recently changed which is something that I don't agree with. Vignelli had a conservative approach to graphics and design, and he had done "rebranding" and "restyling." The same logo was used by American Airlines for 40 years and it was based on the logo before that. Vignelli thought that an image that is familiar to the public and to the client didn't need to be distorted: it needed to maintain its identity by simply refreshing it and modernizing it."

"This is also probably one of the most interesting aspects of Vignelli because he was a poet of design. One of the most important texts for understanding Vignelli is the [Vignelli Canon](#) [10] written by Massimo in which he provides a manual on what a good designer should do. With these pointers, fundamentally, it is the respect for graphic identity and concreteness. Graphic design is above all a creative job, but also very concrete. A designer needs to consider certain questions when designing something. They need to always ask themselves, 'what is this serving,' and 'what does it want to say?' This gave life to very linear, and cut and dry poetics respective to the companies' identities that Vignelli worked with. They didn't want to add anything more than what was necessary to communicate a specific message."

The Opening Event and the Exhibition

The night, organized in collaboration with the Embassy, will open with the inauguration of a collection of some of the Vignellis' most celebrated works, from graphic designs for various companies to reproductions of prints of all the biggest logos- starting with American Airlines, Cinzano, Benetton, Ford, Lancia, Ducati. There will be the original maps for the New York and Washington subways, and the ones from his design project for the National Parks Service.

To illustrate everything, there will be an inaugural conference by Roger Remington, the chair holder of design at Rochester Institute of Technology.

"Together we will recount the Vignellis' careers from their start in Milan to their transfer to the U.S.," continued telling us Director Emanuele Amendola, "then, introduced by Professor [Renato Miracco](#) [11], cultural expert from the Embassy in Washington, and Vignelli's good friend, a video interview from a few years ago with Massimo and Letizia Airos from i-Italy will be projected. Also from RIT, will be [Professor Elisabetta d'Amanda](#) [12] who handles the Italian program and works with the Design Center often integrating language learning with the Vignellis' designs."

Lella Vignelli



Professor d'Amanda will also talk about [Lella Vignelli's](#) [13] role going in depth about her contributions, especially as a woman, and her work.

Amendola shared his thoughts on the Lella Vignelli profile as a woman and as a designer: "Lella was always put second respective Massimo, and in a certain respect, she was even less well known. There is a beautiful anecdote that talks about Massimo's adoration for Lella. She suffered a bit because of the male dominated work environment and Massimo, with respect and sensibility, tried to hide from her all the magazines and the publications that only gave him credit for their creations. She was instead, the pragmatic mind of the two: she was the one who managed the budget and the accounts for their company. And she herself, was also an incredible designer: her many creations for Poltrona Frau and Poltronova, not to mention the beautiful jewelry for San Lorenzo. As you know, behind every successful man, there is always a great woman."

The Director hopes that this exhibition can become a traveling project and can also extend to other Italian Cultural Institutes in the United States.

Italian Design Day and Cavallini's Exhibit in D.C.

[The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation](#) [14] has placed design at the very core of its promotional strategy known as "Vivere all'Italiana". The Italian Design Day 2018 is really in tune with the theme selected for the 22nd Triennale International Exhibition, "Broken Nature - Design Takes on Human Survival".

On March 3rd, the Italian Design Day was celebrated in the biggest Italian venues around the world. "Design is one of the focal points that promotes Italian Culture abroad. Because of this, for 2 years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation organized March 1 as an international day dedicated to this theme." Told us Amendola. "Although the exhibit on Vignelli opens a little bit after, but only for logistical reasons, the initiative definitely goes along with the celebration. This inspiring idea is to recognize design as a real cultural tradition that speaks to the world about the excellence of our country in this sector. Especially in the U.S., Italian design attracts a lot of interest and is seen as synonymous with "well made," elegance, and quality.

"With our other initiatives dedicated to design, we have a program in May for an exhibition of works from the artist [Emilio Cavallini](#) [15]. Emilio is a stylist: he is the owner of Stil Novo, the most important Italian producer of tights. His creations have been paraded on the catwalk by some of the biggest designers: Dior, Celine, Balenciaga, Gucci, Alexander McQueen. Cavallini is the one who gave Mary Quant, the inventor of the miniskirt, the accessory that made the miniskirt so iconic - the stockings. Emilio is, however, also an artist, and with his yarns he creates abstract and very interesting works inspired by the Italian tradition. They will be on view as an exhibition at [IA&A at Hillyer](#) [16], a gallery in Washington D.C starting May 4, and closing at the end of the month."

For more info please visit the Italian Cultural Institute in Washington website here >>> [17]

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[2] <https://www.rit.edu>

[3] <http://vignellcenter.rit.edu>

[4] https://iicwashington.esteri.it/iic_washington/en/istituto/chi_siamo/lo_staff/

[5] <https://qz.com/871213/lella-vignelli-and-massimo-a-legendary-husband-and-wife-design-team-fought-to-give-her-equal-credit-for-40-years/>



- [6] <https://cias.rit.edu/faculty-staff/143>
- [7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unimark_International
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- [10] <https://www.amazon.it/Vignelli-Canon-Massimo/dp/3037782250>
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