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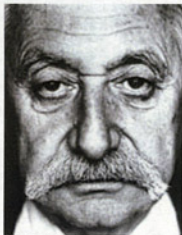
ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Ettore Sottsass, 90, Elder Statesman of Italian Design

By Josephine Minutillo

In a career that spanned seven decades, product designer and architect Ettore Sottsass inspired, provoked, surprised, and amused us with his pioneering ideas and quirky objects. His death on December 31, 2007, at the age of 90, marks the loss of a truly original force.

Sottsass is often credited with helping make Italy the center of the design world during the second half of the 20th century. He was part of a generation that included Achille Castiglioni, Vico Magistretti, Bruno Munari, and Marco Zanuso, who transformed the design of everyday objects from an anonymous endeavor into something joyous. He designed a Pop Art-inspired red typewriter for Olivetti, in 1969, as well as produced countless whimsical objects in glass and ceramic. Often he pushed the limits of taste, as with his anti-functional cabinet and bookcases screaming with brightly-laminated surfaces and slanted shelves. He waited until he was close to 70 years old before designing 20 or so eccentric private residences from Maui to Silicon Valley, and he offered visitors an unexpected welcome to his own adopted city of Milan with his decidedly un-airport-like interiors at Malpensa International Airport, completed in 2000.



Ettore Sottsass
Photo courtesy The Mohawk Group and Sottsass Associati



When Sottsass co-founded Memphis in 1981, the furniture design group for which he is probably best known today, he secured a place in history as a Post-Modernist. The group created a stir with colorful, unconventional, and unapologetic design that combined high cultural references with both cheap and expensive materials across a broad spectrum of objects, including Sottsass' iconic Carlton Bookcase.

Born in Innsbruck to an Austrian mother and an Italian father, Sottsass studied architecture in Turin and took his first job in his father's studio. The elder Sottsass, also named Ettore, was an architect in the Rationalist mold. Yet the younger Sottsass would go on to reject this mindset—and in the most unlikely of places. In 1958, he became head design consultant for Olivetti, a company that embodied Italian industry. During more than two decades there, he designed innovative office machines and furniture pieces. He was concurrently the artistic director at Poltronova where, in 1970, he created his famous Mobili Grigi printed Fiberglas furniture.

During the 1970s Sottsass became a leading proponent of "radical design," mixing with avant-garde groups including Studio Alchimia and Archizoom. He was also influenced by his frequent travels to India and the United States—where he had a brief stint in the office of George Nelson, in 1956—as well as his friendships with the likes of Allen Ginsberg, and his constant collaborations with designers sometimes half his age.

"Most designers work in a very self-involved way," says Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the Department of Architecture and Design



Photos ? Josephine Minutillo

An exhibit, in Milan, of Memphis's whimsical furniture and glassware.

at the Museum of Modern Art, in Manhattan. "Sottsass was what I like to call a universal donor. He was one of the design world's big givers, shaping a new generation of designers with both his style and his passionate approach to life."

Sottsass spent his later years focusing on architectural projects, founding Sottsass Associati at the age of 64. Acclaimed designer James Irvine was one of his partners there from 1993 to 2000. "Ettore taught me to question everything and to rely on one's instincts," he recalls. "Most architects and designers spend their lives becoming more and more rigid and closing themselves into a box within which they are secure of their identity. Ettore never took anything for granted and above all never sold out. He was a true libertine."

To commemorate his 90th birthday, a retrospective of Sottsass's work entitled "Vorrei sapere perché" (I want to know why) opened in December in Trieste, Italy. It runs until March 2, 2008.



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