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# Religious following

The Vignellis reinvented New York design, from Barneys and Bloomingdale's to the subway map. To spread the word, they even made their own pray station  
**Writer Albert Hill**

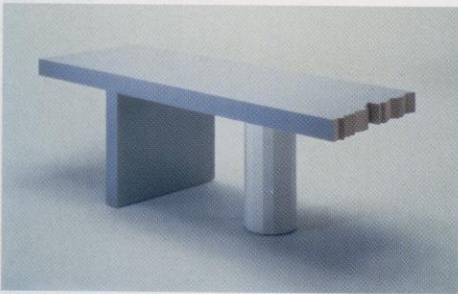
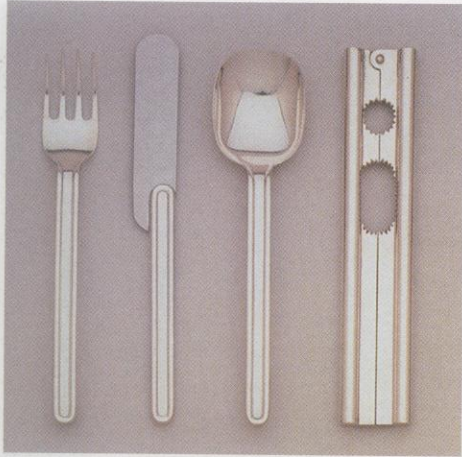


In the 1970s, New York City seemed like a permanent exhibition of Vignelli Associates' designs. The husband and wife team of Massimo and Lella Vignelli had made over Barneys, Bloomingdale's and the New York subway map. Such was their prominence that when, in 1977, a church opened that was entirely created by them, it seemed fitting that New Yorkers could now worship at a Vignelli-designed altar.

By 1977 the pair had been in New York for a decade. Where Milan was a little provincial, possibilities in the US were endless and besides, the Americans needed teaching a thing or two. 'There was a lot of styling but not much design in the US,' says Massimo. 'We brought over with us some discipline and theory.'

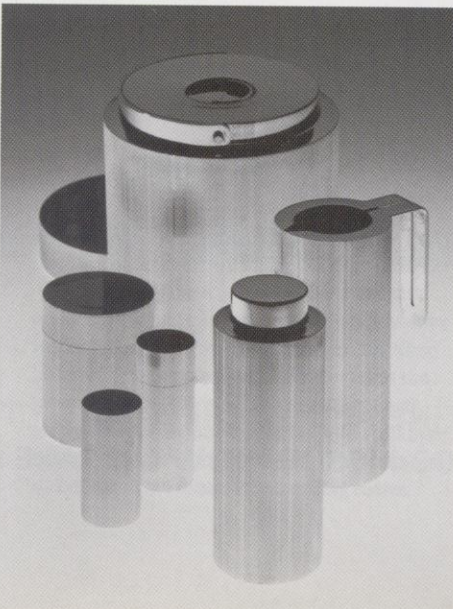
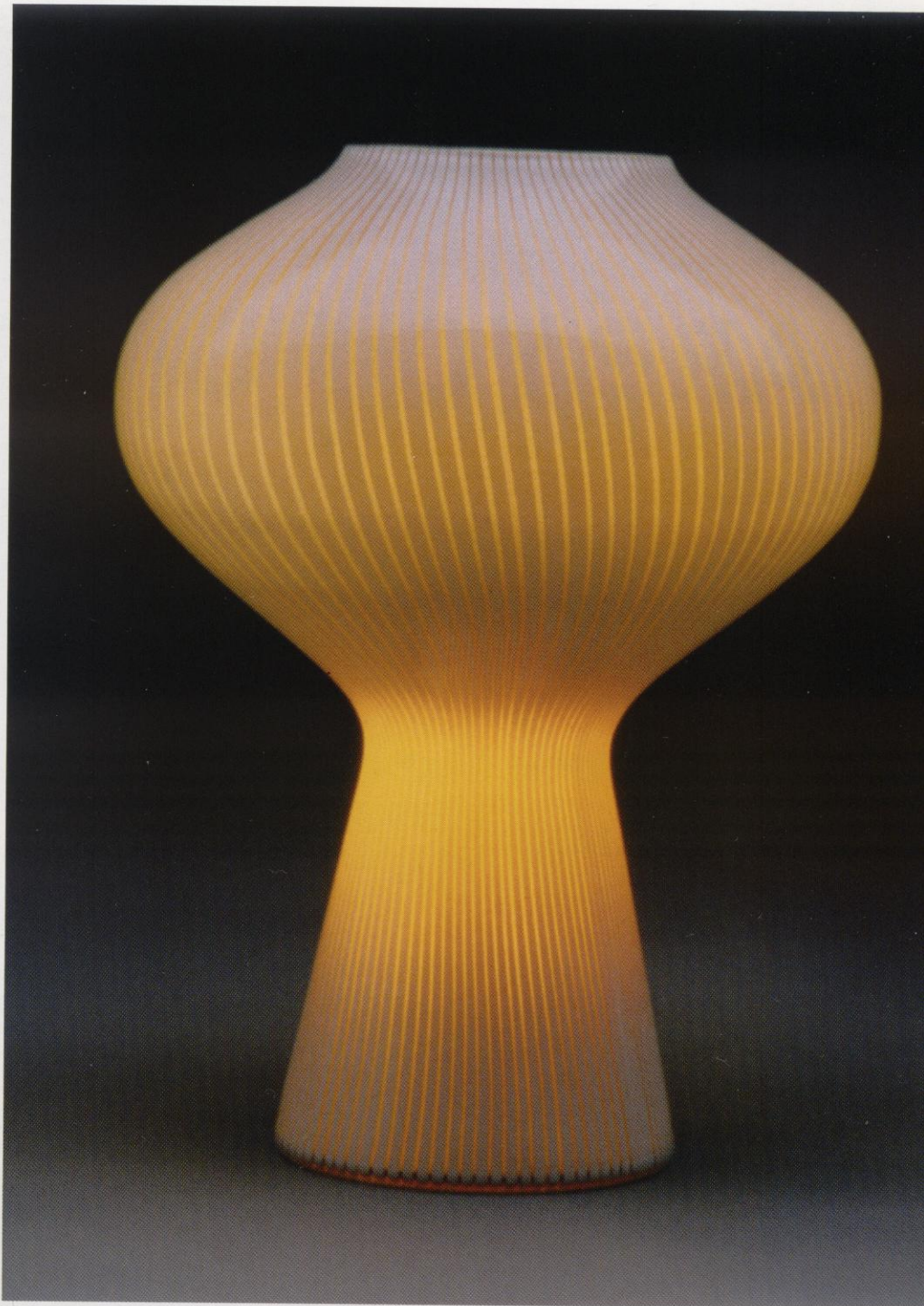
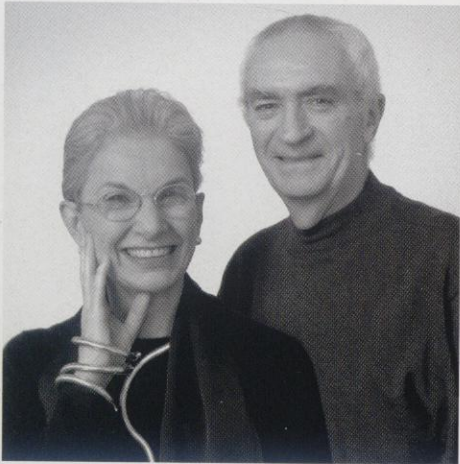
Vignelli designs still sell consistently today, but Saint Peter's church on 54th and Lexington





**ALTAR EGOS**

This page, clockwise from top, Ciga Hotel cutlery; 'Fungo' lamp for Venini; barware for San Lorenzo; Lella and Massimo Vignelli; 'Broken Length' table Opposite, interior of Saint Peter's church and (below) silverware, all by Vignelli Associates



is still perhaps their best-loved project. The ultimate example of the couple's dictum, 'design is one', the interior is complete Vignelli, from the font right down to the church letterheads. Steps become seats, pulpits can be moved from one end of the church to the other and the clergy's chairs are designed to prevent priests creasing their robes. The use of simple, solid materials (the altar, Massimo confesses, is made from butcher's blocks) has helped the interior retain its sleek good looks to this day. 'We try to make our work timeless,' he explains.

Although influenced by America's industrial heritage, the Vignellis have always retained their Italian touch for luxury and have done much work in their homeland, too. In 1995 they designed one of Venini's most enduring products, the iconic 'Fungo' table lamp. Highly

desirable, too, are the pieces they designed for the Ciga Hotels chain in the late 1970s. As Ciga has now been consumed by the Sheraton group, the cutlery, crockery and glassware have found their way into the archives of museums and the cabinets of collectors across the world.

There is something of the crusader spirit in the Vignellis. Eradicating the unreliable and unsightly has been their life's work - 'Every good design', insists Massimo, 'is one bad design less.' It's a shame, then, that the couple are now approaching retirement age and are spending more time on the Amalfi coast than on continuing their mission from their New York studio. They might not have put a stop to bad design completely, but they have certainly showed the world that there is a better way. ✱

[www.vignelli.com](http://www.vignelli.com)