

From Milan To LACMA — Ettore Sottsass

BY REGINA KOLBE

LOS ANGELES, CALIF. — When the story of Twentieth Century design is finally sorted out, Bauhaus-influenced designs will look like so many dull-hearted companions compared to the adrenalin charged works of Ettore Sottsass.

From "Valentine" — the sexy, red typewriter that made a style statement — to Memphis, the look that rocked the 1980s, and Malpensa 2000, Milan's modern airport, Sottsass has revolutionized the relationship between individuals and design.

His outspoken ideas about colorless, purely functional design and the disposability of Twentieth Century consumer culture have sparked heated controversy. His works have influenced a generation of celebrity designers. Despite all this, Sottsass's contributions have been largely overlooked by American arbiters of taste. Perhaps it is because, as Max

Palevsky writes in the exhibition catalog of the recently opened Sottsass exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), "Sottsass does not fit neatly into any aspect of modernism."

True, Sottsass's works play like contenders in the X-games of contemporary design. They are not for the faint of heart nor the aesthetically insecure. But, as Ron Labaco, LACMA's assistant curator of decorative arts, said recently in a phone interview, "They cannot be ignored."

Thanks to Palevsky's sponsorship, LACMA is mounting Sottsass's first solo show in America. "Ettore Sottsass, Designer" runs through June 11.

To do justice to both Sottsass and the public, curator and designer collaborated on the selection of 100 works that survey a career that has spanned more than half a century. Culled from a field of 800 objects that Sottsass believed comprised a full retrospective are furniture, ceram-

ics, glass and metalwork and jewelry

Adding impact to the show is the exhibit itself, which was designed by Sottsass. At 88 years of age, he is still very much engaged with his art. Viewers will see these works as he himself intends, with the artistry revealed step by step. Not until the final item is viewed will art lovers be able to make an informed judgment about the work.

To accomplish this, Sottsass conceived a field of bright laminated towers — "They look like maquettes for skyscrapers," Labaco said — each embedded with a single piece of art. The towers are laid out so that viewers move through them, seeing only two items at a time from any given period. Large case pieces are similarly grouped by background colors.

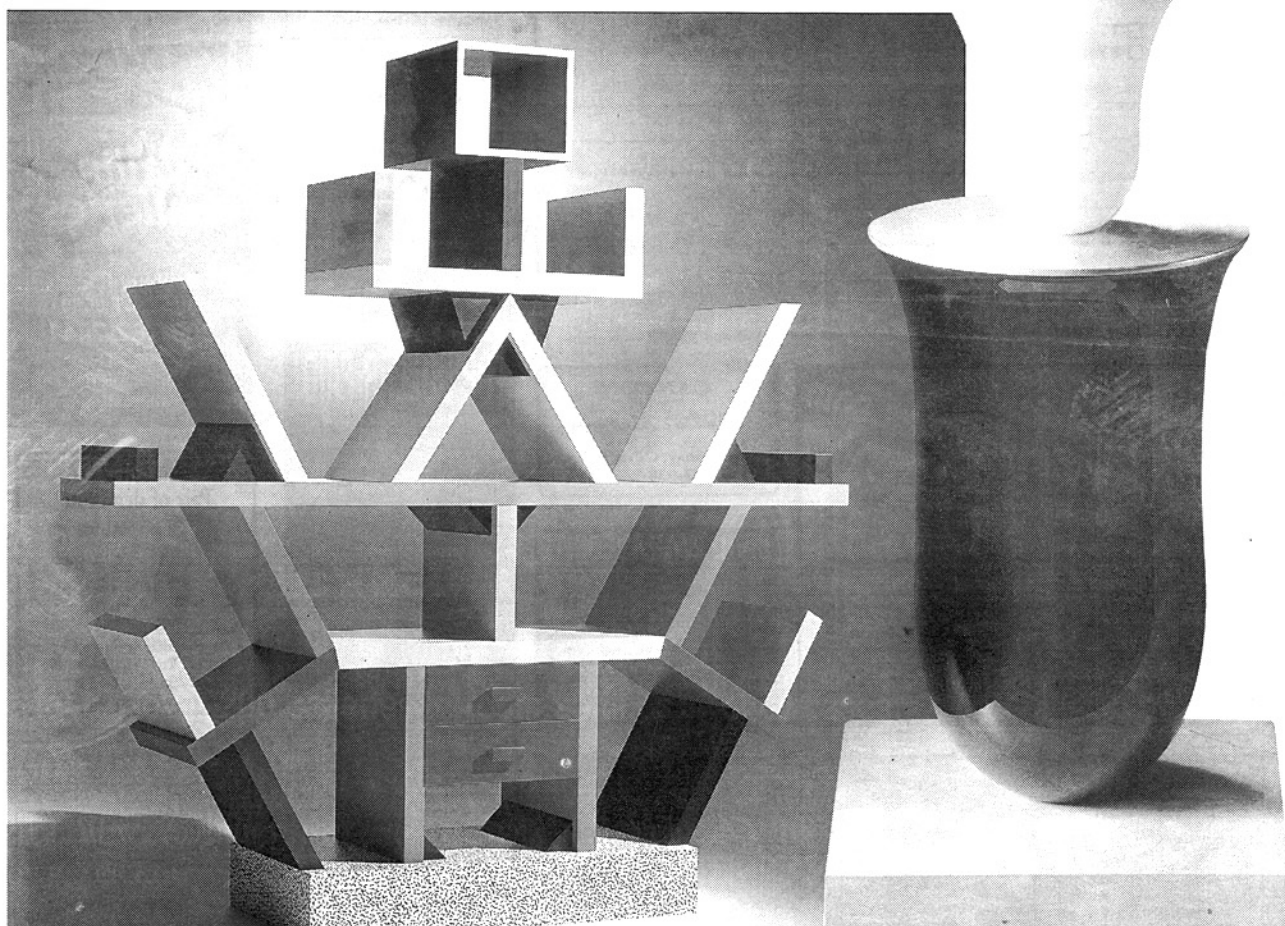
Enthused by the show's blockbuster potential, Labaco, who is a distinguished writer and speaker on the subject of modernism, exclaimed, "The time is right...the

synergy is perfect."

To fully appreciate how Sottsass advanced the design of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, it is necessary to view the world as it was when he came of age.

An Austrian, born on the eve of World War I, Sottsass graduated from the Turin Politecnico in 1939. By the time World War II was over, he had been a soldier and prisoner of war. His career began at roughly the same time that Italy entered into postwar reconstruction, a move that obliterated its fascist past and stabilized the economy. Italy held up style as the unique selling proposition for its products.

Milan became the style capital of the



"It seems whimsical, but is actually a series of triangles, almost a mathematical structure, full of vibrancy," stated LACMA's assistant curator Ron Labaco about the Carlton room divider, 1981, made by Memphis, Milan, Italy, wood and plastic laminate. Collection of The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

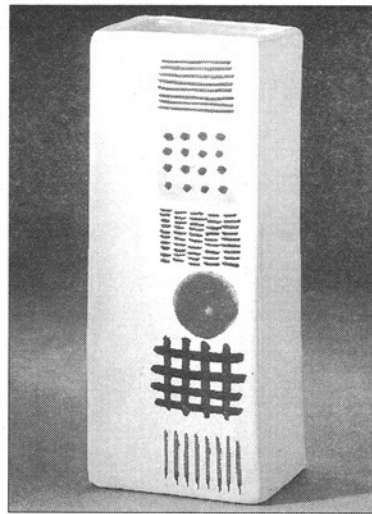
Two sculpted forms are reminiscent of the feminine form, perhaps even the Goddess. They stand atop a square base that grounds the imagery. "Lucrèce" vase, 1994, glazed and gilded porcelain with stone, made by Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, Sèvres, France. Collection of Max Palevsky.



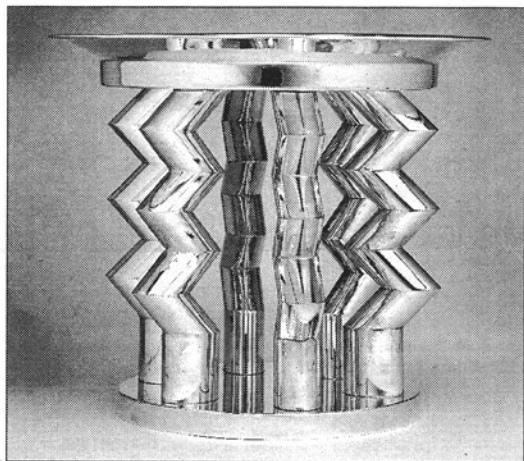
Looking more like an amusement park ride than a bowl. "Diane" bowl, 1994, glazed and gilded porcelain, made by Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, Sèvres, France. Collection of Max Palevsky.



References to Indian rituals are embodied in the surface design of the vase from the "Ceramiche dell tenebre (Ceramics of Darkness)" series, 1963. Unique, glazed earthenware, made by Bitossi, Montelupo Fiorentino, Italy. Collection Bischofberger, Zurich.



The playful symbols give this a foreign, yet familiar, presence. Glazed earthenware, made by Bitossi, Italy. Collection of Joel Chen.



Again, Sottsass displays his penchant for using materials not normally associated with radical designs. The classic metal never looked so good. "Murmansk" fruit bowl, 1982, silver, made by Rossi & Arcandi. Montcello Conte Otto.

world. (Interestingly, designer icons from that early period include the Vespa scooter and the Piaggio espresso machine.) Having captured the eye of George Nelson, Sottsass was invited to America to work on modular designs for "The Experimental House." What he witnessed was a postwar country very much at odds with the Italian experience. America was in the throes of productivity and consumerism.

Sottsass returned to Italy.

As artistic director of Poltronova, he led innovations in furniture and lighting. As designer of the "Elea 9003" mainframe computer, he won the coveted "Compasso d'Oro" in 1953. But it was his association with Olivetti, an early leader in corporate identity, that brought popular acclaim. In 1958, Sottsass designed "Valentine" and turned a utilitarian machine into a fashion "must have." The move also introduced the concept of color into the workplace.

Sottsass went on to initiate other hot office products, too, such as the Sistema 45 chair in 1971, which is now widely knocked off. In the late 1970s, as a consulting designer for Alessi, he created a line of tabletop items that are also still

very much with us.

To backtrack for a moment, in the 1960s the world was changing rapidly. Sottsass, always at the vanguard of the avant-garde, made the scene. His works of the period, "Superbox" closets in striped plastic laminates and the "Barbarella Desk" of wood and anodized aluminum, reflect this. Both are in the LACMA show.

Rarely without a camera, Sottsass went on to document Swinging London. These "Whipped Cream Memories" were published in *Domus* in 1967.

In more personal arenas, antiestablishment was the word of the day. People turned away from Western ideology and embraced Eastern ones. Artists rebelled, design movements were born, and the status quo was shaken up. In a sense, popular culture caught up with Ettore Sottsass.

Design critic Barbara Radice once described him as a "cultural nomad." It is precisely this peripatetic quality that fills Sottsass's work with so much interest.

Always fascinated by ancient cultures, particularly Egyptian and Sumerian, he believes their symbols have left indelible traces in our memories. References to universal icons appear again and again in Sottsass's works, from the largest bookcases to the smallest teapots.

The perfect example of this is the glazed ceramic teapot titled "Lapislazzuli," from the "Indian Memories" series. Created in 1972, it takes the ziggurat (stepped pyramid) as its form. And then, in what Labaco calls "layers of meaning," it goes on to tap the hot buttons of our collective consciousness. Within the same teapot are references to Asia and what Sottsass sees as its "sensorial approach to life, the rituals" that contribute to the quality of human relationships. In a world of paper cups and throw-away cans, "Lapislazzuli" suggests the all but forgotten rite of the pouring and serving of tea and the savoring of the moment that little ceremony engenders.

It is this simple statement of interest in the individual (as opposed to items intended to appeal to a broad-based market that are, of necessity, devoid of personality or cultural references) that, as Labaco said, "is the underlying element in all of his work."

Another way of looking at this is to examine the "Ceramics of Darkness," which Sottsass created in 1963 after a serious illness. In these, homage to certain deities become surface decoration.

Hand painted, according to Labaco, are silver and gold circles that signify Sottsass's recreation of the rituals. Later, "Offerings to Shiva" represent a celebration of his recovery. In the 1968 "Yantra" series, vases contain references to mandalas and meditative devices.

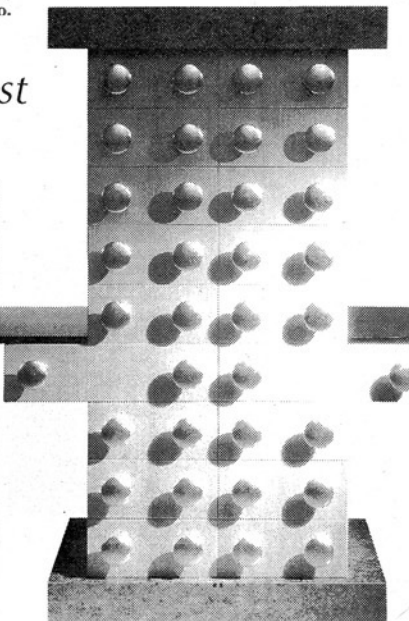
Steeped in alternative and ancient cultures but informed by modernity, Sottsass in 1972 crated mobile, multifunctional fiberglass furniture for MoMA's seminal show, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape." They became the toast of the exhibition.

Then, after seeing the remainder of the 1970s through with a series of trysts with design alternatives, such as Post Modernism, Radical Design and more, Sottsass was, by 1980, ready for something new.

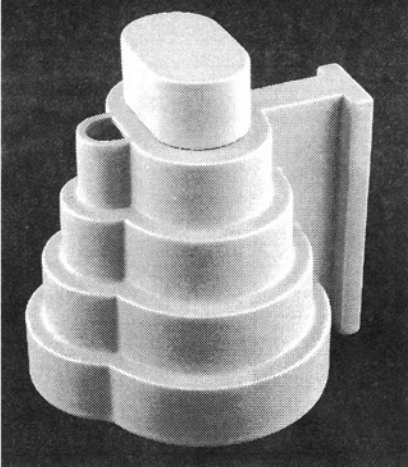
LACMA Gives Sottsass His First Solo Show In The Americas



The sexy typewriter that captivated the world's imagination and put Olivetti on the map. "Valentine" typewriter, 1969, ABS plastic, metal and rubber, made by Olivetti, Milan, Italy. LACMA, gift of Daniel Ostroff.



"The surface decoration balls almost look like they're in motion. "Mobile giallo (yellow furniture — chest of drawers)" from the "Bharata" collection, 1988, made by Indian craftsmen, wood, stained birch, ebonized ash, burl veneers and gold leaf. Collection of The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



The stepped pyramid form is reminiscent of the ancient ziggurat symbol. The teapot suggests the ancient rituals of a tea ceremony, a more sensorial approach to life than that found in world of disposable paper cups and cans. "Lapislazzuli" teapot, from the Indian Memory series, 1972, glazed ceramic, made by Alessio Sarri, Sesto Fiorentino, Italy. Collection of the Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

On the strength of chemistry released at a gathering of young designers, Sottsass founded "Memphis." The name was taken from Bob Dylan's song "Stuck Inside of Mobile With Those Memphis Blues Again." Since it was "doubly coded" with allusions to the ancient Egyptian capital of culture as well as Elvis Presley's birthplace, it was the obvious umbrella for the expo of ideas the group would launch.

Memphis shocked the 1981 Milan Furniture Fair with flashy plastic laminate furniture emblazoned with geometric kitsch and more, and the world took note.

The agenda Memphis members wanted to put forward was twofold. They wanted to resurface some of the principles of Radical Design, an alternative stance taken by designers in the 1980s. They also wanted to blur the lines between high and low class.

"Sottsass," Labaco related, "sought to change the minds of the bourgeoisie, which he calls bourgeoisie, because it is always that upper middle class that is the taste-makers. There is a trickle down, but certain high style designs become acceptable within the larger community and they propel the rest of the community."

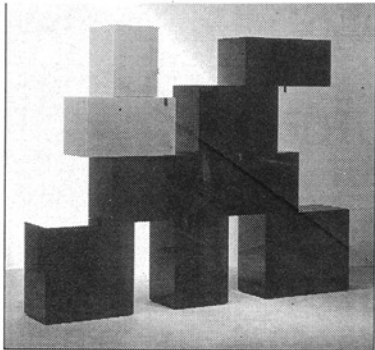
Mostly young, extremely talented and brashly unfazed by criticism, the Memphis team took its cues from just about every theme imaginable.

The team drew on futuristic fantasies as well as past movements. The resulting creations are mind-blowing contrivances and environments, many outsized, often challenging the physics of gravity. They are about as graphically quiet as a heavy metal band is mellow.

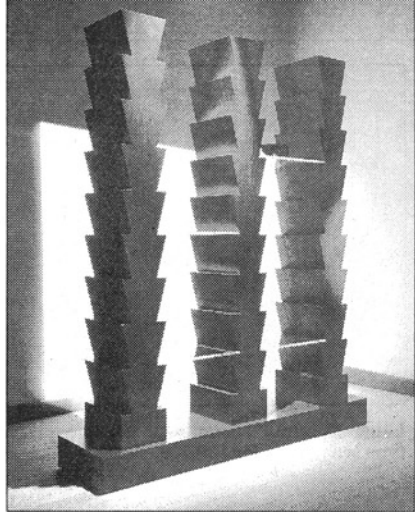
"It's not something you can put aside," Labaco said. "It's something you have to look at. Many of Sottsass's pieces [from this era] are freestanding, finished on all sides so that they can't be relegated to a corner of the room. They're designs you have to commit to."

Many objects from the Memphis experience populate the LACMA show.

Although they appear to be capricious fantasies, they are not. The Carlton room divider, for instance, is a quintessential example. "It may



A stunning example of combining a new material like carbon fiber with the ancient art of lacquering. Cabinet, 2001, from an edition of six. Made by The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Looking like ancient temple steps, the towers make for illusory glass shelves. "Adesso però (But now)" bookcase from the Rovine (Ruins) collection, 1992, wood, veneer and glass, made by Design Gallery, Milan, Italy. Collection of The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

seem whimsical," Labaco said, "but it is really a series of triangles, almost a math structure."

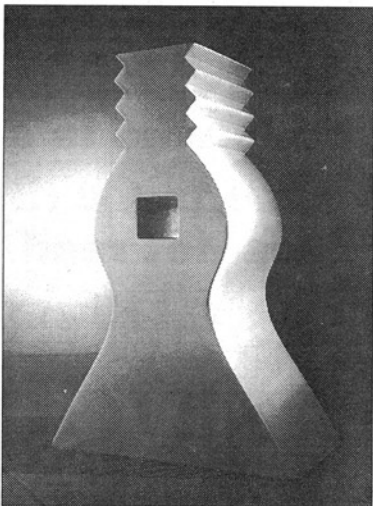
More than anything else, Memphis gave the 1980s its look. Even as it dominated the residences of wealthy collectors, it appeared in less sophisticated circles. "Because it was anti-Bauhaus in the sense of its color, pattern and quirky, odd forms, people simply appropriated these elements without thinking them through fully and applied them to products," Labaco explained. "That's what really determined the look of the 1980s. It [the Memphis look] was so easy to adapt superficially."

Finally, after maturing the roll of color and proving that brilliant design is more than meets the eye, Sottsass left Memphis to found Sottsass Associati. In 1985, he was commissioned to design a chain of shops for Esprit. He then brought Malpensa into the Twenty-First Century, and is now concentrating on architecture, primarily for private homes.

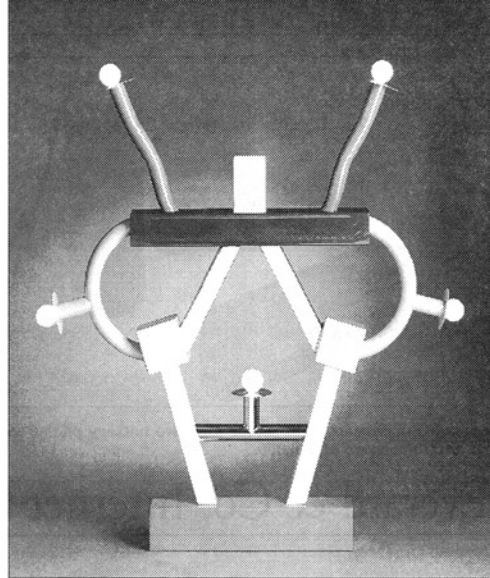
Still, he regards the need for individuality as the most important ingredient of his concepts. Sottsass has been known to interview a home owner and his entire family in depth to determine the way in which lifestyle needs to be accommodated. With that knowledge down pat, he then moves on to create a design.

While the LACMA exhibit "Ettore Sottsass, Designer" promises to enlighten and entertain, it will undoubtedly rekindle a great deal of controversy about the past, present and future of design. Given the state of design today, this is a show long overdue.

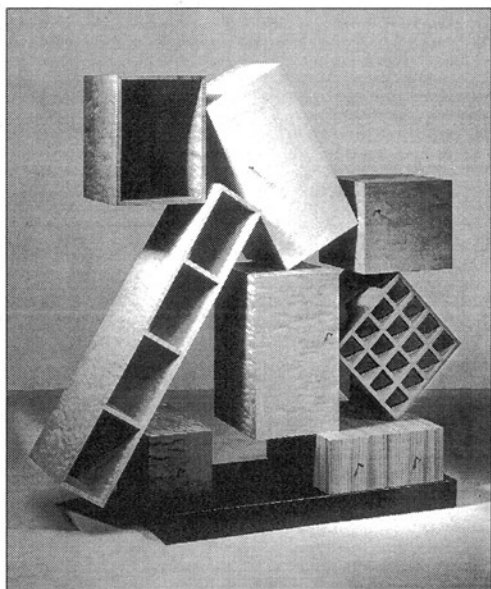
The museum is at 5905 Wilshire Boulevard. For information, 323-857-6000 or www.lacma.org.



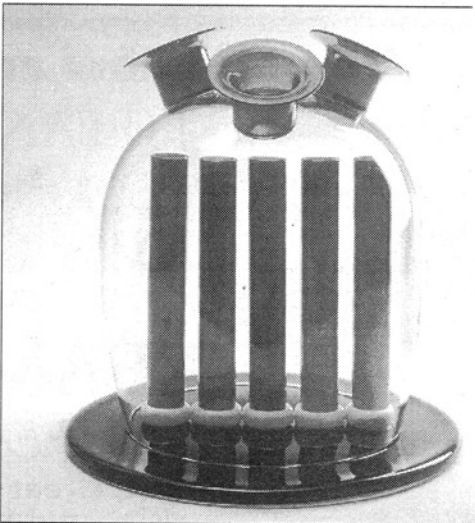
Note the recurring theme at the top of the vase; it is typical of Sottsass's cultural appropriations. "Voglio dire (I Want to Say)" vase, from the Rovine (Ruins) collection, 1992, glazed earthenware, made by Flavia, Montelupo Fiorentino, Italy. Collection of The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



This 1981 creation is a prime example of the Memphis period. Sculptural and vibrant, it hints at extraordinary otherworldliness. "Ashoka" table lamp, painted and chromed metal. Collection of Max Palevsky.



More compelling art than cabinet, the collection of forms challenges ideas about organization. Cabinet No. 50, 2003, wood, natural and stained ice birch veneers, from an edition of six. Made by The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



With an artist's sensibility, Sottsass designed for many media. Glass, which took off as a contemporary art form in the 1990s, is among them. "5 Betelli" vase, glass, 1994, from an edition of seven, made by Vetro Venini, Murano, Italy. Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich.