

con

MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

YOU DON'T SAVE
YOUR
SOUL
JUST PAINTING
EVERYTHING
IN
WHITE

E.S.

Ettore Sottsass
A life in colour

The biodesign revolution
Mario Botta's Turin church
Donald Judd on furniture

us work by UNStudio, Stuart Haygarth, Weiss/Manfredi and design fairs in Cologne, Paris and Stockholm

WORDS JUSTIN MCGUIRK
PORTRAITS RICHARD NICHOLSON

"Every night they
would come with
some tea and say,
'Tomorrow we will
kill you.'"



Things weren't
looking good for
Ettore Sottsass in
the autumn of 1943.>>

Right: Tigris vase, Memphis, 1983-5
Far right: Lucrèce vase, Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, 1994
Below: Aromatic Lunch table and L2 chairs, from The Grey Furniture Collection, Poltronova, 1970

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Valentine portable typewriter designed in collaboration with Perry A King, Olivetti, 1968; Carlton room divider, Memphis, 1991; Summa 19 electric calculator, Olivetti, 1970; Lapislazzuli teapot from the Indian Memory series, Alessio Sarri, 1972; side table, limited production for a private commission, 1947; Elea 9003 mainframe computer, Olivetti, 1958; Muramarik fruit bowl, Memphis, 1982; Altair vase, Memphis, 1982



The story of Italian design – the story of the reinvention of a nation after the Second World War, of modernism's full bloom and the postmodernist rebellion that followed – nearly lost one of its main protagonists before the first act. An Italian soldier captured by the Germans after Italy switched sides, Sottsass was being held prisoner in Sarajevo. What saved him was that, as an Austrian by birth, he spoke German, and so lived out the rest of the war in charge of the prison food store. Yes, he had a degree in architecture, but there was precious little promise then of the six-decade career to follow, or the fact that even as an 89-year-old he would still be watching journalists scribbling down his thoughts as Italy's most influential living designer.

"Memphis" is the word most people will associate with Sottsass. The design collective he founded in 1981 not only defined the look of that decade, **it was the loudest battle cry yet rattled against modernism – a multi-coloured, no-shapes-barred assault on the idea of functionalism and all it stood for.** Memphis trawled its postmodern net through history and pop culture, heaping references on top of each other. It was gutsy, it spawned some of the

most tasteless interior design ever but it showed genius. Sottsass was the enfant terrible of design – at the age of 64!

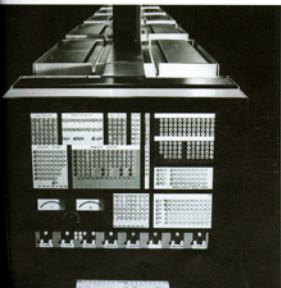
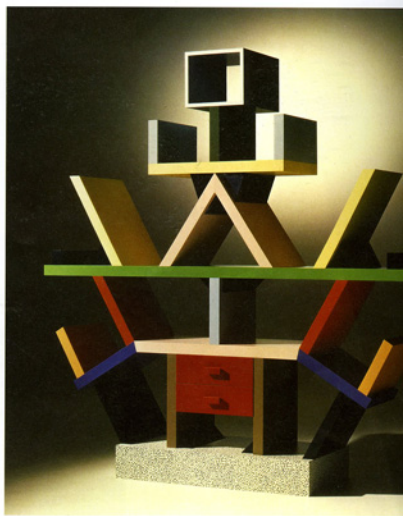
Today, Sottsass is slumped in a swivel chair in the Milan apartment he shares with his wife, Barbara Radice. He is listening to ambient music, lost in thought and at first site looking every one of his years. "How are you?" I ask him. "I am fine, but I cannot play football," comes the reply. With that joke he sheds at least a decade and reveals that his wits are still pin sharp. And as he turns back to his chair there's another glimpse of his zest: not many octogenarians can pull off – or even muster – a braided ponytail.

The walls of the apartment resemble a Memphis assemblage: one is bright green with a pink mantel, another flesh-toned with a white trim. I don't mention it – in fact, I don't mention Memphis until half way through the interview because I've heard that Sottsass is bored of being so heavily associated with what was essentially a blip, albeit a crucial one, in a long career. No, we start with the reason that brought me here, which is the Sottsass retrospective at the Design Museum later this month. "I was very honoured to be in that big exhibition in London," he says. Honoured but

also circumspect, because Sottsass makes no bones about what a retrospective at his age means. As he puts it, "It's already a funeral."

It is the early memories that Sottsass enjoys dwelling on. To hear him talk, you would assume that his awakening as a designer took place in New York in 1956, when he spent a month in the studio of the American designer George Nelson. Sottsass had already set up his own architecture practice in Milan and had even started designing his first pieces for ceramics company Bitossi, but an offer of \$25 a week from Nelson – "To me it looked like an immense sum of money" – was enough to draw him away. Sottsass insists he was exposed to a revolution. "I was very much impressed by America I must say, because it was clear that America was in the middle of an intellectual revolution – an industrial revolution particularly. Because in Italy we didn't have the idea of industry... [I was] discovering the reality of that revolution which before, to me, was lived through books or photographs. There was nothing here in Europe."

America was high on its industrial power and the culture was immediate and uncomplicated compared to home: "All the Europeans, they were intellectuals." Since Sottsass is probably





Above: Trono chair, designed in collaboration with Christopher Redfern, Segis, 2005

Above right: Cabinet No 5, The Gallery Mourmans, 2003
Opposite: Sottsass in his Milan apartment



the most intellectual designer alive (he's quite the philosopher) the appeal of America has a certain irony to it. But when he returned to Milan he embraced Italy's burgeoning industrial miracle, beginning a phase of his career that he would later react against. He became art director of furniture manufacturer Poltronova and started consulting for the electronics division of Olivetti. For the latter he designed a mainframe computer, the Elea 9003 (1957-8), and a decade later one of his most iconic objects, the Valentine typewriter.

The typewriter was at the same time the breakthrough, the high point and the beginning of the end of Sottsass' career as an industrial designer. Plastic, lightweight, a risqué red and sheathed in a sleek case, it was portable, affordable and desirable. In design terms it was the Apple iBook of its day, but it didn't sell as Olivetti hoped. For Sottsass – who was, even then, being pressured to make something to compete with cheap Chinese imports – the creative price of making it was too high. "They told me to design a very poor machine. So I said, OK, if this machine has to become a sort of biro of typewriters, I design a very popular machine. It was a mistake." He adds: "I said I didn't want to do any more consumerism

products, because it was clear that the consumerist attitude was quite dangerous in some ways."


This is the somewhat simplified version of the story. In fact, Sottsass did design a few other pieces for Olivetti, including a plastic office chair, and still makes mass-produced furniture and even kitchen utensils today. But the point is that his ideological shift from the values of industrial production was happening throughout the 1960s, when he was an important part of the Radical Design movement in Italy. A trip to India in 1961 had inspired an attitude to objects that was more ritualistic and emotive, less governed by the laws of commodification, and encouraged him to do limited-edition pieces.

"In India I found very strongly a sort of dimension of sacrality. Every object could become something so related to your life that it becomes [part of] your vision of la sacralità [the sacred]," says Sottsass. His English, although he frequently reverts to Italian, is impressively fluent. He is also endearingly aware that his rhetoric can sound pretentious. "These are big words, uh? But you understand what I mean. It's like with girls. Sometimes some girl is sacred to you – you don't know why but you know that there's something

more than in other situations."

Sottsass is an incurable romantic – not just because he likes to talk about women, clearly, but because of his belief in the emotional content of design, in the idea that our objects should be sacred to us. Romantics don't often lead the avant-garde – they tend to prefer the rearguard – but in using colours, forms and materials that snubbed the efficiency of the machine, that is what he was doing through the late 1960s and 70s. Some of this no doubt fed off his associations with the counterculture. He knew the Beat poets and was a close friend of Allen Ginsberg – at one point he breaks down at the memory of Ginsberg's death – and shared his obsession with India.

However, Sottsass was not a slash-and-burn anti-modernist. In fact, he shared the optimism and the faith in internationalism of the modernists, just not their rationalism. "I tried to find a non-rational solution to the revolution" – "the revolution" is his shorthand for the industrial society. "To try to find out how you could live in the revolution without being a machine."

A work such as the Lapislazzuli teapot (1972) evokes the ziggurat form of ancient Mesopotamia with art deco elegance. Why would you want to pour tea from a miniature Tower of Babel? 

石鏡公像
公溫厚和以
永磐穩一世
卿郡之侯型如
不自晦不能
之卷身其弟
不克享三釜之
志太平之暇遑
誼履於康寧其
人傳乎西江之
以其神永懷安
之降吳時其
眉眉窺是復
紀年以有景福
一齡也改
曾榮升題
宣勝有歌錄





Above left: Bird House, Lanaken, Belgium, 1996
Above: Temple for Erotic Experiences from The Planet as Festival series, hand-coloured lithograph, 1973
Left: Diabuenaga House, Hawaii, 1989-97



For Sottsass, that question presupposes that a teapot is a utilitarian object. If drinking tea is a ritualistic experience, as it is in many cultures – not least in Britain – then there is a contemplative dimension to it, and why not link that experience to our atavistic ambitions to find God? “Big words”, as Sottsass would say, but also, to use another of his favourite terms, “a possibility”.

Sottsass’ postmodernist tendencies came to a head in the late 1970s, when he joined Alessandro Mendini’s Studio Alchymia design group, which was introducing a figurative, highly referential dimension to furniture and product design, and then in 1981 when he formed Memphis. The name – famously inspired by a drunken night listening to Bob Dylan’s *Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again* – combined rock ‘n’ roll with ancient Egypt, and so epitomised a kind of pan-culturalism.

Memphis, which included the designers Michele de Lucchi, Marco Zanini, Aldo Cibic and even Michael Graves, among others, married popular culture with ancient history and high art, and revelled in symbolism and the unconventional use of materials. Sottsass’ *Murmansk fruitbowl* (1982) manages to

summon up an Aztec sacrificial altar and a Brancusi sculpture with the silver of Warhol’s *Factory* and the sheen of the space race. But Memphis pieces were more typically garishly colourful and patterned. Many of the objects, such as the Carlton room divider, were sculptures more than anything, tableaux of symbolic form and colour. They were infused with play and pleasure, like refined furniture for children. Surfaces, it seemed, could liberate you – or even jangle your nerves. Memphis dispatched conventional notions of good taste, but then, it was the Eighties.

Sottsass left Memphis in 1985 – he’d meant it to be a temporary movement, not a new dogma. He returned to architecture, which he hadn’t entirely given up, though he admits that often he was “running after ideas about architecture” and producing drawings that were “like masturbation” when he didn’t have the clients for the real thing. Commissions for houses and public projects followed, including the interior of Milan’s *Malpensa airport* in 2000.

Sottsass was a unique voice in 20th-century design. What designers today can we point to who are challenging the prevailing ideology of the age? If anything, it is a shame that he didn’t do more industrial design because it adds a

note of escapism and even contradiction to his output. He professed to want to reach people on an emotional level, but with his limited edition pieces he was only reaching the few. “That’s not my problem,” counters Sottsass. “Everybody tells me this. ‘You are elitist’. But a painter who sells in a gallery is not an elitist, he is a painter. He gives ideas about paintings; I am giving ideas about objects.”

He admits that his position “pushed” him into galleries, but there is certainly no wistfulness about not having touched the average household: **“A poet writes a poem – that does not mean that in every piazza they are singing that poem.”**

Today, Sottsass is still working. He oversees Sottsass Associati, founded in 1980, and now largely run by his associate, British designer Christopher Redfern. When he’s not working, though, his diversions are poetry and football – the latter he describes as “the only way out”.

He may not be able to make it to London for his retrospective, but he is philosophical about that, aware of the advantages of not having to be present for the endgame. “Most retrospectives, it’s your tomb,” he says. “That’s what I did for 50 years – what do I do now?”