

# The Great New York Subway Map

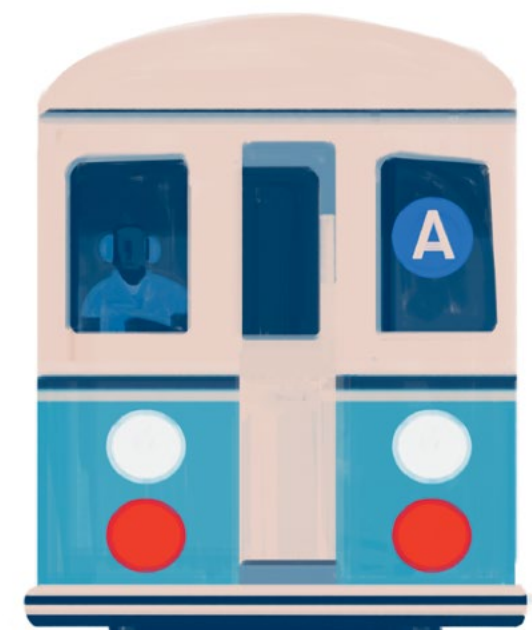
Emiliano Ponzi



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The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
in association with the  
New York Transit Museum



Massimo Vignelli was a designer.  
He made all kinds of things.  
It's easy to forget that everything made by humans has  
been designed, which means someone has thought  
about how a thing works and what it should look like.  
To Massimo, there wasn't much difference between  
designing a city or a spoon: no matter what he  
was designing, he thought about what he was  
making, how people would use it, and why.



His specialty was graphic design,  
which means he took colors, pictures, and words  
and arranged them so they're easy to understand.  
Graphic designers make books, magazines,  
diagrams, signs, logos, and many other things.



Massimo's name comes from the Latin name Maximus, which means "the greatest."  
He was born in Milan, a city in Italy. As a boy, he used to travel through the city with his eyes toward the sky, looking at the forms and shapes made by the outlines of buildings.



In 1965 he moved to New York City.  
He started a design company there with five friends.



Massimo and his friends felt that a design should contain only the most important things, without too much decoration or busyness. They wanted to make things using very simple shapes that everyone would recognize, making order out of chaos.



If you designed something the right way, they thought, it would last forever. They called this way of seeing the world Minimalism, and it was an idea also being used at the time by artists and musicians.





When Massimo's designs left his hands they took on lives of their own, on the tails of airplanes, in the windows of stores, and on the fronts of cars.







One day a call came from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority:  
“We’d like you to come up with a new design for New York’s subway map.”  
This would be the most difficult project the designers had ever done.



Massimo Vignelli at The Museum of Modern Art



Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Knoll International. 1967  
Lithograph, 32¼ x 48 in. (81.9 x 121.9 cm)  
Gift of the designer



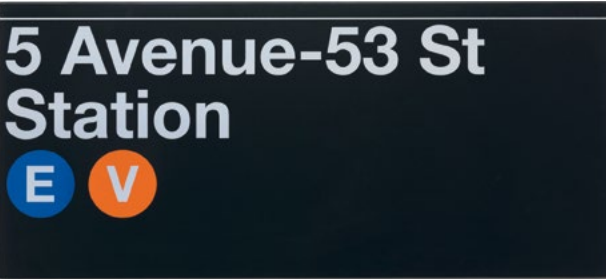
Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Max-2 Stacking Cups. 1970  
Plastic, each: 2¾ x 6¼ x 7½ in. (7 x 15.9 x 19.1 cm)  
Gift of the manufacturer, Heller Designs, Inc.



Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Lella Vignelli (Italian, 1934–2016)  
David Law (American, born 1937)  
Knoll International, Inc., New York  
Handkerchief Chair. 1985  
Fiberglass-reinforced polyester and metal,  
29 x 22½ x 18¼ in. (73.7 x 56.2 x 46.4 cm)  
Gift of the manufacturer



Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Rizzoli-Grafica-Milano  
Pneumatici Pirelli. 1963  
Photolithograph, 18¾ x 26¾ in. (47.6 x 67.9 cm)  
Gift of the designer

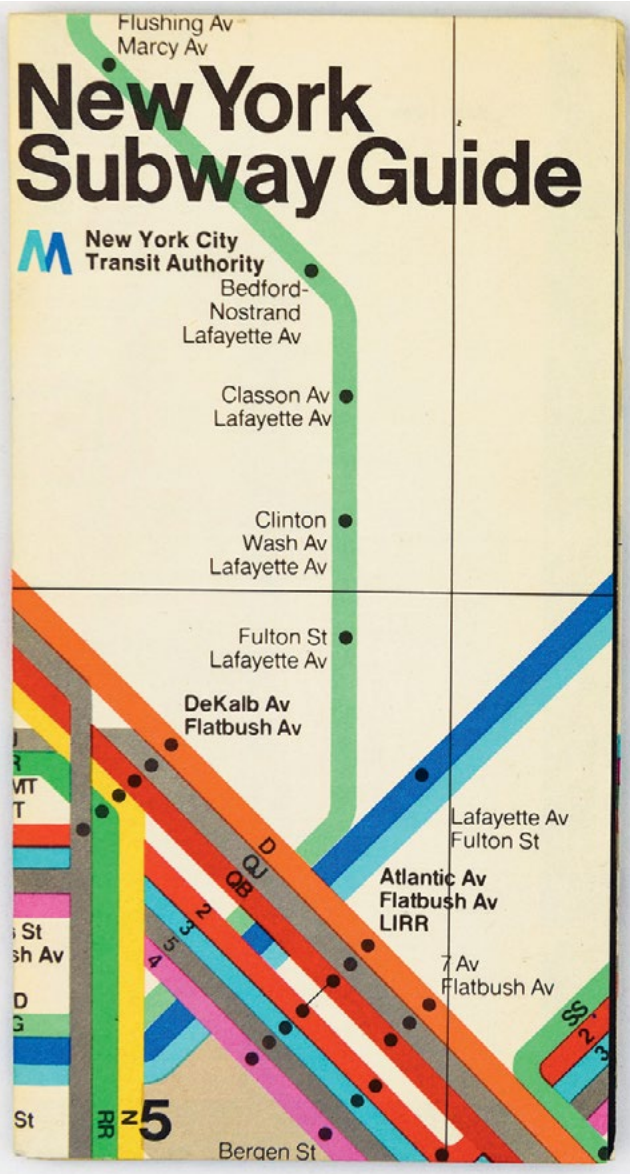


Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Bob Noorda (Dutch, 1927–2010)  
MTA New York City Transit, Bergen Street Sign Shop  
New York City Subway Street-Level Signage. Designed 1966–70  
(this version 1979)  
Porcelain-enameled steel, 24½ x 54 x 1 in. (62.2 x 137.2 x 2.5 cm)  
Gift of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority

Opposite: Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Bob Noorda (Dutch, 1927–2010)  
Metropolitan Transportation Authority (USA, est. 1965)  
New York City Subway Guide. 1970  
Lithograph, unfolded: 28 x 23 in. (71.1 x 58.4 cm)  
Gift of the designer



The Great New York Subway Map



Massimo Vignelli (Italian, 1931–2014)  
Bob Noorda (Dutch, 1927–2010)  
Metropolitan Transportation Authority (USA, est. 1965)  
New York City Subway Guide. 1970  
Lithograph, unfolded: 28 x 23 in. (71.1 x 58.4 cm)  
Gift of the designer

The story of New York City’s subway map begins many years before Massimo Vignelli designed the version that is now hailed as a design classic.

Before 1940, the subway system was made up of three companies: Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT), Brooklyn Manhattan Transit (BMT), and Independent Subway System (IND). Each had its own map in its own style. Another map, used through the 1950s, combined all three, with each one in a different color. The three companies were brought together under the control of the city in 1940, although many New Yorkers continued to refer to them by the old names.

As the system grew and changed, different designers attempted to make a clear, readable map that would help riders easily understand how to get from one place to another. This proved to be a difficult task, made even more difficult by the quirks of the station names, by the random-seeming system of letters used to identify different lines, and by confusing signage. A map published in 1967 to reflect extensive service changes created chaos in stations all over the city.

In 1970 Unimark International, the company founded in 1965 by Massimo Vignelli (with Ralph Eckerstrom, Bob Noorda, James Fogelman, Wally Gutches, and Larry Klein), presented the MTA with a proposal for a new map. Vignelli’s concept for the map (which was applied and amplified by Joan Charysyn, another designer at Unimark, who also made many of the station visits) was that the geographical markers of the city were not useful to subway riders once they were underground. He radically simplified the shapes of the land and water and didn’t represent every twist and turn of the subway routes.

Vignelli left Unimark in 1971 to found Vignelli Associates with his wife, Lella. Charysyn later joined him at the new company, and they finished the map, which was published in August 1972.

The reaction to the map was sharply divided: other designers loved it, but much of the public did not. Vignelli’s modernist approach to simplifying information, especially the elimination of the city’s geography, was not well received, and over the next seven years the map was modified by other designers to reflect the concerns of the public and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). It was replaced in 1979.

In 1991 Vignelli designed route maps, in the form of straight lines, to be posted in each train, and in 2011 he created the MTA’s Weekender map, which shows riders how the routes will change depending on maintenance work around the system.

The debate about what a map should and shouldn’t include continues to this day.

For a detailed account of the map's history, see *Vignelli Transit Maps*, by Peter B. Lloyd with Mark Ovenden (Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2012).

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