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Linear Genius, Bold and Transformative

‘Design Is One’ Centers on the Vignelli Team

Design Is One: Lella & Massimo Vignelli

By **MIRIAM BALE** OCT. 10, 2013

“Every time we take the subway in New York, we’re in Vignelli-land,” says Paola Antonelli, senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, in the new documentary “Design Is One.” Ms. Antonelli is referring to the Italian couple Lella and Massimo Vignelli, whose firm designed many graphic elements for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Mr. Vignelli created a 1972 subway map that the designer Milton Glaser refers to in the film as a conceptual breakthrough.

The couple came to the United States in 1957, after Mr. Vignelli received a fellowship from Towle Silversmiths to design knives, forks and spoons. But, he says in the film, “I would have come with a Sanitation Department fellowship — anything to come here.” American designers like Saul Bass and Charles and Ray Eames were his inspirations. Like them, he wanted to work in diverse fields with a unifying aesthetic.

This smart documentary is occasionally clunky technically, but the directors, Roberto Guerra and Kathy Brew, include perceptive visual details: Lella’s laugh lines and Massimo’s hands, for instance. The information-rich film is enlivened by the charm of the intelligent, eccentric couple at its heart.

“It makes me so happy to know that I’ll be here forever,” Mr. Vignelli says of St. Peter’s Church in Manhattan, another of the couple’s design projects. “The typeface for the church is Optimum,” he says. “In deference to the standards, my tomb will be in Optimum.” He relates that with twinkling eyes and a grin, for he is famous for his use of Helvetica.

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