

Michael Bierut



DESIGN

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University of Cincinnati

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Vignelli Associates

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Pentagram

Graphic Designer & Communicator

Along with the two books that he individually wrote (*How To* and *Seventy-Nine Short Essays on Design*), Michael Bierut also co-wrote a book, *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist*, with Tibor Kalman, himself.^[01]

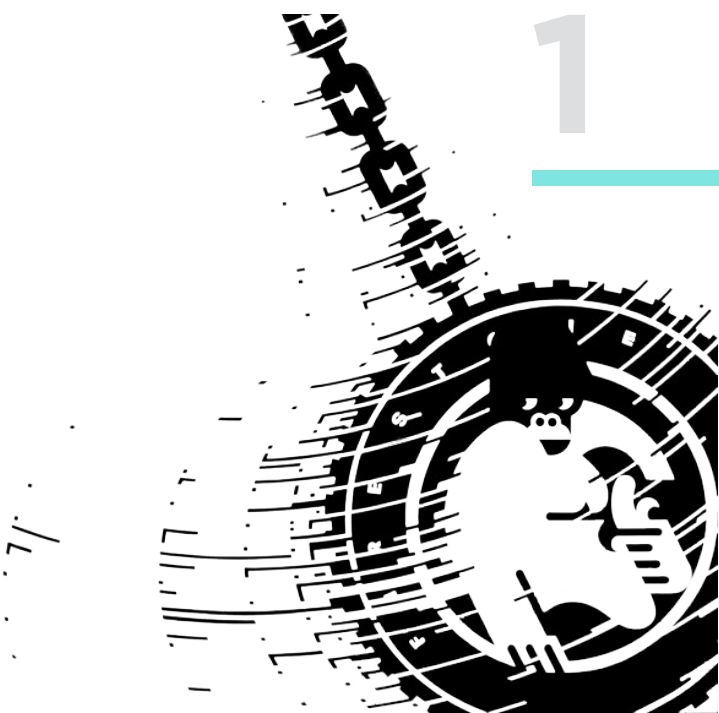
Studied in a top design university. Worked as the Vice President to one of the most famous designers in history. Partner at one of the greatest design firms in the world—Pentagram. The senior critic of graphic design at Yale School of Art. Author of two books on design. President of the New York AIGA chapter for two years. Founder of a famous design forum. His accolades include features in the Moma. The Met. The Cooper Hewitt.

Michael Bierut makes design seem easy. With only three steps in his professional career—the University of Cincinnati, Vignelli Associates, and Pentagram—Michael Bierut has become *the* liaison of design and one of the most important graphic designers ever because of how he makes his work and opinions available, interesting, and easy to understand.

Growing up in a Cleveland, Ohio suburb, Michael Bierut believes that he was “a graphic designer in the middle of nowhere.”^[03] Graphic Design was not well-known there, so it was not encouraged as a career to creative youth, like Bierut. He was always good at art as a child but discovered graphic design through books he found in the library by Milton Glaser, S Niel Fujita, and Armin Hoffman.^[04]

Following creating his first poster in the ninth grade, he realized that the reason he liked design so much more than art was that it had purpose.^[05] Watching people view his posters, Bierut found he loved the way that through design, he was able to speak to many people at once.

LEFT: Michael Bierut is pictured speaking at an event. He has become almost as famous for his speaking as for his Graphic Design work.^[02]



Michael Bierut's response to the famous animal project by the University of Cincinnati, where students are prompted to use simplified shapes to bring an animal into motion.^[06]

His list of interests is endless. He feels that to be a good designer, you must be interested in as many things as possible, especially in whatever the topic or brand is that you are designing for.^[07]

University of Cincinnati

Michael Bierut studied in the University of Cincinnati's world-renowned DAAP Graphic Design program in 1975 for 5 years. While there, he met a girl named Dorothy. She later became his wife, and still holds the title of "first and only girl Michael Bierut has kissed."^[08] The school's design program taught the popular Yale-Swiss Education style, which contrasted greatly with the Glaser-style of the books that Michael Bierut grew up loving.^[09] He grew to love the school's Swiss style even though it greatly differed from what he independently enjoyed exploring. At school, he was able to learn and appreciate different styles.

While at UC, he had an internship with an AIGA medalist, named [Chris Pullman](#), at a Boston public television station, WGBH. Bierut advises toward finding as many mentors as possible and learning as much as you can from them.^[10] Perhaps as a result of this, Michael Bierut, too, became an AIGA medalist later in life.

For creative people, he believes "the real reward is to simply do the work."^[11] It stems from the way that he does not think designers should rely so hard on creativity. Famous for his work ethic, he admires those who can simply show up for work every day and do the best they can because of passion and determination. As evidence of this, he often worked for clients and friends without charging them. He individually explored ways to combine his love for illustration, commercial art, and the classic form resolution that was taught in his studio courses. To do this, he worked on side projects, such as a student-run newspaper.

An important lesson he had during a client project for the Contemporary Art Center was that as important to style is being interested in what you're designing for.^[12] Bierut has fallen in love with how his career as a Graphic Designer allows him to vicariously partake in different fields and attributes his success to being able to be interested in many topics. Michael Bierut greatly enjoys his role of learning from clients and communicating to others.



Michael Bierut had to combine two different events into one poster because of a lack of budget. Creating a picture that can be flipped showcases Michael Bierut's strong focus on ideas and concepts in his work.^[13]

2

Vignelli Associates

Following his studies in Ohio, Bierut moved to New York and entered the center of the “design universe.”^[14] He worked under the great Massimo and Lella Vignelli at their firm, Vignelli Associates. It was the first of the only two jobs that compose his career.

Every day, Michael Bierut would work two shifts. The first was at normal hours and then later at night, following saying goodnight to his wife, he would return for a second late-night shift. Massimo Vignelli soon picked up on Bierut's incredible work ethic. They assigned him more and more work as they observed how efficient he was with time. Eventually, they promoted him to be Vice President, which allowed him to manage the company's Graphic Design Operations. Bierut became very close to the Vignellis, citing Massimo as one of his greatest inspirations.^[15]

“Massimo taught me to focus on the big ideas, and I thought that big ideas were what connected with the greatest number of people.”

—Michael Bierut^[16]

As part of the Vignelli Style, Massimo used only five fonts because he believed that these were the only good fonts that existed. Michael Bierut could understand Massimo's way, but only because five fonts is all that an ordinary person can distinguish. He believes in designing so that ordinary people, like his mom, for example, can understand him.^[17] Though he endlessly studied and imitated the Vignelli Style to the point where the difference was incredibly minute, he does not believe that an idea can be communicated through solely a color and a typeface. Bierut disagrees with Massimo and believes “good design” transcends style and is more concerned with how to communicate an idea to an audience. Therefore, Michael Bierut learned from his time with the Vignellis how to make his work understandable to the masses because he realized that having only one style is not effective for every design.



TOP: Alliance for Downtown New York City Streetscape Signage.^[18]

MIDDLE: SAKS Fifth Avenue Identity.^[19]

BOTTOM: The Robin Hood Foundation's Library Initiative was one of his collaborative projects. He worked with designers that included Christoph Niemann, Charles Wilkin, Rafael Esquer, Stefan Sagmeister, and Maira Kalman.^[20]

3

Pentagram

Michael Bierut wanted to have a design partner that would be as good a complement to him as Lella was to Massimo. He found the perfect opportunity after ten years at Vignelli Associates when he was offered the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be a partner at Pentagram.^[21] He has stayed there since 1990, leading an exemplary team of Graphic Designers. Bierut excels as an identity and branding designer, with most of his work at Pentagram being either print or environmental Graphic Design. He develops brands from the ground up and revitalizes them.^[22]

Some notable client work he has done has been for the Jets, United Airlines, Yale, Downtown NYC signage, and the MIT Media Lab. Recently, he and his Pentagram group were behind Hillary Clinton's campaign logo. The spectrum of styles in Michael Bierut's work speak for his talent of creating Graphic Design for any kind of brand and identity.^[23]

All of his work is widely seen due to many of Pentagram's clients being either famous or globally commercialized. They are also one of the best regarded and known design firms in the world. However, in a classic Michael Bierut move, he has created additional means to be seen and heard. His work and opinions can be easily accessed in many different ways. His design work can be viewed in his recently published monograph, *How To*. This book, combined with his other book of his essays, completes a painting of who Michael Bierut is, what he believes, and what he has done. He has also co-founded an online forum and blog called *Design Observer*, where he has an outlet to speak about news in design, among other topics.

His ability to speak about design lets him reach a universal and unbounded audience. Bierut has been interviewed alongside design legends such as Erik Spiekermann, Stefan Sagmeister, Hermann Zapf, and David Carson.^[24] He has gained the image of the vocalist of the design world, now known not only for his pieces of communication design, but also his ability to communicate what design is.



One of his most famous identities for the Next Wave Festival hints that the event, BAM, crosses borders and cannot be contained in space.^[25]

“Most people don’t understand what a graphic designer does, let alone what they see.”

—Michael Bierut^[27]

Paula Scher used to laugh at Michael Bierut for the way that he would over-simplify design so that anyone could understand. But, later she learned to respect the way that he knew how to design for “normal people.”^[26]

As a result of his time at the University of Cincinnati, at Vignelli Associates, and at Pentagram, Michael Bierut has become increasingly fearful of styles and movements in design and considers himself to be a pluralist because of his appreciation for lots of different work. Other designers, including Paula Scher, note how knowledgeable he is when it comes to design approaches. Bierut feels that designers should focus less on stylistic novelty, and instead concentrate on creating content that people actually want to read.^[28]

Michael Bierut currently lives in Westchester, New York with his family of his wife and two children.^[29] A present-day designer, he is incredibly active in the world of design. Today, he travels frequently, stays in-touch with media, is active on Twitter, and speaks publicly. While still working at Pentagram, he remains a strong voice of design and continues to create incredible work for others to see and appreciate. Michael Bierut designs for himself out of passion for the practice, but also designs so that he can speak to a global audience. As a result, Michael Bierut is most famous for his creativity and skill when designing and the way that he has effectively democratized design.^[30]