

Photo © Daniele Bodolati.

ETTORE SOTTASS

REDEFINING MODERNITY

By Ronald T. Labaco

Ettore Sottsass achieved international stardom in the early 1980s as a founder of Memphis, the irreverent design collective that wowed the world with its unconventionally shaped and exuberantly colored and patterned furniture, lighting, ceramics and glass. But Sottsass's fame was hardly surprising. He had helped lead Italy's conquest of international design in the decades after World War II, creating furniture, objects, office machines and housewares for major companies and independently. He was also the mainstream design world's most vocal critic, poking fun at the sober formalism of Modernism, critiquing the puritanical restraint of the International Style and even questioning the very act of producing objects. Sottsass's theories about design's potential for evoking primal emotion and communicating meaning have influenced generations of designers. "A table may need four legs to function," he once said, "but no one can tell me that the four legs have to look the same." Now 88, he has remained at the forefront of his profession.

Born in Innsbruck, Austria, in 1917, Sottsass received his degree in architecture from Turin Polytechnic in 1939. But, like a number of other Italian architects, he turned to design after World War II,

when important building projects had all but ceased due to the devastated economy. He was an amateur painter as well, and a trip to Paris in 1936, where he saw works by Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Kandinsky, awakened his fascination with the emotive power of color. "For a young lad like me, these artists were something like gods," Sottsass recalled. "As far as problems of color were concerned, they became my masters." He continued to paint until 1965, when he decided to focus exclusively on design and architecture. "I am more capable of spreading colors in space than on a piece of paper," he said.

In 1947, Sottsass moved to Milan to open his own architecture and design studio. That year, he designed one of his first pieces of furniture, a small side table which, although modest, reveals a sophisticated grasp of design. While the rounded corners of the tabletop reflect the biomorphic style popular at the time, the grid-like painted decoration becomes distorted as it wraps around the table edge. This exploration of the relationship between 3-D space and 2-D pattern would be an enduring theme throughout Sottsass's career.

Above Portrait of Sottsass, photographed January 24, 2005.

Opposite *Carlton* room divider, 1981. Made by Memphis (Milan, Italy). Wood, plastic laminate. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Olivetti S.p.A. All rights reserved. Photo © 2005 Museum Associates/LACMA.

Above *Valentine* portable typewriter, 1969. Designed in collaboration with Perry A. King. Made by Olivetti (Milan, Italy). ABS plastic, metal, rubber. LACMA, gift of Daniel Ostroff.

nationale de Sèvres and, through Sottsass Associati, a series of furniture veneered in exotic woods, followed by another series in 2003. Through Sottsass Associati, he also redesigned the interior of the Milan Malpensa 2000 Airport (1994–98). Retrospective exhibitions of Sottsass's work were organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, in 1994, and more recently by the Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Italy, in early 2005.

Sottsass's highly theoretical approach to design has resulted in an eclectic body of work that refutes the traditional association of an important designer with a signature style. By operating on the margins and aligning himself with conspicuous anti-design groups, Sottsass's high visibility and success in the field has inspired young designers to question complacency within the design community, helping to revitalize the concepts of Modernism. The enduring element of radicalism in Sottsass's work has fostered debate about





Photo © Erik and Petra Hesmerg; Courtesy The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

the changing role of design that continues to this day. In a recent interview, Sottsass defined the importance of the “outsider” in the progress of mainstream design. While a core zone of society is extremely conservative, he said, “there is a zone for the bourgeoisie...and they are listening to these crazies who invent things and who seem, at least to the people at the center, to be evil, dangerous beasts. But the bourgeoisie takes in part of this stuff in some way, and they redesign it and resell it, and

Right Jasmine Hill housing complex, Singapore, 1996–2000. Sottsass Associati (Milan, Italy).

Below *Just Back from New Guinea* desk, 1987. Made by Renzo Brugola (Milan, Italy). Limited production. Wood; stained maple, burl, and recomposed wood veneers; metal; electric light fixture. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

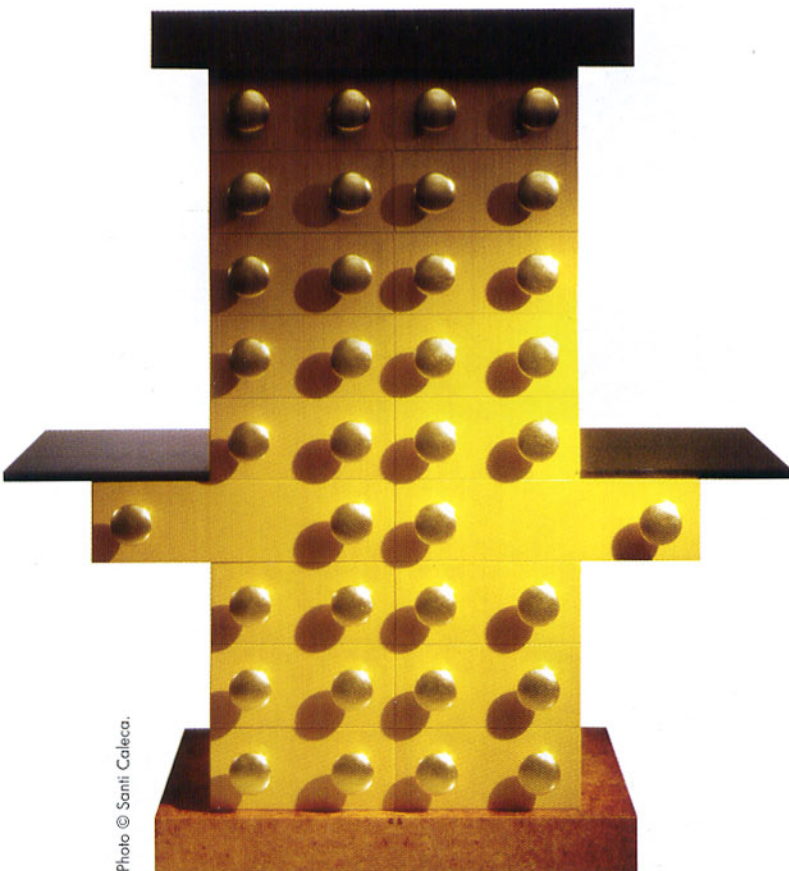
Opposite *Adesso però (But Now)* bookcase from the “Rovine” (Ruins) collection, 1992. Made by Design Gallery Milano (Milan, Italy). Wood, stained wood veneer, glass. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Photo © Benjamin Yu; Courtesy Sottsass Associati.



Photo © Santi Colecca.



very, very slowly these ideas become more and more accepted." With strong conviction and perseverance, working alone and in collaboration, Sottsass has changed the face of contemporary design, enabling it to welcome the idiosyncratic work of such designers as Ron Arad, Philippe Starck and the Dutch collaborative Droog. Only now, with the distance of time, can we begin to evaluate the impact that Sottsass has made on our world. ■

Ronald T. Labaco is Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and curator of its current exhibition, "Ettore Sottsass, Designer." His last article for *Modernism* was "Serving Modern to America: The Museum Dinnerware Collaboration" (Vol. 7, No. 1).

The exhibition "Ettore Sottsass, Designer" runs through June 11 at LACMA. See *In the Museums*, p. 26.

Above left Vase from the "Geology" series, 2000. Made by Alessio Sarri (Sesto Fiorentino, Italy). Edition of twelve. Glazed earthenware. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

Above right *Lucrèce* vase, 1994. Made by Manufacture nationale de Sèvres (Sèvres, France). Glazed and gilded porcelain, stone. Collection of Max Palevsky.

Left *Mobile giallo* (Yellow Furniture) chest of drawers, from the "Bharata" collection, 1988. Made by Indian craftsmen. Wood; stained birch, ebonized ash, and burl veneers; gold leaf. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

Opposite *Cabinet No. 50*, 2003. Made by The Gallery Mourmans. Edition of six. Wood; natural and stained ice birch veneers. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

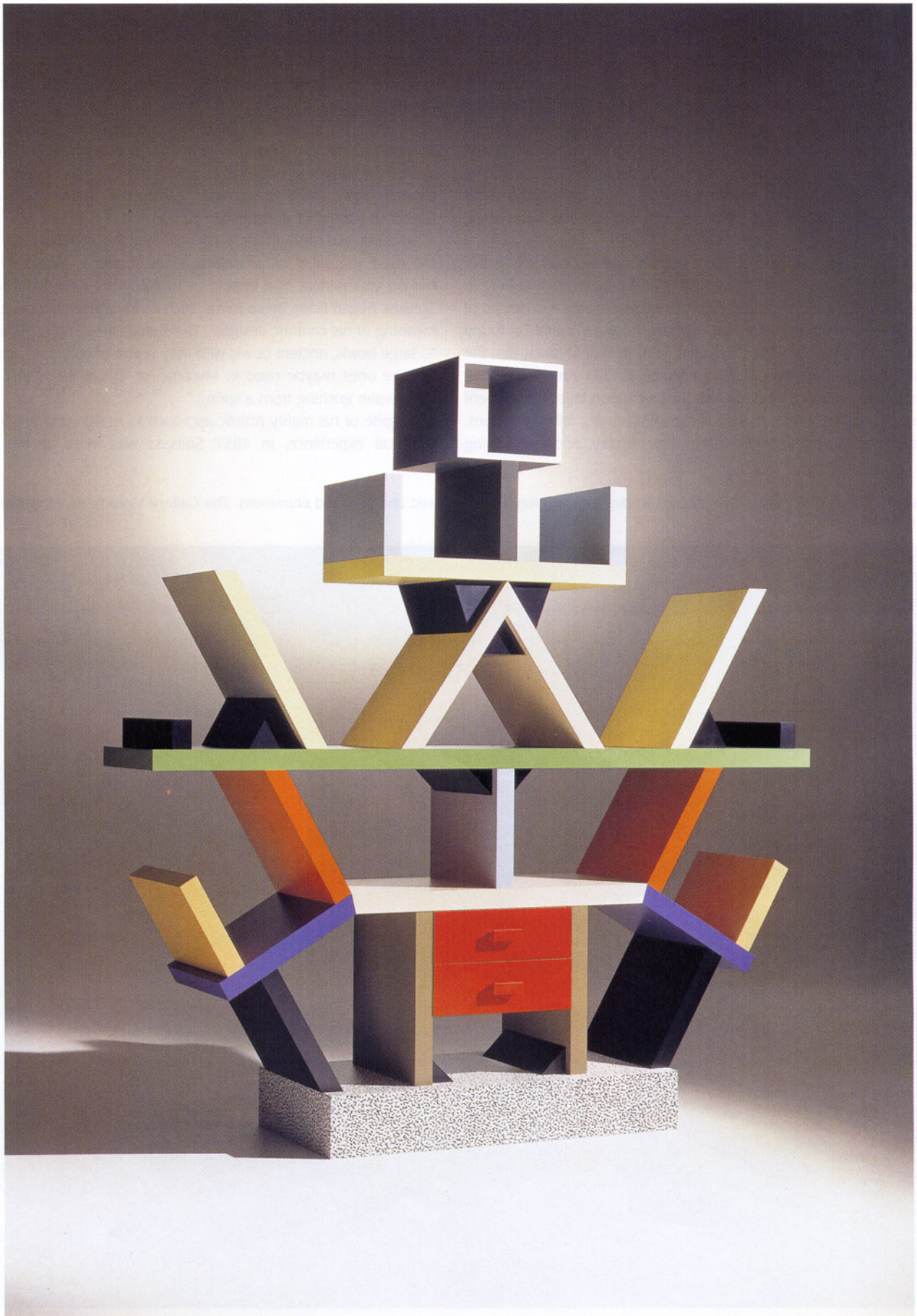


Photo © Aldo Ballo; Courtesy of Sothass Associati.

Commissions in the mid 1950s included ceramic vases and dinnerware and aluminum objects for Raymor, a New York importer and distributor of modern home furnishings known for working with such influential designers as George Nelson, Hans Wegner and Paul McCobb. Sottsass approached these designs as formal exercises in applying current stylistic trends in furniture, architectural design and sculpture to domestic objects meant for small-scale production. The organic forms of his aluminum vases from 1955, for example, with tapering legs dictated by parabolic arcs cut into the outer shell, recall the work of Alexander Calder.

In 1956, Sottsass worked for a short period in George Nelson's studio in New York. The city exposed him to a consumer culture in which the products of modern life seemed disposable and devoid of any lasting significance for their owners, a situation that he found profoundly disturbing. Even a decade later he would assert that the "most brutal impression you have going around America...is the immense quantity of products that fill, layer upon layer, department stores, shopping centers, shops, streets, restaurants, railway stations, everything. An immense wealth without luxury, and overflowing

opulence without pomp...millions and millions of products of all kinds, ready to be consumed..."

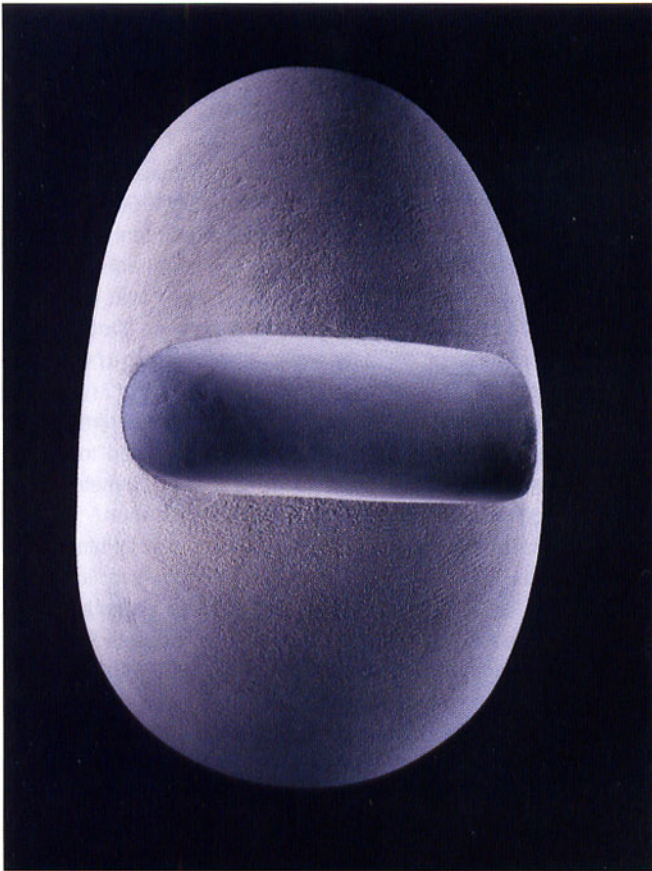
Upon his return to Milan, Sottsass began working with the Italian ceramics company Bitossi. Art director Aldo Londi gave him the freedom to experiment, and Sottsass created unique pieces as well as small series. In a series of ceramic plates from 1959, Sottsass treated the surface as a canvas for painterly expression, applying the enamel glazes with loose, open brushwork in the manner of American Abstract Expressionism.

Sottsass was also inspired by the theories of Carl Jung, who proposed the idea of a collective unconscious: innate, shared human experiences that enable us to recognize archetypal forms. Sottsass began using these forms, such as the goblet, to deepen the meaning of his ceramic designs. "The shapes are simple," he wrote, "...large bowls, ancient bowls with very primeval colors or...goblets like the ones maybe used in Mycenae or in Galilee or in Ur...to drink water gushing from a spring."

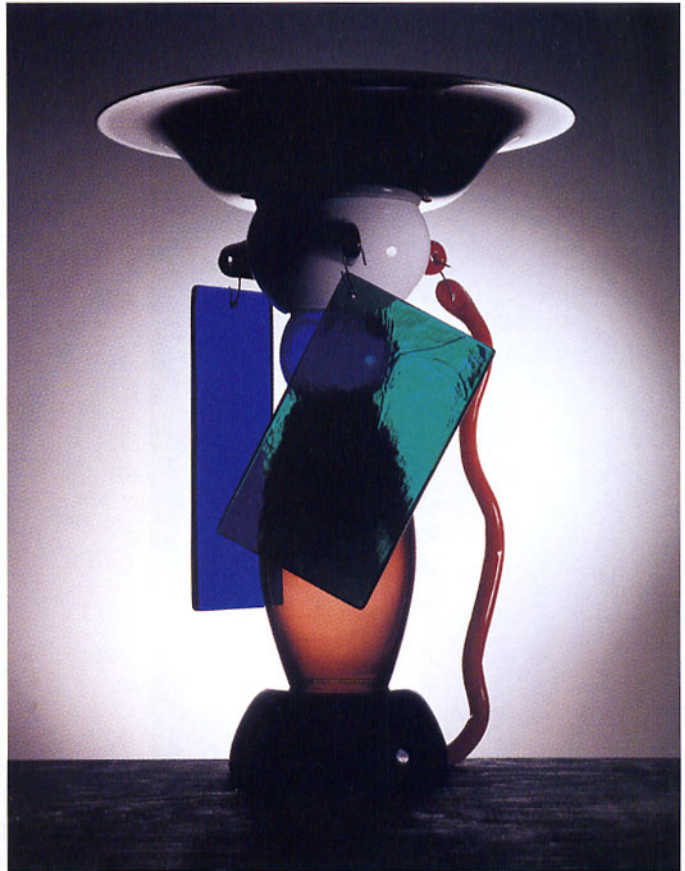
In spite of his highly artistic approach to design and his limited technical experience, in 1957 Sottsass was hired as the chief

Below Vases, 1955. Made by Rinnoel (Milan, Italy) for Raymor. Anodized and polished aluminum. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.





Above left Vase, 2003. Made by Bottega d'Arte Ceramica Gatti di Dante Servadei (Faenza, Italy). Edition of three. Ceramic, acrylic paint. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Above right Efra fruit bowl, 1986. Made by Toso Vetri d'Arte (Murano, Italy) for Memphis (Milan, Italy). Edition of seven. Glass. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

consultant designer for the new electronics division at Olivetti, Italy's premier manufacturer of office machines. The choice soon proved its merit: two years later Sottsass's first project, Italy's first commercially available mainframe computer, the *Elea 9003*, won the prestigious Compasso d'Oro award for outstanding industrial design, an honor that established his reputation internationally.

Sottsass approached the *Elea 9003* with a strategy that has since evolved into the well-known science of ergonomics. By closely observing the computer operators' motions and work habits, Sottsass detected a growing apprehension of new technology in the workplace. To overcome such anxieties, he designed entirely new forms, lowering the cabinet height so that the operators could see each other more easily, and devising a color-coded system to aid in the computer's operation.

Also in 1957, Sottsass accepted the position of art director for the new Italian furniture company Poltronova. He shared with its owner, Sergio Cammilli, an interest in combining art and design, and in encouraging creative expression over the bottom line. Their partnership soon made Poltronova an industry innovator. The company would manufacture all of Sottsass's furniture until the mid 1970s.

In 1961, a sojourn to India introduced Sottsass to its architecture

and antiquities, but what affected him most deeply was the people's relationship to their rich, decorative past, with art, religion, architecture and daily life effortlessly intertwined. Sottsass saw it as a model for how western society, with its consumer culture driven by "new" and "improved" products — especially in the United States — should relate to its own products, whether art or anonymous industrial objects. He began designing ceramics that symbolized Eastern cultural values and philosophies, aiming to provide not only functional but spiritual solutions to the pressures of daily life.

In 1962, while Sottsass lay hospitalized for a near-fatal illness, he conceived the "*Ceramiche delle tenebre*" (Ceramics of Darkness) series of vases, and shortly thereafter, a series of 100 plates entitled "*Offerte a Shiva*" (Offerings to Shiva). These pieces gave form to the despair that he experienced during his infirmity, and to the hope and joy of his recovery. Their leitmotif is the archetypal shape of the circle, suggesting lunar cycles and the deep spiritual connection between man and the mysteries of the cosmic order.

In the mid 1960s Sottsass traveled to the U.S. as an art correspondent for the Italian magazine *Domus*. The Pop and Minimalist art he saw there inspired him to cover austere, monumental wardrobes with brightly colored plastic laminate, until then typically associated

Left Wardrobe (or *Superbox*), 1968. Made by Poltronova (Agliana, Italy) Unique. Wood, plastic laminate. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

with kitchen and restaurant countertops. Sottsass laminated these one-of-a-kind *Superboxes*, manufactured by Poltronova in 1968, on all sides so that they could stand in the middle of a room as totemic objects.

Increasingly interested in conceiving environments, Sottsass next produced large-scale ceramic sculptures for a solo exhibition, "Landscape for a Fresh Planet," at the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, in 1969. *Altare: per il sacrificio della mia solitudine (prima che sia profanata dai raggi della politica)* (*Altar: for the Sacrifice of My Solitude [before It Is Desecrated by the Deceit of Politics]*) is a three-dimensional mandala of ovoid, green-glazed terra-cotta discs stacked to varying heights in concentric circles. More than 12 feet in diameter, these "mandala altars," he said, are "silent rooms for meditation."

In 1970, Sottsass envisioned a fiberglass equivalent of these terra-cotta mandalas: "1 mobile grigi" (The Gray Furniture) collection of chairs, a table, sofa, cabinet and lighting to outfit an entire home, made by Poltronova. The stepped forms and architectural scale refer to ancient pyramids and temples, as well as to 1920s Art Deco, and certain pieces radiate a mystical wash of light. Rather than emphasize the technological advancement of vacuum-formed fiberglass, however, Sottsass explored its emotional effects. "In a room one is asked to put as much as possible of the 'Gray furniture,'" he wrote, "to the point that the normal, 'cute,' square structure of the...room becomes almost, or totally, covered and destroyed. If this point is carefully reached, the inhabitant will feel himself practically suffocated by a gray, shiny, fiberglass plastic, geological slip; he will feel himself suffocated by roundish, inflated (forever) forms...of religious origin... completely isolated from everything which is outside the room, like being in the Benares boiling red Monkeys Temple..."

Even when Sottsass designed for mainstream manufacturers, his approach was highly conceptual. In 1970, his design for the now-iconic *Valentine* portable typewriter for Olivetti won a Compasso d'Oro award. With its catchy name, red hue, shiny plastic surface and well-orchestrated ad campaign, the *Valentine* bore all the qualities of Pop art: witty, sexy, gimmicky, mass-produced and aimed at youth culture. But Sottsass's initial concept for the *Valentine* was far more radical. He said in 1969 that it "was invented for use in any place except an office, so as not to remind anyone of monotonous working hours, but rather to keep amateur poets company on quiet Sundays in the country or to provide a highly colored object on a table in a studio apartment." Sottsass eliminated certain standard features, such as the bell that indicates the end of a line, to make it impractical for use as a business machine; the company restored the missing elements to the production model, however, and priced it much higher than Sottsass intended.

In 1972, architect and curator Emilio Ambasz organized the landmark exhibition "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, acknowledging that country's vital role in contemporary design. Invited, along with several other designers and collaboratives, to submit a conceptual environment, Sottsass produced a series of large, gray plastic boxes meant to be configured into habitable spaces, with built-in components for cooking, bathing and

dining. Sottsass asserted that he wanted to create an environment to which people would feel no attachment." The idea is to succeed in making furniture from which we feel so detached, so disinterested, and so uninvolved that it is of absolutely no importance to us. That is, the form is — at least in intention — designed so that after a time it fades away and disappears."

If the prosperous 1960s fostered the belief that design could improve the world, the faltering economy of the mid 1970s made it clear that these utopian proposals would never be realized. Aside from developing tableware with the Italian company Alessi,

including his now-ubiquitous stainless steel and crystal glass condiment set from 1978, a disenchanted Sottsass largely withdrew from the design profession, letting his relationships with Olivetti and Poltronova wane. He began to take a more active role in the social criticism of design, becoming involved with the "anti-design" and "radical architecture" movements that emerged in Italy in the late 1960s.

In 1973 Sottsass co-founded Global Tools, a short-lived collaboration with studios in several Italian cities, conceived as a "counter-school of architecture and design" to encourage creativity.

Below *Altare: per il sacrificio della mia solitudine (prima che sia profanata dai raggiri della politica)* (Altar: For the Sacrifice of My Solitude [before It Is Desecrated by the Deceit of Politics]), 1968. From the exhibition "Landscape for a Fresh Planet," Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1969. Made by Bitossi (Montelupo Fiorentino, Italy). Unique. Glazed earthenware. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Photo © Erik and Petra Høemeg; Courtesy The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Above Vase from the "Ceramiche delle tenebre" (Ceramics of Darkness) series, 1963. Made by Bitossi (Montelupo Fiorentino, Italy). Unique. Glazed earthenware. Collection Bischofberger, Zurich.

Opposite top *Lapislazzuli* teapot, from the "Indian Memory" series, 1972. Made by Alessio Sarri (Sesto Fiorentino, Italy). Glazed ceramic. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

Opposite bottom Condiment set, 1978. Made by Alessi (Crusinallo, Italy). Stainless steel, lead crystal. LACMA, gift of Alessi.

In 1979, he joined the Milanese anti-design collaborative Studio Alchymia, founded by Alessandro Guerriero, which questioned doctrines of good taste through the unconventional use of color, form, surface pattern, kitsch references and combinations of design languages.

However, Sottsass's desire to market Studio Alchymia designs clashed with Guerriero's interest in producing exhibitions as purely artistic, cultural exploration. In 1980 he established his own firm, Sottsass Associati, with four young partners — Aldo Cibic, Marco Zanini, Marco Marabelli, and Matteo Thun — focusing on product, graphic and interior design.

Later that year, Sottsass began discussions about designing a new line of furniture with Renzo Brugola, his former furniture craftsman from Poltrona, and Mario and Brunella Godani, the owners of Design Gallery Milano. The idea evolved into the Memphis design group. Rather than creating an alternative to popular contemporary design, Sottsass now sought to compete in the mainstream market with provocative mass-produced pieces. According to Barbara Radice, a Memphis collaborator as well as Sottsass's biographer and author of the seminal book *Memphis: Research, Experiences, Results, Failures, and Successes of New Design* (1984), the group's name came about one cold winter evening in December 1980 as they excitedly discussed the project in Sottsass's living room, while smoking, drinking wine and listening to Bob Dylan's song *Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again*. Radice later wrote, "[S]ince nobody bothered to change the record, Bob Dylan went on howling 'the Memphis Blues Again' until Sottsass said, 'OK, let's call it Memphis,' and everybody thought it was a great name: Blues, Tennessee, rock'n'roll, American suburbs, and then Egypt, the Pharaohs' capital, the holy city of the god Ptah." All present that evening were architects, and all except Sottsass and Radice were under the age of 30.

The international group of architects and designers that contributed designs to Memphis over the years included Andrea Branzi, Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, Arata Isozaki, Terry Jones, Shiro Kuramata, Javier Mariscal, Alessandro Mendini, Paola Navone and Peter Shire. They represented a worldwide groundswell of a design ideology that Sottsass had been professing for years. "Memphis, which allows the surface to send more sensorial information and tries to separate the object from its schematic idea of functionalism, is an ironic approach to the modern notion of philosophical pureness," Sottsass said in 1989. Although Memphis had no official manifesto, its look is unmistakable: lively color and decorative patterns, unusual forms, combinations of traditional and industrial materials, and irony, humor, and self-reference — what Sottsass called a "semantic confusion." The playfulness of designs such as the *Carlton* room divider from 1981, with its Tinkertoy-like assembly of colorful plastic-laminated surfaces, belies its serious challenge to modernist rationalism. The first Memphis exhibition of 55 pieces of furniture, ceramics, lighting and clocks opened in Milan on September 18, 1981, with 2,500 people in

attendance. The media blitz that ensued took the design community by storm, elevated Sottsass to cult-figure status and made Memphis a resounding financial success.

In 1985, having succeeded in marketing his work on his own terms, Sottsass withdrew from Memphis at the height of its popularity, citing differences with company president and major shareholder Ernesto Gismondi. He returned to art gallery representation and limited edition designs, unveiling a new series of furniture at the BlumHelman Gallery in New York City in 1987.

"Now when I design I do so thinking about the galleries, about the design itself, not about the market...the market learns from me," Sottsass recently commented. "Not every project is business-oriented; there are physical projects that are experimental. Every time you make love, it's not that you want to make a child. You make love because you like making love."

The notoriety that Sottsass received with the success of Memphis brought him more projects that he developed through Sottsass Associati, including the interiors for the Esprit clothing company's corporate offices in Düsseldorf, Germany, and showrooms throughout Europe.

Sottsass also received his first architectural commissions since the

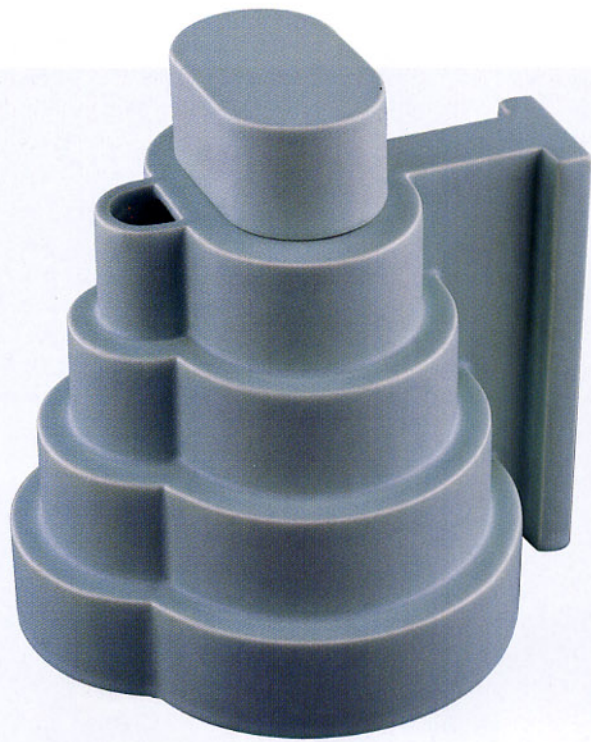


Photo © Erik and Petra Hesmerti: Courtesy The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands.



Photo © 2005 Museum Associates/LACMA.



Above *Pranzo aromatico* (Aromatic Lunch) table and *Elledue* (L2) chairs, from "I mobili grigi" (The Gray Furniture) collection, 1970. Made by Poltronova (Agliana, Italy). Limited production. Painted fiberglass. The Gallery Mourmans, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Left *Murmansk* fruit bowl, 1982. Made by Rossi & Arcandi (Montcello Conte Otto, Italy) for Memphis (Milan, Italy). Silver. Collection of Max Palevsky.



1960s, beginning with the design of a country house in Ridgeway, Colorado, in 1987. The blocks of color in red, yellow and green on the exterior demarcate individual rooms within, a design concept that he also used for his telephone from 1986 for the Enorme Corporation, in which colors indicate different functional components.

Many architectural commissions from around the world followed in the 1990s, including residences in Hawaii, Japan, and Switzerland, a golf club and resort in China and a housing development in Singapore.

The late 1980s and the 1990s heralded more gallery exhibitions for new collections of furniture, ceramics and glass. In 1994, Sottsass designed porcelain vases for the Manufacture