

The Quiet Canadian

Toronto designer Frank Viva spoke to the Alcuin Society this spring, and *Amphora*'s editor PETER MITHAM listened in.



Frank Viva speaks at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto on October 2, 2017. (Don McLeod photo)

CANADIANS ARE KNOWN as a modest lot, but Toronto designer Frank Viva may fit the bill more than most. There's no Wikipedia page outlining his achievements, and when he visited Vancouver this spring and addressed the Alcuin Society, he did so from beneath a ball cap in a voice that was animated yet vastly out of proportion to his reputation.

This is a man, after all, whose studio designs the packaging for high-end cookware maker Le Creuset, not to mention its website and in-store displays. Viva & Co. also selects colours for each year's collection, exploring ideas for naming them and presenting them to the world.

Viva also designs covers for *The New Yorker*, and he has authored a successful line of children's books for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He won the commission to design art for the Metropolitan Transit Authority, a subway installation that—he was reminded, in a counterpoint to his self-effacing manner—would be seen by “billions of eyeballs.” It was

a phrase, he told his audience, he couldn't stop hearing: “billions of eyeballs.” No pressure!

Cultured and cultivated, Viva was born in 1957 to Frank Viva Sr., the son of Italian immigrants who ran a bakery and hotel in Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, and Barbara McNeil. Frank grew up in Toronto, in a family that knew the importance of good food and open hearts. Supported in his ambitions to attend art school in New York, where the Ontario College of Art had established an off-campus studio, Viva returned to Toronto and faced the prospect of making a living. Assembling a small portfolio of sketches, he began shopping them around. “I went around to all sorts of magazines in Toronto and they started hiring me,” he said.

Viva learned to recognize typefaces by sight, and cultivated his knowledge and skills in the field. The magazine work led to other commissions, and soon a studio that was handling work for the likes of Butterfield & Robinson, the luxury tour company. The roster

of clients expanded, though not unmanageably. Viva notes that there's little turnover; some relationships have lasted decades. He acquired Le Creuset, for instance, when the managing director for All-Clad, with whom Viva had worked for 10 years, joined the French company.

"We wanted to remain small," he said. "That was important." Staying small allows Viva to focus on doing a good job—delivering work that performs well for the client and which also respects the finer points of graphic design. These aren't always the points that sell a studio to clients.

For example, he hired a development team specifically to handle online work in tandem with the graphic design team. The collaboration means that things like hanging quotation marks have become possible in the online world, a flourish that might not have received attention from other studios.

"Clients don't care about that kind of thing, generally, but we do," he said. "By being really obstinate and a pain in the ass, the design team has really forced our development team to figure out those beautiful little typographic things that we lived and breathed in a world of print over many years. So we've made

strides having this tight-knit team, people who really care about each other's work."

It's an attitude that stems very much from Viva himself. Showing his work on a history of George Weston Ltd., he points out a typeface on one spread.

"That is using a typeface that started in 1974 with No Name, which was a big hit for this company," he explained. "So I actually went to the lengths of finding the exact cut of Helvetica, and finding out what the precise yellow and the red was . . . I just like doing that stuff, I don't know why."

PUBLISHING PROJECTS

Over the past decade, it's Viva's activities in the publishing world—from magazines to books—that have garnered him the most acclaim and brought him to the attention of the general public. It's not been a bad shift for him, either.

"I love the book community—that's one thing I've learned over the last 10 years," he confessed. "They really are the nicest group of people I've ever met. The design world, by comparison, is a little bit cut-throat."

Where he steps back and comes alive are in these other projects, work that flows from his design sensibilities but which exercises them in a different way.

"The books, the covers, that kind of thing, are what I do in the evening or the weekends, sometimes at the studio (more and more lately, actually)," he said.

His first cover for *The New Yorker* acknowledged Earth Day in April 2010 with a depiction of the start of the annual migration from the city to cottage country. He's now done about 15 covers, each of them bearing a signature devised "in about 15 seconds" for that first cover simply because something was needed.

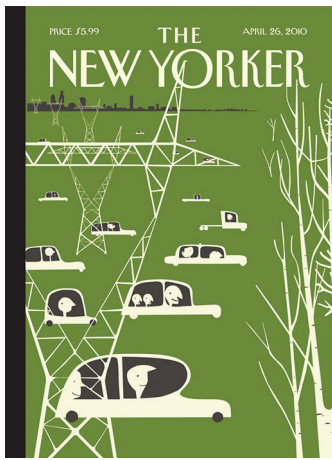
What stands out about the experience of working with *The New Yorker* most, however, is how the magazine treats its artists.

"They treat the cover artist the same way that they treat a writer in the magazine. You're a real contributor," he says with patent amazement.

Viva's first book, *Along a Long Road* (2011), was about a bike journey through city and countryside. A cyclist as well as a



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David Phillips, president of the Arts and Letters Club, introduces speaker Frank Viva following the annual Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book design in Canada at the awards ceremony in Toronto. (Don McLeod photo)



Viva's first cover for *The New Yorker* acknowledged *Earth Day*, April 2010.

designer, Viva wanted to make sure it ended like many journeys do—where it began.

“It made sense as a journey to take a circular route, so the actual yellow road continues from the cover into the inside and right through every page,” he explains. “It comes back on itself like a Möbius loop and reconnects on the back cover.”

The route in the text comes out to 44 feet, but the pages were cut. However, a Chinese edition takes readers the full length in a concertina-style book that doesn't break up the pages.

His next book, *A Long Way Away* (2013), went the other direction—vertically.

“The problem with a vertical book is that we realized that it had to have two covers because everybody knows the spine's on the left,” he says. “When the spine's on the top, is *this* the cover, or is *this* the cover? You just don't know. So we had to do two covers—a front cover and a back cover, which meant the book had to work either way.”

The solution was using the device of a ribbon of light to trace a creature's journey between a place of attachment on the ocean floor to a place of attachment with family, or vice versa. A destination, belonging, was reached either way.

That same year, his first children's book with MOMA appeared. The museum had never published a book before, and Viva was the sole consultant hired for the job.

“I was the writer and the illustrator and the designer,” he says. “It was fun, though, because

they were just figuring out how this all works. They didn't have all that figured out at that time, but of course they had the name—MOMA.”

He recalls how his primary editor had rejected the idea for the book, *Young Frank, Architect* (2013), which he describes as a dialogue between older and younger architects, old Frank and the title character. It includes quotes from Frank Lloyd Wright, and architect Frank Gehry also contributed a quote for the back cover.

The book was an instant hit and is now available in 12 languages.

“It made my main editor kind of angry, because she was the one who rejected it—but I believed in it!” he says, before adding: “I still have a good relationship with her.”

The book led to MOMA asking Viva to undertake a book for each of its curatorial departments, with *Young Charlotte, Filmmaker* following in 2015, and a graphic design title in the works.

By this time, others in New York had taken note. MTA, the local transit authority, commissioned Viva in 2014 to design an Artcard that would be posted throughout the transit system for the next year, including in New York's iconic subway cars.

WHAT ABOUT THE PIGEONS?

The challenges of graphic design for a literary audience go beyond his studio's marketing pieces and come back to the same attention to detail Viva pays to hanging quotation marks and the exact cut of Helvetica for Weston's.

“I like giving myself a tough problem to solve, of one kind or another,” he says. “With the *New Yorker* covers it's like a puzzle I'm trying to figure out.”

Sometimes, the results are puzzles to others.

His commission for the MTA resulted in an angry e-mail to his studio's general e-mail address.

“[She] was so pissed off because the lady on the left, she said, ‘Why didn't any of the riders let her have a seat? She's pregnant—can't they see that?’ I said, ‘She's getting out at the next stop, it's OK.’”

Similarly, a reader of *The New Yorker* wrote him to ask if there was some cryptic meaning behind two pigeons he placed on one cover.



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Viva won a commission to design an Artcard for the New York MTA in 2014.

He recalls a woman from San Francisco calling, asking him about a cover with two pigeons on it.

“‘Why is the black one on the wall and the white one down on the ground? Are you making some profound racial relations kind of message?’” he recalls her asking. “I had to say, ‘No, the black one’s on the wall because it stood out against the green behind it, and the white one is white because it stood out against the brown terracotta flooring. It’s really as simple as that. I’m sorry to disappoint you.’”

Viva appreciates the high level of engagement, but he also says the work of design is sometimes just an exercise in whimsy.

“People think that because it’s *The New Yorker*, every one of these covers has to have some kind of profound meaning that they don’t quite get,” he says. “Many of them are just playful, meaningless exercises.”

With a wealth of experience brought to bear on each new commission, Viva continues to look for challenges and opportunities to explore new aspects of design, but never without his deep-seated modesty.

“The thing I love about the last 10 years of my work I’ve done—I’m certainly not as good as many other people at any of the things I do—my theory is (I’m still hoping to prove it) that if I’m a pretty good designer, a pretty good illustrator, a pretty good writer, maybe I can do some sort of Venn diagram where I come up with, by combining those things, something interesting or something a little different.”

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 ~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.



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Grant Hurley, Linda Gustafson, Frank Viva and Chester Gryski at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto on October 2, 2017. (Don McLeod photo)