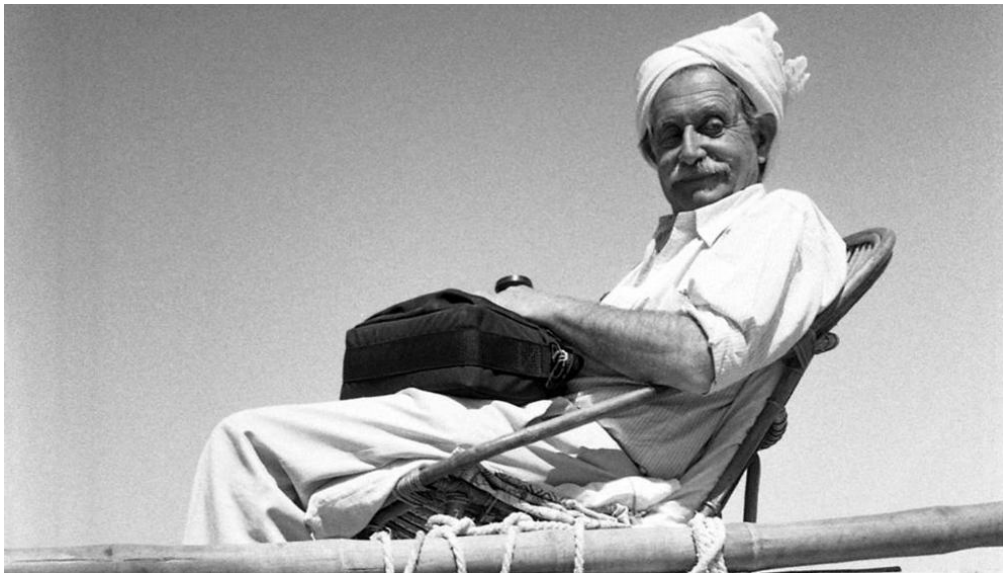


## Its Sottsass' world, and we're just living in it

How Turin provided fertile ground for the Italian artist Ettore Sottsass to establish Memphis - an 80s design movement that found a way into our homes and wardrobes



A photograph of Ettore Sottsass, whose works are now on view at The Met Breuer in New York (ANSA)

**TALIA ABBAS**  
TORINO

From squiggles and swirls, circles and triangles to clashing prints and whimsical textiles, the Austrian-born, Turin-educated Ettore Sottsass Jr. was a man of many hats. He was an architect by training, a designer by profession and an artist at heart.

In honor of the centenary of his birth this year, three exhibitions in Venice, Miami and New York celebrate one of the 20th century's most visionary and prolific designers, shedding light on the city that started it all. The latest, opening today at The Met Breuer in New York and titled "Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical," surveys Sottsass' six-decade long career, contextualizing his work -- architectural drawings, furniture, ceramics, glass, jewelry, textiles, painting, and photography -- with the objects that inspired him, and objects inspired by him.

Abbas, Talia. "Its Sottsass' world, and we're just living in it," *La Stampa*, July 17, 2017.

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Karl Lagerfeld, David Bowie and Sofia Coppola all count themselves as fans, and in the last decade, Memphis - the design movement Sottsass founded in 1980 - has reappeared and inspired creative directors at Valentino and Dior; Supreme skateboards, a home collection at West Elm.

Born in Innsbruck, Austria in 1917, Sottsass moved to Turin at the age 12. In university, he would follow in his father's footsteps and study architecture at the Politecnico di Torino. For a while Italy's most modern city, Turin proved to be seminal for the young Sottsass. It was here that he bonded with Luigi Spazzapan, the Italian artist of Slovenian descent. Spazzapan would become the most important influence in his student days, teaching him everything he knew about color, Deyan Sudjic wrote in his biography of the artist, "Ettore Sottsass: The Poetry of Things."

"Turin's roots were crucial in shaping Sottsass' way of thinking and creating," said Luca Massimo Barbero, director of the Istituto di Storia dell'Arte della Fondazione Giorgio Cini who curated an exhibition of glass works by the artist called "Ettore Sottsass: il vetro" (April 10 – July 30) at the Stanze del Vetro in Venice. "Turin was a source of intelligentsia — a think-tank — for artists, writers and collectors that took elements of culture and visual culture and paired them with an industrial design."

It was out of this sentiment that Memphis emerged. United under Sottsass' vision, the group favored bright colors and cheap materials. "The Memphis Group's main goal was to create objects that appealed to you on an emotional level," the Met Breuer curator Christian Larsen told *The Guardian*.

Sottsass was someone who intimately understood the emotional relationship people had with the things that they used. As Sudjic wrote, he imbued utilitarian objects with a sense of imagination and wonder, all the while playing with color, form and space to give materials deeper meaning.

"He was trained as a modernist, but he brought empathy, joy, surprise, wonder into his objects. He actually believed that colors were like words, they expressed emotions," Larsen said in an explanatory video for the museum.

"There are many aspects of 'Sottsass'," Marc Benda, founding partner of the Friedman Benda gallery, told *La Stampa* in an interview. New York-based gallery Friedman Benda dedicated its annual booth at Design Miami/Basel 2017 (which ran from June 13 - 18) to Sottsass, displaying a collection of rare, unseen works by the artist.

"Postwar Italy provided him with a very fertile ground, including the vibrant exchange between artists and architects or the open corporate culture with companies such as Olivetti,

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Poltronova, Alessi. However, I can't make myself think of Ettore Sottsass as an Italian artist. His father was Austrian, he traveled the world, he was in dialogue with a huge audience and colleagues from all continents. Both his outlook and his achievement completely transcend nationality or origin."

Sottsass worked briefly in New York in 1956 with George Nelson, traveled to India in 1961, before returning to Italy to design the Valentine typewriter for Olivetti in 1968 with the British designer Perry King. The Valentine typewriter demonstrates Sottsass' ability "to take a humble everyday object churned out in tens of thousands by factory workers and give it an identity," Sudjic wrote.

"I am very thrilled with the collection the Met Breuer is presenting because they have this tradition and worldwide sense of collecting that Sottsass naturally shares," Barbero said. Some pieces echoing the history of art come from Ancient Egypt and Peru, including a Moche Architectural Vessel from Peru ca. 400-600 AD.

Other works in the show include designs that appeared in the first Memphis collection of 1981, such as the angular "Carlton" room divider and the "Casablanca" sideboard. "Throughout the 80's, no advertising agency foyer was complete without at least one Memphis piece," wrote Horacio Silva in *The New York Times*. With "its gaudy, high-low mix of colors and star-crossed materials like plastic laminate and marble," Sottsass resisted the chrome and leather aesthetic of the 80s and instead paved the way with a Postmodern design that was as serious as it was playful.

Sottsass completed the Wolf House (1989) in Colorado and Milan's Malpensa airport (2000). Before his death in 2007, Sottsass Associati, the design consultancy he founded in the 60s, completed several postmodernist architectural projects.

"I think the American audience will love it because he's more than just a designer," Barbero said, suggesting that a takeaway one should have from the exhibit is to have fun with everything you do, but be naturally serious about having fun. "That's what made Sottsass very free but at the same time intellectually engaged."

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