

# Art in America

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## Ettore Sottsass at Barry Friedman

This comprehensive career overview of Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass focused on products introduced both prior to and following his founding in 1981 of Memphis, the well-known Milan-based collective at the vanguard of postmodern design. Born in Austria in 1917, Sottsass practiced in Milan in 1947, then briefly worked in the New York studios of modernist George Nelson before returning to Italy. From 1958 to 1970, he collaborated with Olivetti on office product design, in 1969 introducing the popular Valentine, a compact and elegant red plastic portable typewriter that soon entered the design collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. An example of the Valentine—a combination of sleek, modern good looks and function—rested quietly at the heart of this exhibition, "Ettore Sottsass: A Master Returns."

In 1956, Poltronova, a design firm located near Florence, employed Sottsass as art consultant. Few of the new products he produced were consistent with the modernism of the day. In 1969-70, he introduced "Mobili Grigio" (gray furniture), a radical group of vacuum-formed fiberglass furnishings with an Art Deco smoothness of line, but based on a technology employed in the fabrication of domestic appliances. Last exhibited in Milan in 1970, the "Mobili Grigio" furnishings here included a wedge-shaped *Corner Cabinet* with milky fiberglass lamps on either side, and the capacious *Two-Door Cabinet*, less than 6 feet high but more than 7 feet wide. They flanked a sleek bed, its built-in lamps an illuminated part of the headboard structure. A pair of *Shelving Units* were installed back-to-back near a pair of sconces and matched floor lamps shot through with electrified bands of pink, green and purple. Only a few examples of each were produced and fewer survive. The intense glossy gray of the furniture was relieved by a few simple pieces in striped laminates, including *Nefertiti Desk* (ca. 1970), *Brown and Black Superbox* clothes press (1968) and a tiered white-glazed vessel of the same period.

There was a wide array of colorful, stacked, rectilinear ceramic pieces—more object than composite—from 6 to 22 inches high, and forests of rakish, witty furnishings crafted from exotic woods to function as tables, cabinets and desks—high-end objects of desire. The three

wood columns of the altarlike *Vanity No. 9* (1996) rest on a plinth of maple and support a plateau surmounted by a small, black-lacquered wood tabernacle of a box and, in turn, by a small mirror inset into a screen of rare red-patterned wood from the Guyanas. Like the playful *Cabinet No. 50* (2003), formally related in voluptuous mass to a nearby Léger drawing, signature Sottsass objects rallied their various elements, tumbling and cantilevered, revealing and concealing.

—Edward Leffingwell



Left to right, Ettore Sottsass's *Vanity No. 9*, 1996 and *Bookcase No. 31*, 1994; at Barry Friedman.