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On View: Contradictions of Designer-Architect Ettore Sottsass

Famed for a typewriter but also a maker of furniture, jewelry, textiles and ceramics



Ettore Sottsass' 'Carlton' Room Divider (1981). PHOTO: ETTORRE SOTTSASS

Cronin, Brenda. "On View: Contradictions of Designer-Architect Ettore Sottsass"
Street Journal, July 11, 2017.

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By *Brenda Cronin*

1 COMMENTS

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Ettore Sottsass' "Valentine" typewriter was famously attractive—and gave the designer lots of trouble. When creating it in the 1960s, Sottsass proposed leaving out the bell to signal the end of a line—as well as lowercase letters—to keep the machine sleek and inexpensive. The manufacturer, Italy's Olivetti, balked and Sottsass compromised. The two ended up with an irresistible scarlet typewriter that came to define Sottsass, much to his dismay.



Sottsass' Valentine portable typewriter, from 1968. PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTASS

The Valentine, along with dozens of other works, goes on display at the Met Breuer, part of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, on July 21. The exhibition, "Ettore Sottsass : Design Radical," will focus on the influential Italian designer, architect, painter, photographer, writer and editor who

remains largely unsung outside Europe.

The exhibition contains examples of Sottsass' furniture, jewelry, textiles, patterns and graphic design as well as his writing. Glass vases of swirls and squiggles in primary colors compete for attention with a red-and-yellow necklace of enameled metal and rubber. Objects can appear simple, such as a chair in shiny yellow aluminum and steel, or complex, such as a fruit dish elevated on jagged columns of silver.

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Sottsass, who was born in the Alpine city of Innsbruck, Austria, in 1917 and died in Milan in 2007, left a sprawling legacy marked by contradictions. Trained as an architect, he designed far more objects than houses. Both fascinated and repelled by mass production, he came up with assembly-line office equipment as well as unique ceramics and works in glass. Cherishing his independence, he resisted signing on as an in-house corporate designer. He drew inspiration from both East and West, laced his contemporary design with historical references and had a deeply serious nature at odds with his playful hallmarks such as bright colors, vivid patterns and glossy laminates.



'Mizar' Vase (1982). PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTSAASS

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Sottsass at times doubted himself in his early years, according to “Ettore Sottsass and the Poetry of Things,” a book by Deyan Sudjic, director of the Design Museum in London. Writing in 1980, Sottsass recalled that as a 30-year-old, “Sometimes I was happy, and sometimes I was desperate. Sometimes I thought I was a great talent, sometimes I thought I was a total idiot.”

Instead of offering a retrospective, the show puts Sottsass in the context of his creative influences. “You can’t present him as a lone genius in a vacuum,” said Christian Larsen, an associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Mr. Larsen organized the exhibit by stages in Sottsass’ work, starting with the 1950s, when he was crafting ceramics sold in art galleries and designing furniture. On display are some of the decorative ceramics that Sottsass based on ancient, simple forms such as fishing reels and spools of thread. “He is very poetic about ceramics,” Mr. Larsen said. “He’s really trying to find the roots of design.”

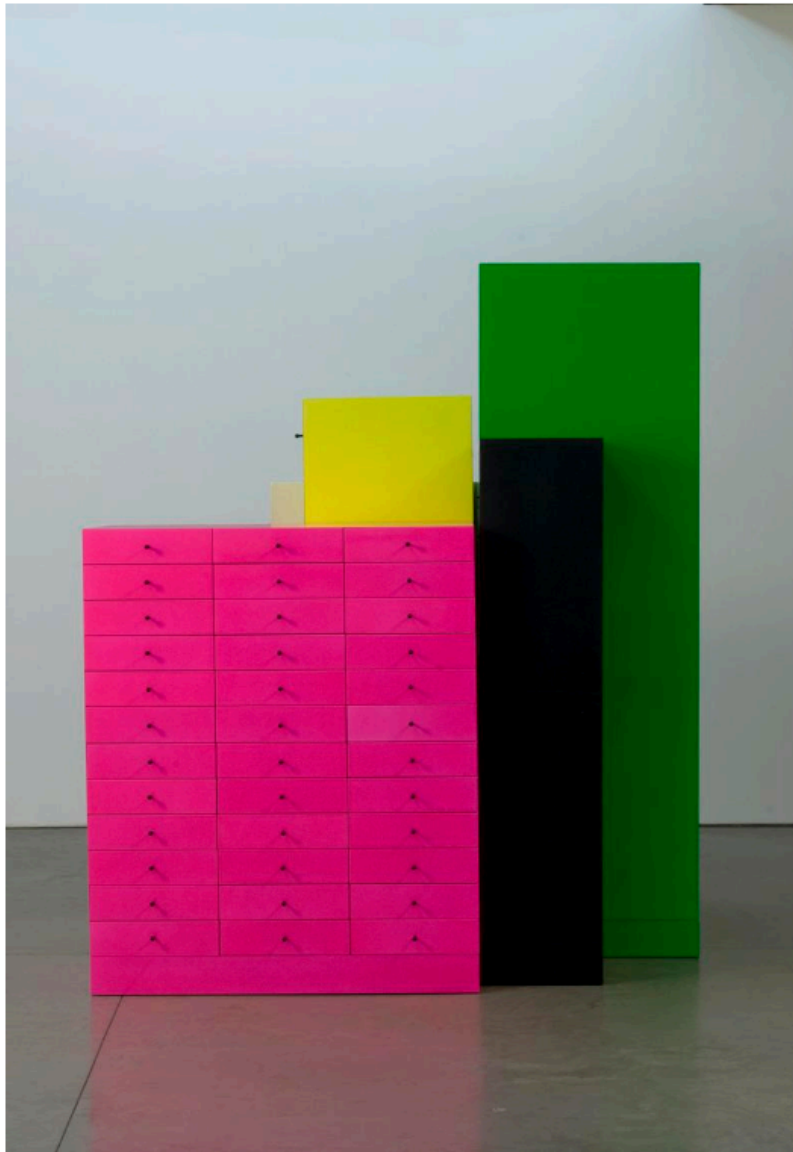
Mr. Larsen also tracked Sottsass’ ’60s and ’70s-era conceptual designs for living. Examples include the “Superbox,” a youth-oriented modular cabinet intended to hold life’s essentials for a mobile, carefree generation. The designer’s “Tower,” a 9-foot-plus piece of hybrid furniture with cabinets, drawers and adjustable shelves, dominates one room.

During a stint as a design consultant for Olivetti—where Sottsass was charged with transforming a room-size mainframe computer from forbidding to friendly—he drew on his time in the U.S. and India. Those travels got Sottsass thinking about how mass-produced goods could benefit individuals—but also lead to a sense of sameness and a culture of consumption.

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In the early 1980s, Sottsass and others formed the Memphis design collective. The group's name is said to have been inspired by the cities in Tennessee and ancient Egypt as well as by the song on the record player during many of the designers' conversations: Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again." Working in Milan with mostly younger creators, Sottsass set out to make furnishings that could be mass produced, many with striking colors and plastic laminate skins.



'Omaggio 3,' from 2007. PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTASS

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The ensemble's first collection of tables, lamps, clocks and other objects caused a sensation in 1981. On display at the Met Breuer is a Memphis exemplar, Sottsass' "Carlton" room divider, a multicolored shelf unit of wood and plastic laminate. The designer wanted such pieces to go beyond function and, thanks to their whimsical and disarming design, evoke a personal response, Mr. Larsen said. He added: "If the objects are emotional, if somehow they...stimulate a memory in you, that's what they are supposed to do."

Sottsass' Valentine typewriter still has a following. Last year one that had belonged to David Bowie fetched more than \$50,000 at [Sotheby's](#) in London, although many are auctioned for far less. Not long before Sottsass' death, in an interview with L.A. Weekly, the 88-year-old designer lamented, "I worked 60 years of my life, and it seems the only thing I did is this f—ing red machine."

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