

Designer of the Year

Suzette Subance Ferrier

**38th Annual
Interiors Awards
Legend Award
Michael Vanderbyl**



Legend Michael Vanderbyl

By Lydia Lee

From graphic identity to products, furnishings, and showroom interiors, Michael Vanderbyl demonstrates the impact and importance of design

As a communication designer, Michael Vanderbyl likes to design everything and, thereby, tell a story. Over the course of more than 40 years, the San Francisco-based designer has created countless visual identities—from products and graphics for Esprit to the sharp stripes of the America One yacht. His multidisciplinary studio is focused on crafting entire brand personas, including the beautiful showrooms that the products are presented within and even the products themselves.

He has been instrumental in the success of some of the most prominent companies in contract furnishings by designing furnishings, showrooms, advertising, brand identity—or often all of the above—for Teknion, JANUS et Cie, HBF, Bernhardt Design, and Luna Textiles, among many others.

“I’m a firm believer that everything communicates. Every touch point that a client has, whether it’s online, in a space, or even a product—or the tag that hangs on the product—all of those things are important,” says Vanderbyl, who turns 70 this year. “Design is about what it’s saying, rather

than a style or a trend. Good design answers the question before it is asked.”

The 15th recipient of *Contract* magazine’s Legend Award, Vanderbyl has built a practice and body of work that is world renown, with products and graphics in the permanent collections of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum; Denver Art Museum; and San Francisco Museum of Art (SFMOMA).

“Michael is a staunch and indefatigable supporter of excellence in design,” says Cheryl Durst, Hon. FIIDA, EVP/CEO of IIDA. “There is also a warmth and respect for humanity that is ever-present in his life and work. In an industry filled with talent, bursting at the seams with good people, Michael towers above them all.”

An early eye for graphic design

Located near the clanking construction of downtown San Francisco’s Transbay District, the eight-person office of Vanderbyl Design is an oasis of calm. Quietly furnished in a monochromatic palette, the interior features

both classical and contemporary elements, a balancing act that he enjoys pulling off in his designs. He moves around the studio, peering through tiny black spectacles to discuss projects with his team. “I probably have ADD—when I’m on one project, I’ll move quickly to something else,” says Vanderbyl. “I’m very much about immediate gratification. It can be tough on my designers.”

Four out of the five designers in his office are graduates of the California College of the Arts (CCA), and that is no coincidence. A 1968 graduate of CCA himself, Vanderbyl taught there from 1973 to 2014, and was dean from 1986 to 2002. “I firmly believe that theory needs to find its way into practice. [A designer is] not someone who just takes orders and executes things that some client wants. You are someone who participates, and you’re a thinker,” he says.

Peter Fishel, a former student of Vanderbyl, joined the firm in 1984. Now a senior designer, Fishel leads the portion of the practice that is primarily devoted to three-dimensional work, including interiors and product design, while Vanderbyl oversees primarily two-dimensional design. But, of course, there is crossover in their projects. “He’s taught me that you never just rely on the field that you’re focused on,” says Fishel. “There are a number of reasons why I have stayed with Michael. A lot of it has to do with the diversity of the work. He started as a graphic designer and that’s what I came out of school learning from him. But it has morphed into something more.”

Vanderbyl got his own start in the Bay area. He was born in Oakland in 1947. His father, William, was a butcher who operated Bill’s Meat Market in





Vanderbyl has designed a number of showroom and exhibition interiors for Teknion (all photos on this spread) in locations including Atlanta (above and above, right), Los Angeles (top two), Montreal (opposite, top), and Chicago (opposite, bottom right), as well as for IDEX 2009 in Toronto (opposite, bottom left).

Castro Valley for 38 years, and his mother, Jean, was a stay-at-home mom. As a child, he drew all the time and built things out of cardboard. He aspired to be an architect but was discouraged by a high school counselor, who pointed to his low grades in math and laughed. At CCA (then called the California College of Arts and Crafts), he studied graphic design and steeped himself in the International Style and the Bauhaus. At the same time, he was also smitten by the very expressive work being produced by Milton Glaser and other illustrators at New York's Push Pin Studios, whose psychedelic posters were emblematic of the 1960s. "There were these two different schools of thought—the Swiss [International Typographic Style], which was very rational and regimented, and then these crazy New Yorkers who were doing Bob Dylan posters," says Vanderbyl.

After graduating from CCA, during the thick of the Vietnam War, he joined the Army Reserves

and was a drill sergeant. While on reserve, he worked for G. Dean Smith, a graphic designer who was responsible for the iconic "Circle 7" ABC television station logo. When the recession of the early 1970s caused Smith to close his firm, Vanderbyl decided to strike out on his own. In 1973, he started Vanderbyl Design.

Creating consistency for clients

Over the course of the next decade, Vanderbyl slowly built up his clientele. His initial break into the commercial design industry came in the early 1980s when the North Carolina-based contract furniture company HBF contacted him to design a simple postcard advertising a trade show booth. At the time, HBF was called Hickory Business Furniture and made very traditional pieces, including wingback chairs. "I saw the potential of the company," Vanderbyl recalls. "Even though they only asked me for a postcard, I presented them with an entire program: a new logo, tagline, catalog, advertising campaign, and ideas for new products. I was hired on the spot." His graphic eye proved equally adept when it came to interior design. A few years later, he created an eye-catching booth for HBF at NeoCon in Chicago. Winner of the award for best small showroom, the space had white columns surrounding a massive reception desk.

During the process of what would become a complete rebranding of the business, Vanderbyl helped convince the company to change its name to the more contemporary HBF. To revive its product line, he introduced the HBF leadership to other high-level architects and designers, including Massimo Vignelli, Robert A.M. Stern, and Barbara Barry. This narrative—a small entrée that leads to an increasingly larger role in reinvigorating



For the outdoor furniture company JANUS et Cie (all on this page), Vanderbyl designed the showroom in the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles (above) and the Merchandise Mart in Chicago (left and bottom, left). Also for JANUS et Cie, he created the cocktail cart called Hatch (bottom, right). Vanderbyl has completed many interiors and products for HBF over the years, including the company's 2013 Washington, D.C., showroom (opposite, top) and the Conexus chair (opposite, bottom), which debuted at NeoCon in 2016.



a company—would repeat itself over and over again with multiple clients.

His work for HBF also led to his first furniture design—a spontaneous commission. “I was on the HBF committee that would review product designs, and there was a period where I had rejected everything,” he says. “I remember Christian Plasman [then president of HBF] getting really angry with me and saying, ‘Well, the hell with you. Why don’t you design a product?’” So, Vanderbyl did. In 1992, he created the Cambridge chair for HBF, which is now in SFMOMA along with his Cube chair, designed for Bolier in 2003. His latest for HBF, the Conexus lounge chair, debuted at NeoCon in 2016; its Eames-like molded walnut plywood shell highlights the woodworking that the company is known for. “I like to design the brand, the advertising, the space that the brand is sold in, and some of the product,” says Vanderbyl. “I think I bring consistency to solve the client’s problems.”

That consistency has also been a key factor in Vanderbyl’s work for Bernhardt Design, going back decades. “He started out doing a brochure, but he ended up doing everything, every graphic piece in our company,” recalls Anne Bernhardt, vice chair of the eponymous furniture company. “He came and made a big presentation, and we said ‘No, we’d positively never repaint our trucks.’ And I remember that because two years later we painted



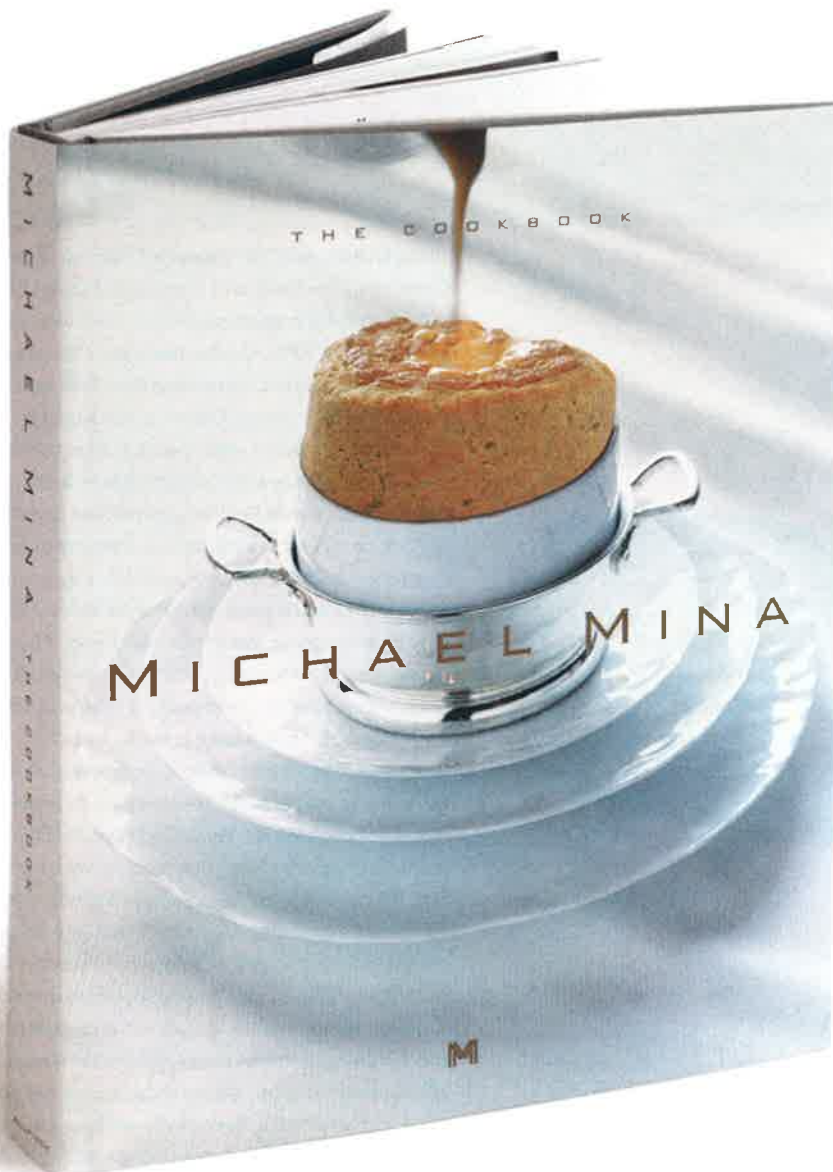
all our trucks. He won!" Vanderbyl went on to design furnishings for Bernhardt Design, including the Helena and Alder chairs as well as the Sheridan table, all released in 2002. He also designed showrooms for the company in Chicago and New York, as well as at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles.

His experience with clients across sectors has allowed him to approach problems from fresh angles. David Feldberg, president and CEO of Teknion, says, "In addition to understanding contract furniture, Michael's work in many other industries over the years has equipped him with a very broad perspective of the world, and of business. He has become a very important part of Teknion's brain trust and plays an important role on our team."

Vanderbyl has been a creative force for that team. "We've been able to work together over the years to sort of build Teknion's brand into what [Feldberg's] vision is," Vanderbyl says. "It's been great working with him." Vanderbyl created a new Teknion graphic identity, complete with a bespoke typeface for the company, in 2014. Vanderbyl also designed furnishings for Teknion, such as Vignette in 2009 and Aegis in 2005, and showrooms for the company in Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago, Montreal, and Toronto, as well as temporary installations at IDEX. In a whimsical take on today's creative offices filled with amenities, he recently designed a Teknion white paper that has a drawing of a building with



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY VANDERYL DESIGN



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Vanderbyl's considerable range manifests in many ways. He designed his own home near Napa, California (opposite, top two), the book *Michael Mina: The Cookbook* (opposite, left), wine label graphics for Barbour Vineyards (opposite, middle right), and a poster for the 2005 *Exhibitor Magazine Show* (opposite, bottom right). For Bernhardt, Vanderbyl designed a showroom at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles (above, right) in 1998 and the Helena chair (above) in 2002.

only the first three floors dedicated to work and the remainder occupied by a giant roller coaster. “We basically try to put wit and humor where it’s appropriate and where we know it can cause a bigger conversation, too,” he says. “It has its place and point.”

Thinking beyond the brand

For JANUS et Cie, led by Janice Feldman, Vanderbyl has crafted outdoor furniture pieces as well as showrooms in Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles. He also recently completed a showroom in Australia, and a New York showroom refresh is being planned.

“Janice Feldman is an amazing long-term client,” Vanderbyl says. “[With Janice], it’s an opportunity for me to do outdoor furniture. We’ve also had a great time doing her ad programs and building a brand of beautifully made, interesting furniture.”

Whether it’s an indoor hedge for JANUS et Cie or elaborate Murano glass chandeliers for



Luna Textiles, Vanderbyl’s showroom designs each have a signature element of surprise. In 2016, Vanderbyl designed a San Francisco showroom for the residential furniture company A. Rudin with ingenious artwork. The clean white space features enormous photographs silhouetted on white backgrounds depicting tools for furniture making. “These tools are so weathered and used that you can see their elegance and the care that the craftsmen use in them,” he says. “It helps to talk about the brand because the furniture is all bench-made.”

While the majority of Vanderbyl’s clients are contract furnishing companies, he has applied his sensibilities to many other industries. He’s designed celebrated chef Michael Mina’s cookbook, *Michael Mina: The Cookbook* (Bulfinch, 2006), a line of ceramics for an American boutique company called Pentimento, and even bedding collections. In the late 1980s, Vanderbyl helped launch what became a big business of bedding items for the fashion brand Esprit, designing everything from the boldly patterned linens themselves to the packaging, catalogs, showrooms, and retail displays. The linens, which *Time* magazine named one of the best designs of 1987, were deliberately designed so that nothing matched and customers could choose their own combinations of colors and patterns.

Douglas Tompkins, the founder of Esprit, impressed Vanderbyl with his clear directives. “He defined the problem so well. [For the advertising], Doug said, ‘I don’t want to use beds. I don’t want to tell people how to live.’” Vanderbyl ended up wrapping sheets around models and dogs lounging together on the floor, and the photographer was Oliviero Toscani, internationally acclaimed for his Benetton ads. After his experience working for Esprit, Vanderbyl began hiring fashion photographers for other clients. “They capture



Vanderbyl's late wife, Anna Hernandez, was the founder of Luna Textiles. He collaborated with her, serves as creative director, and designed Luna's showrooms in Chicago (above) and New York (far right) as well as Luna's headquarters in San Francisco (bottom). Vanderbyl also designed textiles for the company, including Hatch and Bubbly (right). The Atelier Lounge Chair and Atelier Cabinet were completed for Bolier (opposite, left). In San Francisco, Vanderbyl created a showroom interior for A. Rudin (opposite, right).





furniture and interiors a little differently. The images are more intimate, have a softer focus, and feel in the moment,” he says.

His work for Esprit also drew the attention of the art world, who placed Vanderbyl within a West Coast postmodern design movement known as the Pacific Wave. In 1993, SFMOMA's first graphic design exhibition, called “In the Public Eye: The Work of Four Graphic Designers,” featured the work of Vanderbyl as well as Michael Cronan, Michael Manwaring, and Gerald Reis.

Building a personal design legacy

After designing his own weekend retreat in California's Napa Valley in 2001, and spending more time there, he began working with boutique wineries on the branding and identity of their wines. “I tell them, ‘The less you say, the more elegant it's going to be, and the more expensive its going to be,’” says Vanderbyl. A wine called Impetuous for Checkerboard Vineyards is in a stately font, but the P is rakishly askew; a brand called Wildass, designed to be more accessible, is in bright red type reminiscent of a heavy-metal band.

But of all the companies he has helped define, his most personal involvement has been with contract fabrics company Luna Textiles, which he co-founded with wife, Anna Hernandez. An important industry figure in her own right,



Hernandez was only 56 when she died of Alzheimer's disease on October 30, 2016 (see page 144). Hernandez, who had an MBA from UCLA's Anderson School of Management and previous experience in textile companies, brainstormed with Vanderbyl about launching her own business in 1994. “The great thing about textiles is that you don't have a factory. It's a design, marketing, and sales type of company,” he says. “It seemed to be the right fit.” The company was named Luna, after the Isabel Allende novel *Eva Luna* and in celebration of Hernandez's Cuban heritage.

As Luna's creative director, Vanderbyl designed showrooms in Chicago and New York, and he conceived the idea to showcase the company's lively patterned fabrics on purses, dresses, pillows, and other consumer products. “We thought, ‘Architects and designers know what an upholstered chair looks like, so we can make it anything that we want it to be as long as it shows how [the fabric] turns corners,’” explains Vanderbyl. “The showrooms also reflect the whimsical, lyrical attitude of Anna.”

The strategy of showcasing Luna as a small fashion boutique to compete against much larger rivals has been successful: Today, Luna Textiles is a robust, 25-person operation. Vanderbyl has taken a more active role in the company's management and will continue to do so. “I'm honoring that legacy and making sure that the company stays a part of this design community for a long time,” he says.

Recognized for his wide-ranging capability, Vanderbyl intends to continue to have a major influence on commercial design. “I've had these great relationships over the years in the contract industry. And, to be honest, it's the best industry for a designer like myself to work with because the audience you're talking to are all architects and designers. They get it. They know it.” **c**