Top dog
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Ettore Sottsass before Memphis
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King of canine conceptualism
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EARLY SHOW

A New York exhibition celebrates Sottsass’ pre-Memphis moves

PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL SHEA  WRITER: STEPHANIE MURG  PROCTOR: MICHAEL REYNOLDS

Looking back on his early experiments with ceramics, Ettore Sottsass recalled mucking about in the 1950s with crude Tuscan clay and cold overglaze enamels—materials that connected him to a tradition of wares 'made for eating pea soup and potatoes on the large wooden tables of convents in the Siennese hills.' The experience pulled him further away from modernism’s refined rationality and closer to humanity—vital yet fragile, alive but imperfect. I began to think that if there was a reason for designing objects,’ wrote the Italian architect and designer in *Domus,* ‘it was in one way or another to help people live.’ Some fruits of that epiphany are now going on display in the US for the first time in a major exhibition at the newly renovated Friedman Benda gallery in New York. Ten years in the making, the show serves up a rarely seen portion of Sottsass’ diverse output: ceramics, furniture, lighting and photographs from the early stages of his career. Previously only available to institutions, many of the approximately 100 works, which date from 1955 through to 1969, have never before been offered for sale. The show is the result of a decade of hunting down important collections of Sottsass’ work and homes he designed as well as a close collaboration with his estate, which decided several years ago to begin selling selected works, initially exclusively to museums. ‘We are looking for both institutional and private buyers with this exhibition,’ says Marc Benda, who founded the Manhattan gallery with Barry Friedman in 2007. ‘The show should serve to broaden the appreciation and connoisseurship of a discerning collecting audience, but also a wider public.’

Asummer maneuver has unified Friedman Benda’s Chelsea base, creating a single open space and adding two large windows that open to the street. The more compact arrangement brings a new intimacy to the gallery. ‘It was very much a conscious decision to make the space a bit smaller,’ explains Benda.>>

Nothing Sottsass did was unconsidered, from the way he dressed to how he chose the right pencil to draw with...

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
THREE ‘TANTRA’ VASES, 1968, ON A ‘LOTTO’ DINING TABLE IN ENAMELLED STEEL AND MARBLE, 1965; BENDA HOLDS A UNIQUE VASE CREATED BY SOTTASSI IN 1959;  