

Definitive Design

7 creatives on Ettore Sottsass, the genius who designed the '80s

Written by
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In the 1980s and early 1990s, garish swirling graphics and colorful geometric shapes ruled American TV screens, department stores and high school playgrounds. From Fisher Price toys to the opening credits of "Saved by the Bell," the era's designers carved out a distinct day-glo look that is an unmistakable product of its time. But they were all taking cues from one radical Italian designer and architect: Ettore Sottsass.

Sottsass' short-lived collective, Memphis, was made up of about two dozen Italian creatives. As well as attracting the attention of high-profile collectors, including Karl Lagerfeld and David Bowie, the group's wildly stacked blocks and zig-zag patterns inspired the mainstream designers who defined the aesthetic of an optimistic age.

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A 'renaissance' figure

But while Sottsass is best known for his work with Memphis, he spent just six years of his seven-decade career in the collective. By the time he formed the group in 1981, the Austrian-born Italian (then aged 64) had already traveled Europe with Allen Ginsberg, photographed Picasso and Hemingway, built a postmodern New York flagship store for the fashion brand Fiorucci, and helped design some of Silicon Valley's earliest computers.

His influence touched the farthest reaches of the design world, inspiring generations of young designers from across many disciplines, according to Hans Ulrich Obrist, artistic director of London's Serpentine Galleries, who describes Sottsass as a "renaissance figure."

"He was not just an industrial designer or an architect. He worked in ceramics, paintings, jewelry and interior design, as well as photography and writing. He was also the editor and publisher of his own magazine," said Obrist, a friend of Sottsass' for more than 10 years before the designer's death in 2007.

"It's common for people who make a great contribution in one field to go into different fields. But it's very rare for people to make amazing contributions to entirely different fields. He was unique."

To mark the 100th anniversary of Sottsass' birth, Le Stanze del Vetro museum in Venice exhibited more than 200 of his glass works earlier this year. A major retrospective of Sottsass' work -- from both before and after his time with Memphis -- will be on show until October at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's new design-focused sister venue, the Met Breuer.

Here, we hear about Sottsass' work and legacy from some of the design industry figures who knew -- and were inspired by -- the Italian designer and his collective.

7. Misha Kahn

Misha Kahn is a Brooklyn-based furniture designer who said that he wanted his latest collection "to do Memphis as if it was about Memphis, Tennessee."

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Lavumisa (2015), by Misha Kahn in collaboration with Gone Rural. Credit: Misha Khan/Friedman Benda

I remember discovering (Sottsass') work in college and being very influenced by its spirit. I think I was more inspired by his willingness to swim upstream against conventional taste than his visual language. I love the Carlton bookshelf -- it's sort of anthropomorphic and feels like a dance party, which isn't often something you'd say about a bookshelf.

The shapes and colors of my Lavumisa chandelier were really Sottsass-inspired. (I designed it) at the height of a Memphis revival, and I felt like I wanted to introduce some natural materials to the mix to see how it felt.



"Carlton Room Divider" (1981), by Ettore Sottsass. Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Studio Ettore Sottsass Srl

Misha recommends: the Carlton Shelf

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