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## Mandi Keighran + January 5, 2023 + 7 Min Read

Los Angeles vintage dealership Two Enlighten is on a mission to bring lesser-known and undervalued mid-century designers back into the spotlight.

John Ballon has been a collector for as long as he can remember. In high school, he scoured thrift stores for relics of the 1960s, and he helped pay for his sushi habit in college by uncovering first-edition Alan Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac books and selling them to the local bookstore.

"As I got older, my vintage habit developed from T-shirts to furniture," he says. Today, his habit has transformed into a career and a business partnership with his wife, Elizabeth Vitanza. Together, the couple run Two Enlighten, an online vintage dealership dedicated to rediscovering lesser-known mid-century designers.



Vintage and modern classics from Two Enlighten include: L: Paavo Tynell Ark light by GUBI; C: Astep light – a Copenhagen company run by Gino Sarfatti's grandson; R: Vintage Akari table lamp

Ballon's path from high school thrifter to high-end vintage dealer wasn't a direct one; his first career was in the Hollywood film industry, advertising movies. A decade ago, while searching for a Max Ingrand 1963 sconce to replace the "Home Depot-style" lighting of their 1930s Spanish bungalow, he realised his hobby could become a side hustle.

I always say that if it's not a little painful to see it go then I bought the wrong piece.

John Ballon, founder, Two Enlighten

"I found a whole bunch of other things I knew were valuable – sellers were asking €100 but dealers were asking for €1,000," he

recalls. "In the office downtime, I would be searching for pieces on eBay or Craigslist. It monetised what was a pathology of obsessively searching for stuff, and we suddenly had some 'fun money."



Hollywood echoes: Two Enlighten also work with contemporary lighting designers. Pictured here is the Daniel Becker 'Emily 5' chandelier installed in the home of actor Robert Downey Jr

Soon, Vitanza (who had been working as a French teacher) became involved, helping Ballon to launch a website in 2013, the year <u>Two Enlighten</u> was incorporated. The couple began renting an appointment-only showroom in a consignment mall in Glendale, and five years later, Ballon made the leap from advertising to full-time vintage dealer.

"I was in my forties and I noticed there weren't too many 50-year-olds around in movie advertising," he says. "I decided this side gig could become my encore career – little did I know that I would do substantially better and be busier than I ever was in advertising."



A stunning example from Two Enlighten of the 1950s Giuseppe Ostuni 'Ochetta' lamp

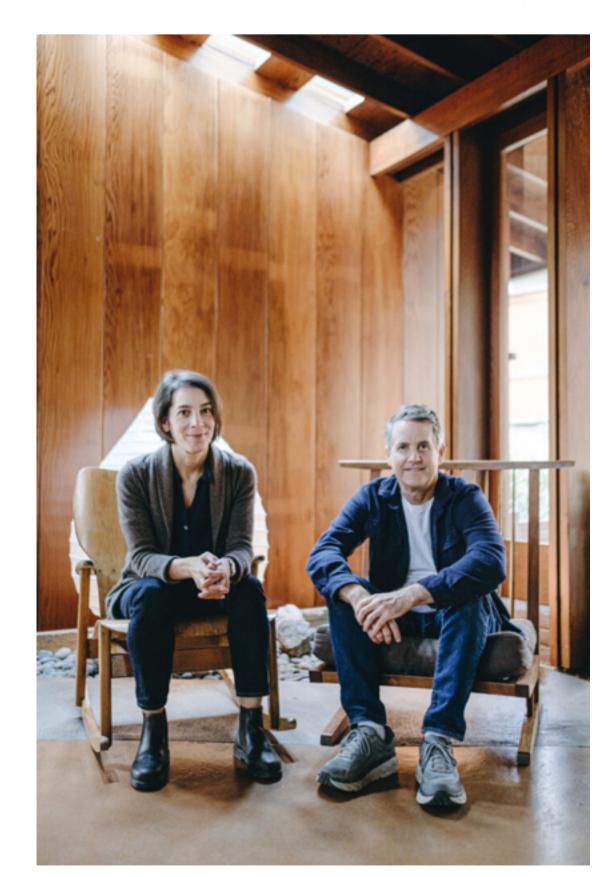
Ballon's dedication to forging his own tastes rather than following well-established trends has been instrumental to this success. And while he has always been more interested in discovering lesser-known music or design gems from the past, this approach for Two Enlighten was also driven by necessity: the modestly sized showroom and limited budget forced the couple to be discerning about what they bought and to explore more affordable, under-valued designers.

In doing so, Ballon and Vitanza have carved out a niche within the highly competitive world of vintage dealing. "I was able to buy things that I love – and that became my brand," says Ballon. "I always say that if it's not a little painful to see it go then I bought the wrong piece."



Finnish design masters: Two Enlighten favourites of lighting design from Finland include L-R: Lisa Johansson-Pape, Helena Tynell and Mauri Almari

Finnish designers Mauri Almari and Lisa Johansson-Pape, who were both contemporaries of Paavo Tynell, are two of the couple's favourites. Or there's the lighting design of Helena Tynell, a pioneering Finnish glass designer whose work is defined by her playful bubble lighting. "I had seen her work before but it didn't sing to me," says Ballon. "Then, I saw a piece on the gallery floor of a vendor we deal with in Paris – in that context, I realised her work was actually kind of cool. It was like the feeling I had when I discovered bossa nova, and this is what keeps it exciting for me."



Two Enlighten founders Elizabeth Vitanza and John Ballon

When the pandemic hit, the primarily online, low-overhead business model of Two Enlighten combined with a surge in consumer spending on the home led to a business boom. Vitanza became more involved, resigning as a teacher in 2021 to take on a marketing and logistics role. The team quickly grew to four, giving Ballon more freedom to focus on building relationships and uncovering vintage gems (which he estimates as assessing around 1,000 potential pieces every day).

As their client base grew, the idiosyncratic vision of Two Enlighten began to attract the attention of architects and interior designers wanting to buy large quantities rather than one-off vintage finds. To address this demand, Ballon and Vitanza began working with modern design brands.

After starting with bigger brands such as Louis Poulson and Artemide, they soon shifted their focus to "under-represented but wonderful" new brands, many of which were represented in Europe but not the States. <u>Astep</u>, for example, which is run by Gino Sarfatti's grandson out of Copenhagen; or the Auböck family in Vienna, the fourth generation to run the <u>Werkstätte Carl Auböck</u> – a workshop stretching back more than 120 years.

They are also keen to work with brands offering high-quality re-editions of classic pieces – such as the upcoming Stilnovo re-editions or the Paavo Tynell pieces brought back to the market by GUBI. This not only expands their offering, but gives clients the option to buy the vintage originals or the more affordable re-editions.

Alongside this they are working with fabricators (including some from the film industry and Disney) to build a portfolio of custom pieces. These range from transforming an unattractive chandelier into a series of

desirable wall sconces, to creating completely new, mid-century-inspired designs. The Rey ceiling lamp, for example, is an enormous brass disc discreetly patterned with perforations that scatter the light.

As Two Enlighten continues to grow, the founders are prioritising solidifying the existing relationships and building a stronger brand recognition over endlessly adding new brands: "Discovering brands like Stilnovo will keep us vibrant, but there's a point where we have too many," says Ballon. "It's a very un-American thing to say, but we want to figure out what the right size is. It's not infinite growth; it's about finding a comfortable balance."





European design gems from Two Enlighten include; Top: Stilnovo chandelier and Bottom: Rey ceiling lamp, with perforations that scatter the light

Beyond the joy of working with beautiful objects, Two Enlighten has also empowered Ballon and Vitanza to find more of a balance in their own lives. They have developed a strong global community through the design industry and now have the freedom to explore the world as a family.

"I didn't like the people and the world of Hollywood advertising to the same degree that I like the design community," says Ballon. "Now, we know people all over the world who feel and think like we do and who we are very connected to. We also happen to do business together, so it's a virtuous cycle."

Shop 4 vintage gems from Two Enlighten:

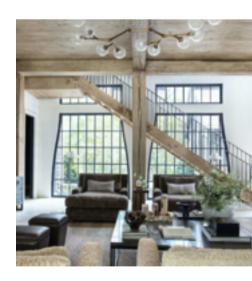


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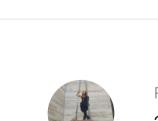
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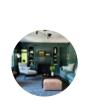
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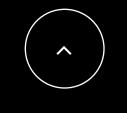
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