

A Polymathic Italian Designer, With Muses and Friends

By ROBERTA SMITH JULY 26, 2017



“Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical” features six decades of his work and that of his contemporaries. Rear, a grove of ceramic totems, built by Sottsass from glazed cylinders. Front, Capitello Chair (1971), from Studio 65 (Franco Audrito and Piero Gatti). 2017 Ettore Sottsass/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Ettore Sottsass. You can’t always live comfortably with his eccentric furniture, but you can’t write the history of late 20th-century art without it. On the 100th anniversary of his birth and only a decade since his death in 2007, the Milanese maestro best known for his red Olivetti portable typewriter and as the guru of the revolutionary postmodern design group Memphis remains a magnificent irritant and an exemplar of originality.

Smith, Roberta. “A Polymathic Italian Designer, With Muses and Friends” *New York Times*, July 26, 2017.

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From left, a Mondrian painting; a Carlton Room Divider (1981) by Sottsass for Memphis; and his modular storage unit for Studio Alchymia (1979). The designer slyly merged painting, sculpture and furniture with the spirit of architecture.
2017 Ettore Sottsass/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Unsurprisingly, “Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical” at the Met Breuer has a combative air. You may argue your way through it, and also take issue with some of its contextual artworks — this show is nearly half non-Sottsass — but it is an invigorating, illuminating experience.



Early furniture designs by Sottsass include Tower Furniture (1960-63), in wood, paint and gold leaf, and the Commode column (circa 1965), made of laminated wood and painted steel.

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The largest Sottsass show staged in a New York museum, and one of a celebratory crop for the centenary, it provides a broad picture of the origins of this architect/designer and of Memphis itself that few are familiar with. It details his influences and inspirations with artifacts from Egyptian, Indian and other non-Western cultures; examples of European and American modernism, as well as designs by Sottsass's Memphis contemporaries (especially Peter Shire and Shiro Kuramata) and also some acolytes, misguided and not.



From Sottsass's early career: on the wall, enamel on copper plaques; below, from left, armchair by Koloman Moser and Josef Hoffmann (1903); plant stand by Otto Prutscher (1903); and a wood planter by Sottsass (1961).
2017 Ettore Sottsass/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

This effort has been organized seemingly on the fly by Christian Larsen, who arrived as the Met's associate curator of modern design and decorative arts only 18 months ago. Unusual for a show of this size and ambition, there is no catalog, although Mr. Larsen does his best to compensate with expert labels and several short, effective slide shows. But excepting architecture, this is a fairly complete Sottsass sampler: furniture, decorative objects, textiles, office machinery and jewelry and, of course, the idiosyncratic laminates so important to the indelible Memphis look. My favorite is Bacterio, a combination of little black squiggles on white that sheaths a 1979 proto-Memphis cabinet for Studio Alchymia and is completed by a windowed door, three fluorescent lights and lunar-module feet.

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Born in 1917 in Innsbruck, Austria, Sottsass teched in proximity to one of the founts of modernism as the devoted son of Ettore Sottsass Sr., an architect who trained in Vienna when its design ethic was steeped in the grids and geometries of Otto Wagner and his brilliant student Josef Hoffmann, a founder in 1903 of the Wiener Werkstätte. (Junior would also be inspired by the Bauhaus, modernism's second front.)



From left, two Hopi kachina figures, which inspired two blown-glass objects by Sottsass, from 2007. 2017 Ettore Sottsass/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

His father moved the family to Turin and after World War II, in Italy's frenzy of Marshall Plan rebuilding, father and son collaborated on designs for low-cost housing and schools that were inspired by the varied structures and materials of small Italian villages. Their work is postmodernism in embryo and a veritable template for the 1989 house in Ridgway, Colo., that Sottsass designed for the couple Daniel Wolf, an art collector and dealer, and Maya Lin, the architect, that is seen here in drawings and a slide show.

During his 60-year career, Sottsass Jr. designed office systems (including the shell of the Olivetti mainframe computer, from 1957 to 1959) and systems for simplified living, as well, that were intended to discourage consumption. His Superbox, for example, designed in 1966, was an outhouse-proportioned wardrobe with a surface of plastic laminates of the buyer's choice — had it been produced. It stands out from the wall like one of Anne Truitt's painted Minimalist plinths. Complete with its own pedestal that ignored the Minimalist practice, while also complicating its use, it was intended to hold all your carefully winnowed belongings. His experimental Environment units similarly compressed the basic household functions (cooking, sleeping, bathing) into mobile modular cabinets that would link together for moving. At least in theory. They never got

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beyond the maquette stage and are present here only in a 1972 film that Sottsass made with Massimo Magri, and two excellent drawings.



Tenebre (Darkness), a series of ceramic vases by Sottsass.
2017 Ettore Sottsass/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

But he also had an obsession with handcrafted glass and especially ceramics, fed by his many trips to India. A grove of Sottsass's looming ceramic totems, built from cylinders glazed in many colors, are in a gallery painted marigold yellow, alongside tiny Indian stupas with similarly stacked structures. The remaining Sottsass ceramics here mostly lose out to the antiquities, except for the more delicate, Deco-like black-and-silver vases of the Tenebre (Darkness) series from 1963.

Initially a devotee of modernism, Sottsass designed one of its postwar classics: the Olivetti manual typewriter of 1968, intoxicatingly bright and enshrined in the Museum of Modern Art by 1969. Its form-follows-function economy is articulated by its magnetic color, but it was eventually cursed by its creator for overshadowing his other achievements (in an expletive probably never before seen in a Met wall text).

But Memphis seems to have been in Sottsass's blood. Even before the Olivetti typewriter, he was intimating a sundering of modernism's form-function credo, as evidenced by two towerlike cabinets from the early- and mid-1960s in the show's first, dense gallery. Enlarging the Viennese grid seen nearby in designs by Hoffmann and Kolomon Moser, they attest to an inborn preference for bright color, combined materials and bold, subtly humorous scale.

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Sottsass's apostasy culminated in the exuberant wildness of his Memphis furniture, with its angled forms, Fiestaaware hues, enlarged faux-wood grains and startling modern laminates. The design group took its name from the cities in Tennessee and ancient Egypt and the Bob Dylan song "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again," which played repeatedly during its first meeting in 1981. Later that year, Memphis caused a furor at the annual Salone del Mobile, Milan's revered Italian furniture fair, unapologetically infecting design with postmodernism's skeptical mixing of styles, symbols and emotional content. Karl Lagerfeld bought many of the Memphis prototypes for his Monaco apartment and — well, the rest is history. (The pieces ultimately were priced too high for average consumers and became symbols of '80s excess.) For better and for worse, Sottsass's influence still ripples through contemporary design.

The Met's insistence on mixing and matching, always pushing the relevance of its vast holdings to more contemporary developments, may become a tick. (It certainly diluted the recent show of Marsden Hartley's Maine paintings.) Mr. Larsen's add-ons here are usually effective and they point up a strength of this tactic: singling out historical works you might otherwise have missed in the flow of the collection galleries, like the terrific little painted-wood reliquary from New Kingdom Egypt that resembles a Romanesque chapel.

Some add-ons feel superfluous, including overexposed works by Roy Lichtenstein and Frank Stella. The Met's exceptional 1964 canvas by the Abstract Expressionist Adolph Gottlieb serves mostly to make the show's single Sottsass painting look bad. Some indication of Sottsass Sr.'s work, or his collaborations with his son, seem in order, as does the inclusion of relevant non-Memphis legends like Joe Colombo and Gaetano Pesce.

Mr. Larsen has some revelatory decoy maneuvers. A black-and-white cane armchair from 1903 by Hoffmann and Moser is accompanied by what initially appears to be a Werkstätte oddity but is actually a wood planter that Sottsass designed in 1961, more straightforward and less refined. One of the best juxtapositions is a vitrine that alternates three Sottsass glass objects with three kachina figures by unrecorded Hopi artists whose colorful geometric forms clearly relate. And the kachinas come racing back to mind in one of the high points in the show's final gallery: the akimbo, symmetrical semaphore of Sottsass's Carlton Room Divider, a standout from the 1981 Milan furniture fair. Here Sottsass, as in his other Memphis pieces, achieves a new friction between form and function, while slyly merging painting, sculpture and furniture with the spirit of architecture.

The not-always-pertinent non-Sottsass material means that this exhibition sometimes feels padded. Sottsass could easily have filled the space at the Met Breuer if there had been more lead time. Nonetheless, it provides an invaluable introduction to his complex, resonating achievement.

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