

Vitra celebrates Ettore Sottsass' legacy as a design rebel, poet, and photographer

DESIGN / 20 JUL 2017 / BY ALI MORRIS



Halo click table lamp, 1988, produced by Philips, and 'Tahiti' table lamp, 1981, Produced by Memphis. *Photography: Jürgen Hans*

Exhibitions documenting the life and work of Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007) abound this year as galleries and museums— such as The Met and Le Stanze del Vetro — celebrate what would have been the influential Austro-Italian designer's 100th birthday. One of the latest surveys comes courtesy of furniture manufacturing megalith Vitra, which recently opened 'Ettore Sottsass – Rebel and Poet' at its Basel campus in Switzerland.

Located in the new Herzog & de Meuron-designed Schaudapot space, the exhibition sees the family-owned brand draw from its own archives to form a showcase of approximately 30 of Sottsass' furniture designs, consumer products, as well as numerous photographs and writings. The exhibition, Vitra says, 'pays tribute to an extraordinary designer who did not regard form and function as constraints, but rather viewed design as an opportunity to explore the nature of human existence'.

Morris, Ali. "Vitra celebrates Ettore Sottsass' legacy as a design rebel, poet, and photographer," *Wallpaper**, July 20, 2017.

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Vich, from the series 'Metafore', 1973. Photography: Ettore Sottsass. Courtesy of Studio Ettore Sottsass

Supplemented by excerpts from Sottsass' poetic and literary texts, as well as photographs from the 'Metafore' series (1972-1979), where Sottsass reveals his thoughts on fundamental design issues, the exhibition tracks the unconventional designer's development, and demonstrates how he succeeded in challenging the established tastes of the middle class throughout his career.

His collaborations with furniture manufacturer Poltronova and office equipment manufacturer Olivetti resulted in bold, rule-breaking designs that demonstrate his early love of vivid colours and distinctive structures. His 'Califfo' sofa (1964) for Poltronova is among the exhibited works, as is his pillar box red 'Valentine' typewriter (1969) for Olivetti.

In the 1970s, Sottsass took on various roles: as a participant in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' (1972); as a central figure of the design initiative Global Tools (1973-1975); and as a member of the design collective Alchimia (1976-1980), when he created the characterful 'Seggiolina da Pranzo' (1979-80) – one the 30 showcased pieces.

However, Sottsass is perhaps best remembered as the leading figure of the 1980s design collective Memphis, where he created some of his most distinctive work. Inspired by pop culture and liberated from a functionalist design approach, it was during this time that Sottsass created the 'Carlton' bookcase (1981), the lamps 'Ashoka' (1981) 'Tahiti' (1981), and the 'Tartar' table (1985).

Running until 24 September, Vitra's exhibition serves as an insightful tribute to this 20th-century designer, rebel and poet, whose legacy continues to enrich our everyday lives.

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