

This architect's radical works have blurred the boundaries between art and design

An influential figure of 20th-century design Ettore Sottsass created a body of work, spanning more than six decades, which are now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Devanshi Shah | July 24, 2017



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The Met Breuer's exhibition, **'Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical'** is an attempt to portray the Italian architect and designer's illustrious career in a new light by presenting key works in a range of media, including architectural drawings, interiors, furniture, machines, ceramics, glass, jewellery, textiles and pattern, painting, and photography.

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Born in Innsbruck, Austria and educated in Turin, Italy, Sottsass established his studio in Milan in 1947. In this exhibition one can see his creative journey as his work evolved from functional arrangements to a more symbolic gestures. This shift in his ideology can be contributed in large part to his travels.

While in the US, he briefly worked with the designer, George Nelson's office. Later in 1961, he travelled to India, the impact of which is visible in his ceramic works "Ceramics of Darkness" (1963) and "Tantric Ceramics" (1968).

The exhibition highlights landmark projects, including five of the original industrial ceramic totems that borrow iconography from the "Menhir, Ziggurats, Stupas, Hydrants, and Gas Pumps" (1965–66) project displayed at the Galleria Sperone in 1967, alongside his subversive 'Superboxes' (1966).

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First displayed at MoMA's 1972 exhibition "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape", 'Environment' was designed as a conceptual prototype for a system of modular cabinets.

As was the trend at the time 'Environment' questioned social norms and proposed a sense of liberation from traditional architectural structures.

The totemic 'Carleton' room divider (1981) is meant to oppose the neatly ordered conventional bookcases in a stoic fashion. Sottsass justified the odd angles by emphasising that the books never stand straight anyway. The work embodies both pop and vernacular references that play with perceptions of high and low design.

The exhibition presents Sottsass's work in dialogue with ancient and the synchronous objects that influenced his practice, situating him within a broader design discourse.

Like in the 'Masters' section of the exhibition, a few of Sottsass's lesser known and later works are presented in a dialogue with pieces by four important 20th-century artists and designers; namely, Piet Mondrian, Jean Michel Frank, Gio Ponti, and Shiro Kuramata.

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Sottsass's writings, which often reference the objects that influenced him, appear throughout the exhibition. The inclusion of Frank's 'Low Table' (1983) and a few examples other examples are featured in the show as a means to illuminate how Sottsass diverged from his contemporaries to become a true design radical.

Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical is organized by Christian Larsen, Associate Curator of Modern Design and Decorative Arts in The Met's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art. On view from July 21 to October 8, at The Met Breuer, New York City.

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