



young gun

MEN'S FASHION FALL 2007

The actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt



Goin' Back to Memphis

DESIGN THAT FELT SO FINE FEELS GOOD AGAIN.

As design buffs will attest, there were some lessons to be learned from the latest round of furniture auctions. The first is that design, like art, is becoming even more vertiginously expensive. And the second is that Memphis is back.

Yes, Memphis. Remember the Milan-based collective that split the world in two between those who loved the postmodernist wit of its kitschy, colorful furniture and those who loathed it? Like "Diva," the DeLorean and the Palladium, Memphis was eventually dismissed as an early-1980s blip. There still isn't a stick of it in the Museum of Modern Art's design collection. But all that's changing — MoMA's antipathy apart.

Among the most sought-after pieces at Phillips de Pury in New York in May were those by the Memphis designers Ettore Sottsass and Andrea Branzi and their chief collaborator in the late '70s at Studio Alchymia, Alessandro Mendini. Perhaps more telling is that all of Memphis's hallmarks — dizzying colors, gaudy patterns, supersize proportions, cheesy historic motifs — were visible in the more directional work at the Milan Furniture Fair this spring.

"It's the wow effect," says Job Smeets, a co-founder of Studio Job, the Dutch design team whose Memphis-inspired objects often grace Moss's windows in SoHo. "When I open old Domus magazines and see those amazing pieces by Sottsass and Mendini, they seem so emotional and expressive."

Why does Memphis feel right again? Let's



begin at the beginning. Memphis was cooked up in Sottsass's Milan apartment one night in December 1980, when the host, then in his 60s and a grandee of Italian design, invited younger designers to develop a furniture collection to show at the next year's Milan Furniture Fair. It was to be a protest against the dry orthodoxy of modernism. They called it Memphis because Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile" was on the record player at the time and the needle kept sticking (a common problem in ye olden days of vinyl) on the words "Memphis blues again."

Exuberant, glittery and unashamedly kitschy, Memphis was everything modernism was not. Studio Alchymia had done it all before, but only the design cognoscenti knew that. The secret of Memphis's success was its flair for marketing. There were long lines outside the opening party during the Milan Furniture Fair, and Sottsass posed for photographs with his young collaborators in a "conversation pit" designed by Masanori Umeda to look like a boxing ring. That image appeared in magazines all over the world, and Karl Lagerfeld placed a bulk order of Memphis furniture for his Monaco home.

Showy, media-savvy and an easily digestible

expression of fashionable but often obscure postmodernist theories, Memphis was perfectly attuned to the early '80s. It was design's equivalent of Ronald Reagan's photo-op presidency, not to mention all those gaucho-wearing New Romantics preening on MTV. But there was only so much leopard-printed plastic laminate that the world could take, and by 1985, even Sottsass was bored by it.

The pendulum then swung away from pomo playfulness and back to rationalist restraint. Memphis's legacy lived on, not least in putting the media onto design, and vice versa. (Otherwise known as the "who cares if it's uncomfortable when it's so photogenic" school of chair design.)

It's impossible to imagine how subsequent design stars — Philippe Starck, Marc Newson — could have risen quite as quickly without it.

And now Memphis is everywhere: you could spot its influence in Marcel Wanders's giant ornamental bells at the Milan Fair and in the sinister surrealism of Jaime Hayon's porcelain figurines. And you'll see even more Memphis in December when Moss unveils a fantastical new Studio Job collection at Design Miami.

The reason is somewhat obvious: designers are rebelling against superslick branding, preferring to chase the emotional and expressive qualities that Job Smeets so relishes in Memphis. It's also because the Memphis aesthetic is attuned to pop culture, with the fluorescent colors of the New Ravers, who hang out at London's BoomBox, and the acid-house revivalist bands like Klaxons. And let's face it, if ever an era was as showy and media savvy as the early '80s, it's this one. ■