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Massimo Vignelli, Helvetica and the New York City Subway

Massimo Vignelli, one of the most influential designers of the 20th century was a true minimalist who adored simplicity, structure and functionality. A modernist in his practice, Massimo Vignelli worked in a wide variety of areas, including interior design, environmental design, package design, graphic design, furniture design, and product design. His clients at Vignelli Associates included high-profile companies such as IBM, Knoll, Bloomingdale's and American Airlines (Bigman). Before pursuing graphic design, Massimo Vignelli had studied architecture in The Polytechnic University of Milan, largest technical university in Italy (Bigman). Perhaps, his architectural background does explain his obsession with rationality and functionality being the central drive in his work.

Besides the identity design for large corporations, Massimo Vignelli's greatest, the most historical work was the design of the subway map and the signage of the complex New York City subway system. Today, millions of people ride New York City subway daily and Massimo Vignelli's work is as relevant as it was in 1971, the year of its creation. Whether it was Helvetica, a typeface developed by a Swiss typographer Max Miedinger, that inspired Massimo Vignelli to

produce such influential work is an interesting thing to ponder but one thing is clear: Massimo Vignelli thought of Helvetica as a perfectly composed music.

Helvetica, a modern, sans-serif typeface became a symbol of International Typographic Style, a graphic movement that sought to convey messages clearly and in a universally straightforward manner (Fussell). Grid, sans-serif typography, simplicity and functionality being hallmarks in Typographic Style movement show the direct influence of Constructivism as well as Bauhaus movement (Garg). Perhaps, Typographic Style movement was an example of further simplification of Bauhaus ideals, regarding typography as the most important aspect of a design. Helvetica was a true symbol of this simplified, modern world and Massimo Vignelli quickly fell in love with its soft, neutral and legible nature.

His design “If you can design one thing, you can design everything” is a playful, modern design visually corresponding to the New York City subway system signage. Consisting of only typography, circles and colors, this visual creates an interesting association between an idea and the concrete experience which is a real-world subway signage. By using the same typeface as in the subway signage and the same visual elements, Massimo Vignelli creates the visual union between the abstract thought and the concrete reality. To further explore, this same concrete reality is a product of Massimo Vignelli’s abstract thinking which strives for clear and straightforward communication.



*The design by Massimo Vignelli
(<https://inkbotdesign.medium.com/massimo-vignelli-biography-of-the-famous-graphic-designer-6eaba10a4ca6>)*

The ideas of simple and clear typographic communications in the design field were widely explored in Beatrice Warde's famous 1930 essay *The Crystal Goblet*. In her essay, Warde compares typography to goblets and notes that those who know something about wine, or profess to, will prefer a clear crystal goblet because through a transparent glass, the focus is on the wine itself and the experience is devoid of all sensory distractions. Just like a wine connoisseur would prefer a crystal-clear glass, a reader of a typography-based communication would also find "transparent" or "invisible" typography less distracting and more perceptual. Beatrice Warde warns designers against using decorative type, illogical setting and tight spacing which only causes boredom and sensory disturbance. She then mentions her book *Three Musketeers* in which the typography is so "invisible" that she has no visual recollection of it and only sees the story of the Three Musketeers.

Massimo Vignelli's design mentioned above is truly a great example of "transparent" typography. Although, it does look simple, there is nothing simple or dull in the transparent page as nothing gets in the way of mental picture and the sensory experience is uncontaminated with the excessive stimuli. To Massimo Vignelli, Helvetica was "a crystal goblet" that allowed him to communicate his ideas in the clearest form. It is no surprise that his design work still remains significant in the modern world as he was able to reach millions of people by presenting them a practical world seen from his "crystal goblet".

Works Cited

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