



Rose, Julian. "Ettore Sottsass," *Artforum*, January 2016.
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Ettore Sottsass

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In a letter from 1987, no less a towering figure of twentieth-century design than Aldo Rossi credited his compatriot Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007) with “the destruction of established architecture.” The establishment that Rossi was referring to was modernism, or what Sottsass himself once described as the Bauhaus legacy of “functionalism, functionalism, functionalism,” that still lingered decades into the postwar era. And there is no question that throughout the course of his career, spanning well over half a century, Sottsass cemented a reputation as one of the most famous—even notorious—apostates of modernist orthodoxy. The furniture exhibited at the 1981 Milan Furniture Fair by the Memphis Group, which he had founded the previous year, made headlines for its explosion of vivid hues, vibrating patterns, and exuberant, Pop-inflected geometry. This emphasis on color, pattern, and surface over any tectonic system, material logic, or concept of utility definitively transgressed the core values of modern design—if also, in the opinion of more than one critic, the boundaries of good taste.

But Memphis was not such a radical departure for Sottsass himself, as he had long explored similar approaches in his ceramics, an eye-popping selection of which were on view at Friedman Benda’s recent exhibition “Ettore Sottsass: 1955–1969.” Throughout his career, the designer used these works for visual experimentation, focusing on their glazing, which seems to take on a life of its own, sliding across their smooth surfaces to produce arresting variations of pattern and color that seem largely unrelated to the forms underneath: Vases sport splashes of a lurid lime green that reappears in the palette of Memphis; flamboyant stripes climb the narrow necks of vessels, making them appear like clown socks.

But if these ceramics offered the clearest link to Sottsass’s best-known later work as well as the most explicit rebuff to modernism, the furniture on view was actually more subversive. Take a simple rectangular umbrella stand from 1960. At first glance, it, too, is all about surface effects—in this case, alternating bands of red and white. A closer look reveals that this pattern is, in fact, coincident with the object’s structure;

in a neat trick, the basket has been assembled from abutted lengths of painted square dowel, producing a vibrant visual reverberation almost by default. Yet this arrangement isn’t quite a structure after all, since each strip of wood seems to hover in space, with no visible attachment to its neighbors. In fact, the whole assembly is clamped together by a nearly invisible threaded rod passing through the dowels’ interior—a decidedly equivocal relationship between surface, pattern, and structure.

Sottsass used this same system for a nearby table from 1959. Its top is composed of separate slats of wood, their individuality reinforced by notched corners and a slight beveling that creates a distinct shadow line at each edge—fastened together by a metal rod running through them. Modernist furniture tends to elevate its structural frame to the status of a fetish, as in Marcel Breuer’s iconic tubular steel tables and chairs, in which graceful curves of gleaming chrome-plated steel become the main event, with the leather straps or wooden surfaces connecting the steel elements serving more to articulate their complex interpenetration than to provide a surface on which to sit or work. Functionalism in the modernist sense, after all, was about far more than mundane matters of use, seeking to elevate tectonics into a kind of ontology, as if a well-designed structure found its purest expression of function by simply holding itself up.

But the metal legs of Sottsass’s table never cohere into a frame. They, too, are individual elements that become part of the overall visual composition of the piece, each leg ending in a polished, square cap that protrudes through the wooden slats to lie flush with the tabletop, adding a luminous visual accent to its surface, fusing decoration and structure into an ambiguous mix. There is no postmodern didacticism here, no dogmatic rejection of rationalism or efficiency, simply a recognition that function is less an essential property of a thing than a range of interactions between user and object, encompassing everything from sitting to daydreaming—that function can also contain a bit of fantasy.

—Julian Rose



Ettore Sottsass,
Libreria (Library),
1965, lacquered wood,
walnut, brass, ceramic
vessels, 102 3/4 x
96 1/2 x 12 1/4".

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