

Louise Fili

AND LA BELLA ITALIA

How a passion for everything Italian has influenced the career of Louise Fili.

Louise Fili, owner of successful New York design company *Louise Fili Ltd*, has a long standing love affair with everything Italian. She worked for the great *Herb Lubalin* and spent an impressive 11 years at *Pantheon books* before opening her own studio specialising in the food and the restaurant industry.

Let's have a look at how this love affair started and how it has influenced her design work, side projects and life philosophy over the years.

Louise Fili was born in New Jersey to Italian immigrant parents. It was on their first trip back to Italy where Fili saw

a billboard for *Baci Perugina*. This ad for chocolate, showing a couple in a passionate embrace was the reason that Fili fell in love with type, food and Italy.



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Upbringing and Education

Fili's parents were old-school Italian immigrants. They could not understand her passion for art. They did, like all Italians, have a great passion for food. This passion got passed on to Fili.

At college, Fili had an Italian-American graphic design teacher who took her under his wing. It was there, where it suddenly clicked for Fili, all the things she loved before, such as calligraphy, books and type, she was now able to use studying graphic design. Ironically, this teacher helped her with one of her first independent projects, which was a completely hand-lettered Italian cookbook. No pictures, only type.





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Work History

After college Fili started working for the great *Herb Lublin*. One of her clients there was *Harry Levine*, an art director in publishing. He taught her the importance of using design history as a reference for inspiration. Through Levine she got a job at *Pantheon books*. There she designed book covers. The authors at Pantheon were very Euro-centric, so Fili got to experiment with design history elements on a daily basis. By combining different European design styles in the use of type and illustration she learned that design doesn't have to be bold and loud. In her own words; "*You don't have to shout to get somebodies attention*"

A good example of this is the cover for "*The Lover*" by *Marguerite Duras*. The book shows the title in hand-lettered Art Deco type with shadow over a pale yellow cover. It features a soft focus portrait of the author at a younger age.

The book became a best-seller.



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The studio

It is also in this time, that Fili started to travel to Italy and France at least twice a year. In quest for inspiration, she visited flea markets and bookstores. She started photographing restaurant and shop signage, and she started to collect anything with type from books to food packaging. In 1989 she starts her own studio. To this day her studio shows off all the treasures found during her travels. It is full of old European advertising, tins, food packaging, collections of Italian orange wrappers, menus and anything that could be of use as typographic inspiration.

When Fili left *Pantheon*, she decided that she wanted to start up a small, intimate studio focusing on the three

things that interested her most: food, type and all things Italian. Besides still having clients in book publishing, Fili started working for restaurants in New York. She started designing restaurant identities, and soon this expanded to food packaging.

The shift to food packaging happened on a trip to Milan in 1992. Fili was researching a book on Italian Art Deco when she stumbled upon a warehouse full of 1920's print proofs. She found a series of "*pasticceria*" papers. These hand designed wax paper pastry wrappers inspired Fili to shift to food package design.

Again she felt that design, in this case package design doesn't have to be loud, to be noticed.

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L'Arte del gelato

Fili used these “*pasticceria*” papers as inspiration for the logo for artisan ice-cream company “L'Arte del gelato”. The New York based company owned by two Italian immigrants produce artisan daily fresh made ice-cream. Their old logo didn't represent the passion that the owners put into producing the product, so they approached Fili to redesign it.

Fili wanted to capture the timeless care-free mood that comes with eating ice-cream and so she started sketching designs in an old Italian ledger book. She was inspired by the “*pasticceria*” papers and used an upright Italian



script used in the 1920's for the logo, as well as colours inspired by Art Deco and the gelato itself.

Her design can be found on the business cards, cups, bags, signage, uniforms, carts and even on a Fiat Cinquecento riding around New York.

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Monzù



Fili used her great archive of books and Italian treasures to find inspiration for the design of the logo for a New York based Mediterranean restaurant called Monzù. Monzù is a Sicilian bastardisation of the word Monsieur.

It was a name used for French-trained chefs used in nineteenth-century Italy. As Sicily is symbolised by a triangular shape, Fili used this for her logo design. The illustration used in the design is based on an image from Fili's collection. The type is based on a font that appeared in a popular Italian magazine from the 1920's. Although it originates in Germany, Fili found it to have an Italian feel to it.

The logo was printed on heavy card stock and die-cut with special edge to roldex size. These cards were also laminated on matt stock for the restaurant's menus.



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Wine labels

When people visit Fili's studio they are often shocked by the amount of bottles of wine on display. Fili has designed many wine bottle labels over the years and often she has found inspiration in Italian Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

Art Nouveau (in Italy known as *Stile Liberty*) is a combination of art styles and movements appearing in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. It originates in the socialistic idea that the common man should be able to surround himself by art and therefore increase the value of life. It was a reaction to the ugliness of the Industrial Revolution and mass production.

Organic, linear and geometric shaped ornaments were taking over the design of an object, whether it was a book cover, poster, house or piece of furniture. The ornaments became part of the structure of the piece. Because Art Nouveau focussed on handcrafted decorative styles, it soon became only available to those who could afford this craftsmanship, the very rich.

In Italy the Art Nouveau style was influenced by the Austrian and German relationships resulting in the use of geometric ornamental styles from the Wiener succession. On the other hand there was a great influence by the Catholic church resulting in a Baroque style Art Nouveau, using a lot of movement and expression.

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Cale Nero and Cale Inzolia

The *Cale Nero* and *Cale Inzolia* wine labels have ornamental lines and curls decorating the label. The font used is also showing these curly flowing lines.



As in the tradition of the Art Nouveau style the decorations blend in with the functionality of the letterforms.

It looks as if the curly lines are taking over the design. The type has an organic feel to it. This is also a significant characteristic of Art Nouveau.

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Sfida, Il Conte and Tratturi

For the wine labels of *Sfida* wines, *Il Conte* and *Tratturi primitive*, Fili found her inspiration in 1920's and 1930's Art Deco.

Art Deco, is a combination of different styles of applied art, emerging in Europe around World War I. In the inter-war period new inventions and consumer products appeared rapidly. Art Deco expressed the excitement about these new inventions and consumer products. It was glamorous and modern and embraced technology and science. Designs were stylish and dynamic and influenced by modern art. Bold colours and geometrical shapes were used in a

streamlined and energetic way. Sans-serif type and block type were often used to express this modernism.

For the *Sfida* label Fili needed to fit a lot of text on the label. She developed a hand-drawn red and black Italian Deco-inspired letterform to make all the text fit the labels specific proportions. The use of this sans-serif font has a stylish and modern effect.



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Il Conte red and white use an upright Italian deco inspired lettering. The geometrical shapes in the background and in the border are typical for the Art Deco style. The shape of the grapevine illustration is streamlined and modern.

The *Tratturi* label is inspired by 1930's lettering and also uses abstract shapes. In this case the cone shapes represent *trulli*, or cone-shaped huts of the Salento region in Italy.

Although Fili uses elements of the Art Nouveau and the Art Deco styles, the labels still have a modern feel to it. One can see that the labels weren't designed at the start of the Twentieth century. That is part of Fili's success.

As her friend and colleague *Paula Scher* adequately states; *"What Louise does instead is built upon things passé to enliven her contemporary graphic statements — even when the result has vintage resonance."*



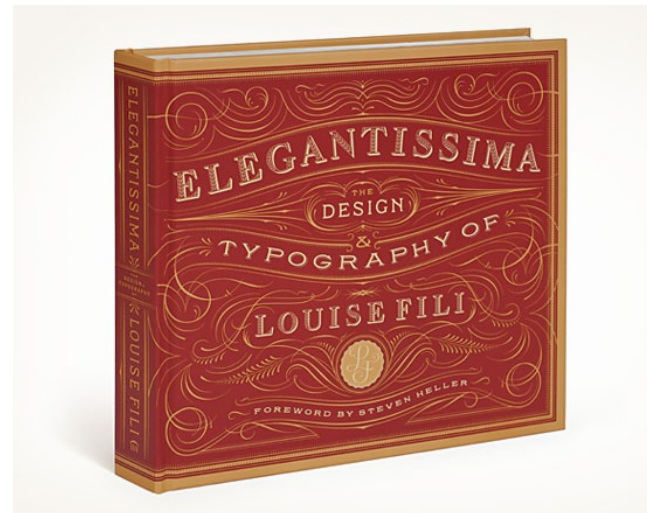
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Side projects

Besides her work for her design studio, Fili has always made a point on never to rely on any one type of work and client, and never to sit around and wait for the phone to ring. Fili always works on personal side projects. It started with a book on Italian Art Deco, which soon expanded to a series, published by *Chronicle Books* on various European Art Deco design and typography. Each book representing the style in a different country and each cover showing a strong Art Deco female figure. Fili used materials that she had been collecting from flea markets and her travels over the years. She also found material from other people's private collections and

from corporate archivists at companies such as *Campari* and *Lazzaroni*. She produced these books together with her husband writer *Steven Heller*. Together they continue producing books, such as *Stylepedia*, *Design Connoisseur*, *Typology* and recently *Scripts*.

Most recent Fili wrote and compiled *Elegantissima*. This is a monologue showcasing her best work.



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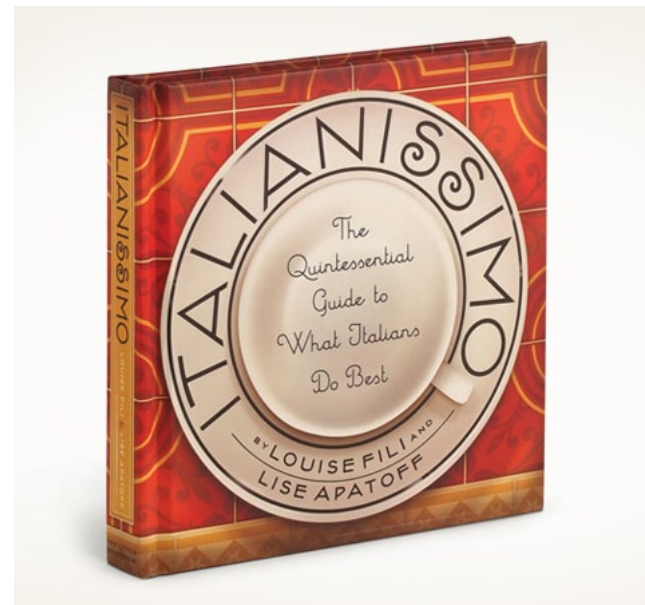
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Books on Italy

After sharing lots of her knowledge of Italy as the unofficial travel guru of Italian design, Fili created a special edition booklet, called *A designers guide to Italy*. It shows the reader where to find flea markets, museums and places with the best signage. It explains how to buy an orange still wrapped in its paper.

More shopping guides and travel guides followed. For the little book room Fili compiled *The civilized shopper's guide to Florence*. When this was completed she was asked to write a book about everything she loved and sometimes loves to hate about Italy. She wrote *Italianissimo, The Quintessential Guide*

to *What Italians Do Best*. It looks at the 50 quintessential things that Italians do best. From patron saints to gelato, from Italian gestures to La Mamma.



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10 Italian novels



Rizzoli International publications asked Fili to design a series of 10 book covers to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy.

The books in the series are all Italian literary classics and of great historical importance. The books needed to look like a series, yet every piece required its own design.

In order to create a timeless feel, Fili chose to use historical wood type and wood ornaments for the design. Every cover uses the colours red and black for the design and each cover uses a different subtle colour for the background. Fili manages to combine elements and type from different times and styles into a well-balanced authentic product.

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Passion

By collecting typographical and design references, books, food packaging and photos of signage on her trips to Italy and Europe, Fili has developed a great understanding of historical art styles.

She uses design and typography elements from the end of the nineteenth century up to the 1930's and combines them to create her own authentic subtle style. A style that is decorative, elegant and timeless. She adapts existing fonts, recreates old lead type and creates entire new fonts to suit a specific design.

Every logo, book and every packaging design Fili creates, shows a quality which is only achievable by someone



who is dedicated and disciplined. This discipline can only come from a person who is very passionate about her job. Passionate about typography, passionate about food and passionate about ALL THINGS ITALIAN.



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