

# Bea

# &

In 1962, two young assistants ascended to one of the top spots in magazine design.  
*Katie Calautti* charts *Ruth Ansel* and *Bea Feitler*'s groundbreaking collaboration at *Harper's Bazaar*,  
without which the '60s might never have swung quite so hard.

# Ruth.

Photograph: Bea Feitler and Ruth Ansel, New York (c. 1965) by Richard Avedon. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.





The history-making collaboration between Ruth Ansel and Bea Feitler came about as the result of a bitter argument.

In 1962, *Harper's Bazaar* art director Marvin Israel was fired on the spot by Editor-in-Chief Nancy White, after he commissioned a cover featuring a model who looked exactly like the magazine's iconic former fashion editor, Diana Vreeland—a heavy-handed insinuation that Vreeland should have been given the top job.

At that moment, Israel's two 24-year-old assistants, Ruth Ansel and Bea Feitler, assumed his role, becoming the first-ever female art directors of *Harper's Bazaar*, and the youngest in the industry. It was the first of many firsts for both women, who were about to change the print design world forever.

The two arrived at their jobs in diametrically different ways. Feitler, born in Rio de Janeiro to Jewish parents who fled Nazi Germany, studied at Parsons School of Design in New York City. After graduation, she returned to Brazil where she worked for the pro-

gressive literary magazine *Senhor* before moving back to New York in 1961 and accepting a job at *Bazaar* as an assistant to Israel, her former Parsons professor. Ansel, meanwhile, was born in the Bronx and studied fine art at Alfred University before being introduced to graphic design by her then-husband, Bob Gill. Shortly after Feitler was hired, Ansel landed an interview with Israel. "Although I didn't have a graphic design portfolio, he decided to take a risk and hire me anyway," Ansel once told *Creative Review*. "He liked the idea that I didn't have to unlearn graphic design clichés."

"They put us together because it bought them time to shop around and look for a male art director to replace us," Ansel explained to *Creative Review*, recalling her and Feitler's status after Israel's departure. "They never told us that, but we suspected it. But once they discovered that we weren't doing such a bad job, they kept us on. One of the factors that weighted in our favor was that we came pretty cheap. Our combined salary was probably less than an established male

art director earned at the time." They wasted no time in upending much more than merely sexist stereotypes. "This is a theory," says Paula Scher, a partner at design studio Pentagram. "I think because they were women, and they were outside the group of famous men, they were capable of breaking rules and trying things. They didn't have to adhere to the same standards men did because no one had the expectation they would."

"Bea and Ruth truly complemented each other," says artist and researcher Nicolau Vergueiro. "Being looked at skeptically for being young women in power positions, I think Bea and Ruth, as a duo, allowed each other to be as bold and daring as they could: the power of two." Along with infusing *Bazaar* with their seemingly boundless youthful energy, Feitler and Ansel also fostered new talent. Photographers Bill King, Diane Arbus, Duane Michals, Bill Silano and Bob Richardson blossomed under their collaborative efforts. Their work throughout their decade-long tenure has come to be seen as quintessential visual representations of a rapidly changing era. This was the decade where space travel, television, plastic surgery and boundary-pushing fashion was on everyone's lips. Gloria Guinness wrote about pornography and the pill within *Bazaar's* pages. Women wanted feminist commentary on sex, marriage and careers—they were starting to expect more from their fashion magazines—and Feitler and Ansel were all too happy to serve it to them on a Day-Glo platter. They cut and glued and juxtaposed into *Bazaar's* pages the vitality they experienced on the streets of swinging '60s New York City: freshly emancipated youth, pop art,

Throughout their careers, the designers clung to Ansel's belief that you should "always hire people smarter than you." They both sought to encourage new styles of expression among students—including, in Feitler's case—that of a young Keith Haring.



Left Photograph: Duane Michals. Right Photograph: Sheila Metzner. Overleaf, Photograph: Antonio Guerreiro



"They put us together because it bought them time to look for a male art director to replace us."







*Magazine* in the 1970s, followed by stints at *Vogue* and *House @ Garden*, was asked to build on Feitler's vision at *Vanity Fair* as its first female art director. "It felt strange. I felt very conflicted about it," Ansel explained to *Creative Review*. "I didn't expect it and I didn't quite know how to handle it. But I did it because I couldn't say no." After almost a decade working with Editor-in-Chief Tina Brown to create an iconic record of the Hollywood-obsessed 1980s, Ansel formed her own design studio in 1992, where she continues to work to this day. Some of her designs include ad campaigns for Versace and Karl Lagerfeld and books for Annie Leibovitz, Peter Beard and Elsa Peretti.

As with many previously unheralded women, Ansel and Feitler's work is experiencing a renewed public fascination. In 2009, Ansel was the subject of the first in a series of books highlighting female graphic designers called *Hall of Femmes*. And Nicolau Vergueiro has championed Feitler's work since 2017 through a touring exhibition that has shown in Berlin, Oslo and Cologne. "Feitler was part of creating new standards in publication that are still current," he says. "In *Ms.*, her work lays out aesthetics of punk and zine culture, which in turn points to blogs and webpages. In *Rolling Stone*, she mastered the overlay of images to convey documentarist pictorial essays, a convention in contemporary visual design."

"The great art director Bea Feitler taught me the value of stopping from time to time and looking back at one's work," Leibovitz wrote in her book *Annie Leibovitz: Portraits 2005-2016*. "She said that you learn the most from your own work, and by looking back you find how you need to go forward." Perhaps it is our newfound interest in looking back—particularly at the women who quietly shaped their industries—that is allowing Ansel and Feitler's names to finally be placed among the giants of magazine design.

Photograph: Bea Feitler Portrait (1960s) by Bob Richardson. Courtesy of The New School Archives and Special Collection, The New School, New York, NY.

