

A Man Who Could Find Passion in a Typewriter

For the designer Ettore Sottsass, everyday objects are emotional and spiritual experiences.



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LOS ANGELES

LONG before Apple made computers look like toys by issuing the iMac in playful colors, Ettore Sottsass made typing seem like child's play by designing a bright red plastic typewriter for the Italian company Olivetti. The "anti-machine machine," as he called it, had several unusual features, like a carriage dropped to the level of the keyboard and a nifty storage case for easy portability. But it was the red color that proved most memorable.

"Every color has a history," said Mr. Sottsass, the 88-year-old Austrian-born design legend, long based in Milan. "Red is the color of the Communist flag, the color that makes a surgeon move faster and the color of passion." Red was his way of bringing a machine from the business world into the realm of the senses and emotions, or from the office into the bedroom. It also inspired a shrewd marketing plan: the Valentine typewriter hit the stores on Feb. 14, 1969.

These days, the Valentine has a home in many museums, including the Museum of Modern Art. And for now, it takes center stage at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the first major American survey of Mr. Sottsass's work. The show features nearly 100 works from the last 50 years, including office equipment, furniture, blown glass, ceramics, lighting, metalwork and jewelry. Works on view range from early objects for Olivetti to recent pieces for the design giant Alessi, with a good look at his irreverent contributions to the Italian design groups Studio Alchymia and Memphis in between.

"I consider Sottsass a true design maverick," said Peter Loughrey, the expert behind Los Angeles Modern Auctions, which has been selling 20th-century design objects since 1992. "It's hard to say who has influenced him and who he has influenced, though he has paved the way for acceptance of some of the Dutch designers working today, like the Droog group. They share something of his whimsy and irony, and his use of ornament and pattern."

They also share his interest in the incubation period of objects. Known for working at a remove from manufacturing clients, Mr. Sottsass sees himself not as an industrial designer but as a "theoretical designer — like Einstein is a theoretical physicist," as he said in an interview two days before the show opened. Despite some retail success in the past, he now tends to make limited-edition objects for art galleries; in other words, do not expect him to follow Michael Graves's footsteps and make a teapot for Target anytime soon.

Rather, Mr. Sottsass's teapots tend to flirt with the edge of functionality. A bulging green

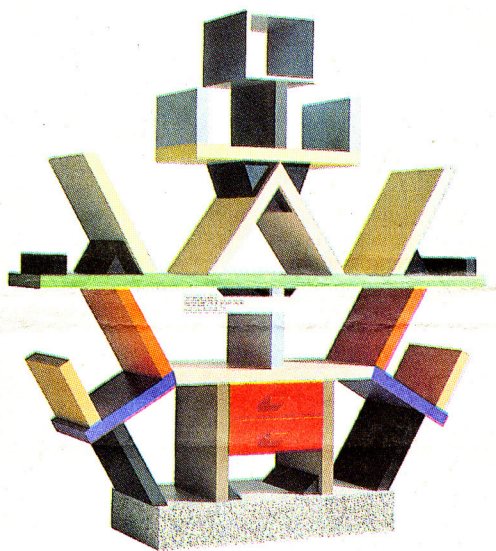
ceramic teapot in the show looks like it's made for display, not for water, while a turquoise example that was inspired by the form of a Sumerian ziggurat "would be a bit heavy to pick up," Mr. Sottsass admits.

This emphasis on form over function, and the use of colors and materials for their emotional punch, set him apart from the main currents of highly streamlined 20th-century design. The collector Max Palevsky, the co-founder of Intel, suggests that this is the reason the designer has not had a major museum show in the United States until now.

"The Museum of Modern Art has several pieces by Ettore in its collection," Mr. Palevsky said. "But for years they refused to do a show. Memphis clearly doesn't fit with their history of midcentury design or the Bauhaus idea that form follows function."

Mr. Palevsky, who owns about 50 pieces by the designer, eventually stopped knocking on the Modern's doors and decided to sponsor the show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art instead. (The Modern declined to comment on the issue.) Just don't call the exhibition a retrospective. On that point, Mr. Sottsass is firm, and curators are following suit. "I find the whole idea of a retrospective a bit macabre," said the designer, bundled into a dark jacket and mustard-colored scarf, with his gray hair pulled back in a braid. "It's like having a birthday party where too many relatives show up — a sign that too much time has passed." Besides, he added, he would rather not see his life's work "cut up into little pieces."





A desire to present his work in a fluid or organic manner informs the exhibition, which Mr. Sottsass himself helped to design. Instead of arranging work chronologically, he opted for thematic groupings: each object is displayed in its own vitrine, a tall cabinet with one glass window, with vitrines featuring objects made of the same material — say, ceramics — clustered together.

Mr. Sottsass says he got the idea for the vitrines from a 2002 exhibition he designed for the jeweler Cartier. "I wanted to isolate each object and erase the chaos surrounding it," he said.

Ron Labaco, a curator at the museum, sees the vitrines as skyscrapers of a sort, and the paths in between as a maze of streets and alleys. "There is no one narrative here," he said. "You get to piece together your own story by wandering through the streets."

Or, in Mr. Sottsass's case, riding through them, in a wheelchair that he uses for more demanding journeys. After seeing off a few friends at the museum, including Ideo's founder, David M. Kelley, for whom he designed a house in Silicon Valley a few years ago, Mr. Sottsass wheeled past his greatest hits.

He started with the one of the most famous and colorful pieces from his Memphis period, the Carlton room divider from 1981. The shelving unit has four horizontal plastic laminate shelves of different lengths and colors. Yet instead of vertical supports, the unit mainly features angled arms. Along with overturning the minimalist standards of the day, the piece breaks the basic law of designing storage units for maximum efficiency.

"The idea came very quickly — while I was talking on the telephone," said Mr. Sottsass. "You know how sometimes when you are on the telephone, you think you are speaking, but really your hand is going?"

He did not linger long near the Valentine — "That is how everyone knows me," he said — but he did pause in front of a 1959 ceramic plate marked with black gestural brushwork across the center and a large red disc, an Adolph Gottlieb-style sunburst, near the top. Others see traces of Jackson Pollock as well.

"I was painting a lot after the war, influenced by automatic gestures and Pollock," said Mr. Sottsass, an architect by training. "But I knew there were better painters out there," he said.

So instead of devoting himself to canvas, he turned to ceramics, glass and various high-tech materials. (He still works with these materials today while overseeing his architectural practice.)

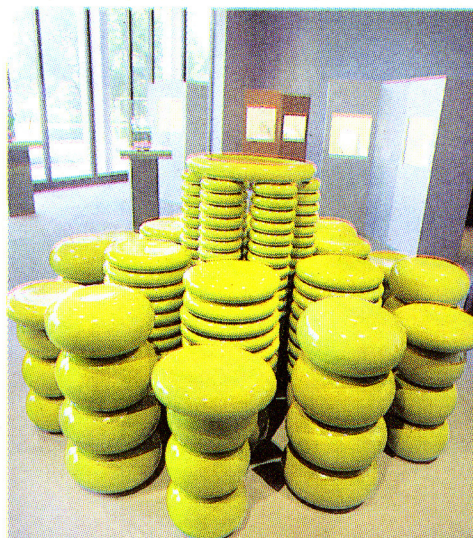
A trip to the United States in 1956 was pivotal. "After my first trip to America, I realized that industrial civilization was coming," he said, "and that the lacquer of an automobile could be as beautiful as an abstract painting."

He also saw beauty in plastics, making it a trademark of Studio Alchymia (which he was a part of from 1979 to 1980) and its successor, Memphis (which he led from 1981 to 1985). His breakthrough was the Superbox, a towering wardrobe from the late 1960's covered in stridently colored laminate. The one in the show features vertical stripes in brown, pea yellow and chartreuse. Standing away from the wall on a chunky white base, the Superbox is a free-floating monument to plastic, without so much as a door handle interrupting the shiny surface.

"The knob problem is a big problem," the designer recalled. "Normally you put knobs where they are comfortable to use. But they enter into the design very strongly, so you have to be very careful — choosing which material, which position, how high or low." In this case, he decided not to put a knob on the wardrobe door at all, but inserted a metal rod into the door's side that one can pull on to open it.

At the time, laminates were the stuff of kitchen and bathroom counters. Using it for other forms of furniture was considered radical. And soon Mr. Sottsass would openly juxtapose the two materials, playing the rich, warm history of wood against the cheap, tacky associations of plastic in furniture for Alchymia and Memphis.

Such wild juxtapositions, and the mixing of



different patterns and colors, gave Memphis its shock value in the early 1980's. Nathalie du Pasquier, a Memphis member, once described the movement, which lifted its name from a Bob Dylan song with a nod to Elvis's hometown, as "a way of life, of transferring into the world of the Western home the culture of rock music, travel and a certain excess." Mr. Sottsass called it a way of rejecting the principles of good taste by "quoting from suburbia." Others, of course, call it a prime example of postmodernism, a term the designer prefers to reserve for his American counterparts, like Mr. Graves.

The term "subversive" also fits. The show includes radical fruit bowls, like the Murmansk from 1982, a highly architectural sterling silver piece that looks like a rotunda, its columns buckling under the weight of its roof. And, as Mr. Loughrey points out: "The Carlton may look great standing alone in a museum. But put books on it, and it starts to look really sloppy."

So are the fruit bowls even meant to hold



The designer and architect Ettore Sottsass, top, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is best known for his Valentine typewriter (designed in 1969 with Perry King), far left. His Carlton Room Divider prototype, 1981, center, flouts its function, as does his Basilissa Vase, 1974, near left. Below, "Altar: For the Sacrifice of My Solitude (Before It Is Desecrated by the Deceit of Politics)," 1969.

fruit? Mr. Sottsass says yes: "I do like to see fruit inside of them, and I've even designed fruit bowls in particular colors to hold particular types of fruit — like a blue bowl to hold oranges."

Still, his work can also be a hard sell with collectors, said Marc Benda of Barry Friedman, the designer's gallery in New York. Mr. Benda describes Mr. Sottsass' following as small but dedicated. "Ettore's work makes such a strong statement," he noted, "that it's hard to decorate with it. It's hard to fit it into a larger ensemble."

Mr. Sottsass knows the problem well. Standing near his bold Adesso però stained wood bookshelf from 1992, which looks like three red lighting bolts shooting into a red platform, he discussed the "solitary" nature of his work. "I try to make objects that have a certain strength of communication, objects that vibrate," he said. "Generally speaking, I imagine them in an empty room, not with other Baroque or Rococo or Art Deco furniture."

He likewise tends to set his objects on bases, much as sculpture often sits on a pedestal. The works in the exhibition are thus framed as art several times over: isolated by the vitrine, elevated by the base and of course exalted by their placement in a museum.

Many designers today would see all that framing as fussy. But not Mr. Sottsass, who also has a penchant for various temple and ziggurat forms dating back to his early, eye-opening trips to India.

"Objects for me are both spiritual and emotional experiences," he said, before getting out of the wheelchair to stretch his legs. "To reach the mountain of illumination, you have to be willing to climb."

ETTORE SOTTASS
LOS ANGELES COUNTY
MUSEUM OF ART

Through June 11;
(323) 857-6000 or
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