

Introduction to “Hall of Femmes: Lella Vignelli,” Oyster Press, 2013

### **Lella Vignelli: designer and design partner**

Lella says: “It’s not that we hold the pencil with four hands, but we talk all the time.”

Partnership is hard. Long-term, on-going, productive, award-winning and financially successful professional collaboration is the thing of designer dreams – but Lella Vignelli has managed this with Massimo Vignelli for over 50 years. And they’re still married. Only they know how they have done this; there are no formulas. Think of the variables of skills, talents, education, experience and personalities – to say nothing of cultural, social, or economic context and timing.

What separates Lella and Massimo and what brings them together? What are their individual strengths; how do they mesh? Very important has been a shared Italian heritage and architectural training, as well as scholarship study in the US. Very early in their careers they began their design conversations, which have not stopped.

Until very recently, ‘design’ education in Italy was synonymous with architectural education. The phrase ‘from a spoon to a city’ (used by Ernesto Nathan Rogers at a 1946 conference to describe architects’ and designers’ purview) was the mantra of post-WWII Italian designers: they could (and did) design everything. As do the Vignellis.

What does Lella do? What are her contributions to this sprawling enterprise?

From what design colleagues and other observers have written (I’ve only met Massimo once, a long time ago as part of a class tour of their legendary West Side office), Lella and Massimo have established roles and a modus operandi that allow each the creative space to practice together and separately, but not wholly independently. Lella and Massimo each knows what the other is doing, and feels free to comment.

In my article “Messy History vs. Neat History: Toward an Expanded View of Women in Graphic Design” I developed a typology of roles that women have played, most of which can be seen in other design disciplines. (1) For our Lella Vignelli example, we can identify: design employee (interiors at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill), design/creative collaborator and business partner (exhibitions, furniture, housewares, fashion at Vignelli Associates), and independent designer (showrooms, furniture, jewelry, tableware at Vignelli Designs).

Working with Massimo in several iterations of Vignelli Design, they have clarified their different spheres and melded them at different times. Such choices were based on solid business principles, but have been partly in response to some common obstacles for women in design.

Early in their careers, the American business policy of not hiring married couples meant that Lella could only work on contract at Unimark. This restriction on their preferred working process was one reason to establish Vignelli Associates in New York. Even while they are known as equal principals, admired for their working relationship, still magazine editors frequently credit only Massimo for products on which they

collaborated. By creating a separate company (Vignelli Designs) of which she is president, assigning credit is more straightforward. For the female designer there is always the issue of family, the intersection of private and public lives, that only recently has engaged male professionals. At different periods in her career, Lella's practice has been balanced with the demands of two children. Advantages of partnership include negotiation and flexibility, though the partnership has been more flexible in hours, than in sharing new roles.

When they practice together (for the majority of their professional lives) Lella has taken responsibility for the business side (such as figuring billable hours and pricing, supervising fabrication), while not abandoning the creative side. From the beginning Lella was the one with math skills and the architecture degree. She readily plays the practical and objective partner, with Massimo free to entertain the 'what ifs.' Within the partnership she is known for the sharp critique. Massimo has said, "If Lella does not like it, it goes in the basket." (2)

While the conversations are about the full range of office projects, the Vignellis take the creative lead in different areas. Lella enjoys the 'big picture' and works primarily in 3-dimensions and large scale, while Massimo works in 2-dimensions and smaller scale (except when it's for a subway or a book series). With her work in furniture and interior spaces. Lella spent time communicating with craftsmen and suppliers; she is the one for follow-through on large scale projects and quality control. Sometimes it has been an advantage to be the woman in the room. As Massimo says, her beauty is not to be discounted.

Various former assistants and interviewers, as well as the Vignellis themselves, have described their dichotomous approach: besides the dimensions in which they work, Massimo is the visionary: "I talk of feelings, possibilities, what a design *could* be." Lella is the realist: "I think of feasibility, planning, what a design *can* be" (3) "I'm the engine, and Lella is the brakes," from Massimo. (4) Michael Bierut, a ten-year employee, writes: "Massimo would tend to play the role of idea generator. Lella served as the critic, editing the ideas and shaping the best ones to fit the solution. Massimo was the dreamer, focusing on the impossible. Lella was ruthlessly practical, never losing sight of the budgets, the deadlines, the politics, the real world. ... I learned an enormous amount from Massimo about how to be a *good* designer. But I learned how to be a *successful* designer from Lella." (5)

There are other designer couples and partners, of course, many well known. How are the Vignellis different and what has contributed to their professional success and longevity?

Comparing careers of female architects, Pat Kirkham has pointed out that the Vignellis began their conversation while students (equal status); and following they were on parallel but independent and successful career paths. They pursued complementary disciplines though their training was similar. By concentrating on commercial interiors, Lella avoided the gendered domestic practice, and she moved into product design, an oppositely gendered arena. In addition, as a company's CEO she cannot be ignored. (6)

As you will read, the Vignellis have obviously given thought to how they best interact and operate to be successful. They have worked as business/design partners with others and with assistants, ultimately with and for themselves. They appreciate the benefits and stresses of their partnership, and project a confidence in their shared perspective, and their control of business scale, carefully chosen clients, and the quality of their production.

While we, too, can appreciate the collaboration, there is a powerful desire to know exactly “What did she do?” This book should help parse this out.

Notes:

(1) Scotford, Martha. “Messy History vs. Neat History: Toward an Expanded View of Women in Graphic Design.” *Visible Language* 28:4, 1994.

(2) Diamonstein, Barbaralee. “The New Freedom: Massimo and Lella Vignelli” video interview, 1981  
([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFJReFZFEIw&list=PL2BC6ED608833963D&index=114&feature=plpp\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFJReFZFEIw&list=PL2BC6ED608833963D&index=114&feature=plpp_video))

(3) Brown, David R., Wylie Davis, Rose DeNeve, eds. “1982 AIGA Medalists.” *AIGA Graphic Design* 4, 1983

(4) Bierut, Michael. “Lella Vignelli.” *Design Observer*, September 13, 2010.  
(<http://observatory.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=8277>)

(5) *ibid.*

(6) Kirkham, Pat, and Yenna Chan. “Denise Scott Brown; Lella Vignelli.” *Modern Women: Women Artists at the MOMA*, 2010