

ON THE PROWL

Design and art dealer Marc Benda on ferreting out the distinctive.

BY BROOK MASON

Marc Benda has long had a penchant for design. When he first honed his eye on the influential founder of the Memphis Group, Ettore Sottsass,' quixotic chests, he was a mere five years old. Well, fast-forward 34 years and Benda has assembled the largest-ever exhibition devoted to that maestro's early oeuvre.

"This body of Sottsass' work has never before been seen in the States and it took a painstaking 10 years to assemble the exhibition," says Benda while seated in one of the designer's 1950 upholstered chairs, opposite a coffee table laden with a trio of black ceramic vessels that the designer dubbed his *Darkness* series. Benda reached out to private collectors globally for "Ettore Sottsass: 1955-1969," on view through October 17. "Barely a handful of important Ettore's objects from this period come up at auction in a single year," he adds.

The exhibition encapsulates Benda's approach, melding exacting scholarship with the discovery of never-before-seen historic design. "Sottsass' early period is especially noteworthy in that it solidifies his all-encompassing creative spirit across categories, including interiors, lighting, rugs, wall friezes, photography and art, and even his now-iconic red Olivetti Valentine typewriter," explains Benda, while he points out pivotal interiors in early copies of *DOMUS*.

Though there are some familiar objects and furniture in the show, expect some surprises as well, like an arresting sideboard lacquered with vertical red stripes and a series of glazed terracotta ceramics whose spare lines look as if they were created just yesterday. Also on view will be custom works for an Olivetti executive's home in Capri.

Proof of Benda's prowess in the collectible design world is his sophisticated client base, including Reed Krakoff. "Marc's a longtime friend and he's far more than a routine dealer and always ahead of the curve," says Krakoff. "He showed Ron Arad long before MoMA. Marc discovered Joris Laarman. While my collection may seem like it's simply peppered with routine examples by textbook names such as Marc Newson and the Campana Brothers, everything Marc has introduced to me epitomizes the height of a designer's style from a particular period," adds Krakoff, who just commissioned seating by Laarman based on his celebrated *Bone* series.

Looking back at his earliest exposure to design, Benda recalls a less than typical childhood where "more time was spent at flea markets than at the zoo." He snapped up all manner of Japanese stamps and Disney figures while his parents assembled an eclectic collection: "Ruhlmann, Art Moderne, Chinese blue and white porcelain were just some of the areas they focused on," says Benda. "I'm a hunter. I still discover."

What's different today is that Benda's expansive scope in pinpointing the next figures in the hallowed halls of art and design reaches from studios here in Europe to those in the Far East and South Africa. He's also expanding his reach with a new gallery, Albertz Benda, a joint partnership with Thorsten Albertz, located in the same building in Chelsea as Friedman Benda. The gallery's inaugural exhibition, "The Accidental Poet (The Avoidance of Everything) Bill Beckley—1968-1978," is on view through October 3.

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—Marc Benda



Ettore Sottsass' Mobile Barbarella, 1966

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