

ART

This One Man Colored the 1980s in Pastel

A new exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art examines the career and influence of Ettore Sottsass, an industrial designer whose playful aesthetic influenced a generation.

By James Tarmy

July 24, 2017, 4:46 AM EDT

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Italian Architect Ettore Sottsass surrounded by some of his designs at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Sottsass is recognized as a major figure in architecture and design. His work is currently on exhibition until June 2006 at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores/Corbis via Getty Images) Photographer: J.Emilio Flores/Getty Images

Rarely has one person defined an epoch as completely as the architect and designer Ettore Sottsass did the late 1980s and early 1990s. The totems of the era—Cosby sweaters, swatch watches, neon rollerblades—can be traced directly to objects his design collective, the Memphis Group, unveiled at a Milan furniture fair in 1981.

This summer, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is taking on the task of not only reviving Sottsass’s reputation, but also introducing the world to his lesser-known early work. In an exhibition at the museum’s Breuer Building, Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical (July 21 through Oct. 8), visitors are taken on a tour of the chairs, computers, and sculpture that defined the designer’s world.

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The Olivetti Valentine portable typewriter, designed by Sottsass. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

By the 1970s, Sottsass had experimented with virtually every medium. He'd made wooden furniture, including a magnificent, Jenga-like assemblage of shelves and drawers, Tower Cabinet from 1962-1963, which the show puts on prominent display. That whimsical, almost impossible piece of furniture is contrasted with a side chair from 1972's "Synthesis 45" Office Furniture System. Olivetti manufactured the aluminum chair, with its cheerful yellow base and drab brown fabric, for corporate offices around the world.



An office chair designed by Sottsass for Olivetti. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art
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Only in the final room of the show do visitors encounter his Memphis Group designs, the most exciting objects in the exhibition. By the time he co-founded Memphis in 1981—the name is partially an homage to Bob Dylan’s song *Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again*—Sottsass was a major figure in his own industry, and the group had backing from manufacturing companies eager to appropriate his avant-garde imprimatur.

The result, unveiled at the famous *Salone de Mobile*, was a collection of 57 pieces ranging from a colorful, -primary-colored couch to a bookshelf made out of laminate-covered particle board. These objects were never intended for mass consumption; they were considered luxury items. They’re still for sale. After walking through the Met Breuer’s galleries, visitors can buy Memphis furniture in the gift shop downstairs, or go online, where one of Sottsass’ “Carlton” bookshelves is on sale for €13,145 (\$15,345).



A Carlton room divider/ bookshelf from 1981 designed by Sottsass. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The response to the Milan exposition was immediate: Sottsass and the rest of the group were lauded for mixing pop culture and high design, and—this won’t come as

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news to anyone who spent the early 1990s wearing bright pastels—their aesthetic soon permeated every corner of the globe. Esprit, the clothing company, for instance, commissioned Sottsass to design its geometric, wildly colorful showrooms.



A silver Murmansk fruit dish from 1982, by Sottsass. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Met curator Christian Larsen saddled himself with the additional challenge of pairing the 80-plus Sottsass works on display with another 80 or so objects by different artists, primarily drawn from the museum’s permanent collection. Some of these supplementary pieces had a direct influence on Sottsass’s practice: a 1910 mother of pearl inkstand by Josef Hoffmann, for instance, is paired in a vitrine with one of Sottsass’ early, Vienna Secession-inspired ceramics. Elsewhere, a neon-pink, green and black cabinet, *Omaggio 3* from 2007, is contrasted with an achingly beautiful geometric painting from 1921 by Piet Mondrian. Other pieces, though, feel more tangential. One room is dominated by Sottsass’ serene ceramic totems from the late 1960s. Why clutter them up with a group of marble stools, designed in 2017 by an unrelated company?

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Omaggio 3, a corian and wood design by Sottsass from 2007. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Sottsass' own work is so varied that delineating it from the crowd can be difficult. Everyone other than a true Sottsass scholar will be forced to peer at wall labels to identify what's what, which is perhaps too much interrogation for a casual visitor. Still, the show is ultimately a series of pushes and pulls, an exhibition in true dialogue with the art it showcases. It befits Sottsass's career, which was a string of experiments, a sequence of trials and errors that culminated in a global influence.

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