

I.D.

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of emerging designers)*



Next Train to Memphis? Tracking the revival of the iconic '80s movement

Long denigrated for its clashing patterns, perishable particle-board components, impractically angled bookshelves, and associations with 1980s nouveaux riches (think Bette Midler in *Ruthless People*), Memphis is back, at least in the museum world. Half a dozen lauded exhibits at venues including London's Design Museum and LACMA, especially heavy in Ettore Sottsass material, have explored the short-lived postmodernist collective's flamboyant work. And this month, New York's Friedman Benda is inaugurating its new Chelsea gallery with a show devoted to Sottsass's latest adventures in cabinetmaking, combining aluminum, acrylic, and exotic veneers. But how "back" is Memphis, really, and could it actually rival mid-century modernism in the design marketplace? I.D. asked eight experts to weigh in. — EVE M. KAHN

James Zemaitis, head of the 20th-century decorative arts and design department, Sotheby's, New York
Verdict: Dead in the water

"Memphis is a commercial disaster at auction and on the secondary market. I've been saying that for years. It was an important moment for the development of design, but you can't live with it, and there's been absolutely no growth in collectors. The quality of most of the pieces is just crap, plastic laminate over plywood, and no one has any idea how many examples of each different design were produced."

Marco Tonizzo, assistant buyer, 10 Corso Como gallery, Milan
Verdict: Holding steady

"We sell re-editions of Memphis table and floor lamps, mainly by Sottsass, Michele De Lucchi, and Martine Bedin. There's been a lot of interest; it's been a fashion for several years. The pieces are very strange and particular—you have to have just the right setting for them. Our customers are typically middle-aged people and foreigners, working in the fashion or design fields."

Dave Alhadeff, owner, The Future Perfect, Brooklyn

Verdict: Potentially pistol hot

"The working title for my fall show about Memphis is 'Past Imperfect'—Memphis is what this store would have carried if it had been around in the '80s. You see a lot of veering toward the '80s in our culture: the power suits with big shoulders, the eclectic abundance of our interiors, the ironic inexpensive materials in furniture. I'm not 100 percent sure American buyers will embrace Memphis again, but when I show it to people in their 20s, they say, 'This stuff is dope.'"

Marc Benda, co-owner, Friedman Benda gallery, New York

Verdict: Hedge your bets

"The aesthetics of Memphis are back to some extent, but not all the works are. A lot of pieces represent an idea more than they're furniture meant to be used and to last, and I'm not interested in anything that was mass-produced. Our September show will feature only very limited editions by Sottsass. They have a strong presence, and art collectors today like to be challenged by their furniture."

Cristina Grajales, owner, Cristina Grajales gallery, New York
Verdict: Lukewarm buy recommendation

"Memphis is becoming more visible, but it will still take time for prices to really appreciate. Connoisseurship is just getting started, and some of the pieces are not easy to live with on a daily basis. But the prices for the post-war French and Italian pieces are so high now, Memphis may be the next frontier for investment. I hope I'm not being too vague."

Ronald T. Labaco, decorative arts curator, High Museum of Art, Atlanta
Verdict: Jump in

"Memphis is really on its way; now is the time to collect it. We have enough distance from the '80s—from that epitome of garish luxury that Memphis represented in *Ruthless People*—to be a little nostalgic. And there's a return everywhere in design to ornament and pattern. Memphis is certainly part of my acquisitions strategy for this museum. For now, the permanent collection here stops in 1959."

Marcus Tremonto, international senior specialist, Phillips de Pury & Company, New York

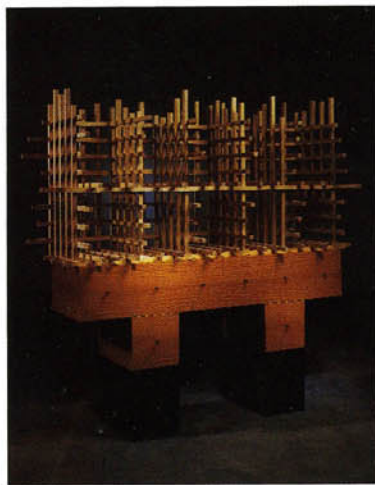
Verdict: The best is yet to come

"The market is definitely not there yet, but all the signs are there for it to happen. A whole new generation is getting interested, especially in the rarest pieces. There are still great one-offs out there, prototypes in the original buyers' collections, that haven't been seen for a long time. There's yet to be a true unearthing of what's out there, and the time is definitely ripe for that."

Daniela De Ponti, press officer, Zanotta, Milan

Verdict: Maintaining its cool

"In our Edizioni line that we started in 1984 there are pieces designed by designer/artists like Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini, and Riccardo Dalisi, and some are in numbered series for the collectors' market. These are sold regularly, and the sales have been more or less the same over the years. They were not designed due to some temporary trend; they are intended for a cultured audience, a niche market not bound by fashion."



clockwise from left
He's left Memphis behind:
Ettore Sottsass's new
collection of cabinets
for Friedman Benda
includes Cabinet nrs. 69,
78, and 68 (all 2006).