

The Pure and Personal Modernism of Ettore Sottsass: A Conversation with Jim Walrod

By *Stephanie Murg*

Photographed by *Clement Pascal*

“Decoration can be a state of mind, an unusual perception, a ritual whisper,” said Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), and in his capable hands, it could be all three at once. The architect and designer cut a singular path, infusing creative energies first stoked by Italy’s post-war rebuilding into a long career that blurred disciplines and decades, form and function. On the occasion of a new exhibition of Sottsass’s rarely seen early work at [Friedman Benda](#) gallery in New York, we sat down with design guru [Jim Walrod](#) to discuss objects, interiors, and the role of time in making modern icons.



“Every time the gallery has reached a milestone, we’ve always done a Sottsass show,” says Carole Hochman, director of Friedman Benda. “It’s sort of a signature of Marc [Benda], who was very close with Ettore toward the end of his life.” This exhibition, ten years in the making and the first in the Chelsea gallery’s newly configured space, includes unique ceramics, rare furniture and lighting, and vintage photographs never before seen in the United States. Pictured above: Sottsass’s *Canada Settee* upholstered seating (1959) and tables for Poltronova are joined by a selection of his ceramics—*Lava Vases* and *Lava Box*—also made in the late 1950s; on the wall is a brass mirror made for Santambrogio & De Berti.

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“This lighting fixture is amazing,” says Walrod of Sottsass’s 1957 *Ceiling Light*, which combines painted aluminum, acrylic, nylon wire, and brass. “It’s Arredoluce, and it’s one of the first experiments with using plastic in that way.” The clamshell-like form is suspended over a 1958 mirror made for Santambrogio & De Berti and *Califfo Settee*, a 1965 piece for Poltronova that is upholstered in acid green with hot pink stripes. At left, *Mobile Barbarella* (1966) for Poltronova.

The works in this new exhibition date from 1955 to 1969—quite early in Ettore Sottsass’s career—and indicate the exceptional diversity of his fields of activity. What stands out for you?

The purity of this work. With Sottsass, people always presume that there was a line of design that evolved from beginning to end, but there really wasn’t. You can see certain things, like the lines, certain shapes and forms, but he was a designer that definitely changed constantly. Everybody wants to connect this work to Memphis [the 1980s design movement founded by Sottsass], but I don’t see one thing that has anything to do with Memphis in this entire show. And that’s the importance of this story—that he was truly a modernist, and working through periods, and in the most advanced way working also very much within his time.

Is there a particular “breakthrough” project for him around this time?

The thing that’s incredible about Sottsass was that his first real big job in Italy was to work on the computer [a series of mainframes developed by Olivetti beginning in the 1950s]! That’s mind-boggling to me, because I don’t even know if he had decided to be a full-fledged designer by then, and that was his first job. In a lot of ways I relate to it, because my first job really was designing a hotel, and I didn’t even know how to draw a floor plan—or what a floor plan was. So I can’t imagine what it’s like to be thrown into the mix of Olivetti, which was one of the largest companies in Italy at that time and then being in charge of designing the housing for these early computers.

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As an architect and industrial designer, how is Sottsass approaching the design of a room at this point?

It's funny, because most of the pieces in this show were also the pieces that were in his house—the screens, the umbrella stands, the jardinières. He had a configuration of four or five tables just like this, and the sofas and chairs were in his apartment, which he published as “an apartment for a gentleman.” So he had a vision for himself that spread into the interiors he designed for clients. His corporate vision was intensely personal.

Sottsass wrote in 1955 that color “can arise and be in harmony with the imperatives of structure, without destroying it.” How would you describe his relationship to color?

His earliest experiments were to bring color into the home. He did umbrella stands that had polka dots on them in the early 1950s, and it was kind of an important thing to him, but if you look at the works here, it's not all multicolor layering like Memphis was. It's almost sedate to some degree.



A self-taught interior designer, Walrod began his creative career in the mid-1980s at Fiorucci—the New York department store designed by Sottsass, Andrea Branzi, and Franco Marabelliin—and moved on to open a series of influential furniture stores, including Form and Function, with partners Jack Feldman and Fred Schneider of the B-52s. He has since made a career of applying his appreciation and knowledge of furniture and design into the creation of unique commercial and residential spaces as well as exhibitions such as *Difficult*, on view through October 29th at [R & Company](#).

What do you make of the range of materials—terracotta, plastic, Formica, brass, rosewood?

In a way it's a breath of fresh air, because there are familiar materials and things that someone can make. Many of these pieces are held together by Allen screws—the same fittings you can find today at Ikea. Yet he also used exotic woods, which brings in another element. It's funny, because in Europe, almost every material that is used is tied to a political movement. If you used chrome at one point it was seen as being part of the Fascist movement, so you wouldn't use that going into the fifties, which is more utilitarian. Sottsass would have used brass. For him to use exotic woods and modernism in this way was extraordinary, and the prices of the furniture were not exorbitant.

What do you think distinguishes pieces like the chair you're sitting in [Sottsass's 1959 Canada Settee upholstered armchair, one of a pair at Friedman Benda] from those of other designers working around the same time?

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There's not so much of a difference between this chair and a George Nelson chair of that period, but it's the intent of it that makes it an Ettore Sottsass piece. It's the tiny things of watching the walnut frame go up around the side. Maybe a first-year design student would come in and associate it with the 1950s, but I don't. It lends itself to some of the experiments that continue on, using stripes and variation.

Are there parallels between this exhibition and the one you've organized at R & Company?

Almost everything in here at some point or another would have been damned or given away, or almost unappreciated, even up to about ten years ago. Just that this is now seen in an academic forum warms my heart—that someone has to engage with the green and pink sofa on a white base is absolutely amazing to me. If something like that was sitting in my house ten years ago, somebody would say, "Where did you get that ugly thing?" So that's why the show is really beautiful, and it's heartwarming that it's happening at the same time as mine is.



"The experimentation in ceramics up against the furniture pieces shows the complete duality of what his career was," says Walrod. Pictured above: Unique ceramic *Tenebre Vases* (1963) atop a striped sideboard (ca. 1960) and a trio of walnut and stained wood *Rocchetto* tables (1965); the furnishings were all made for Poltronova.

What is the organizing principle of your exhibition?

Sottsass was important and really the linchpin of where I started thinking about the show. It's about objects that are really important in the lineage of design history but at the same time were mocked completely during the period and are still pretty hard to approach, much like this work. This may seem really tame, but in 1970 I'm sure that nobody wanted any of this. What they wanted was the new work by Sottsass, so this was probably cast away as little experiments leading up to the contemporary work. And in a lot of ways the pieces in my show were that way. They were considered ugly. They were mocked. And thank God, because I got most of them cheap for that reason.

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