

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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‘Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical’ Review: A Cosmopolitan Creator

There was more to Sottsass than his signature red Valentine Portable Typewriter thanks to a lifetime of world travel in search of raw inspiration.



Ettore Sottsass's Cabinet No. 56 (2003) PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTASS

By *Julie V. Iovine*

July 25, 2017 5:13 p.m. ET

1 COMMENTS

New York

Iovine, Julie. “Ettore Sottsass Design Radical Review: A Cosmopolitan Creator” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2017.

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A household name in Europe, the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass —best known to Americans, if at all, for his fireplug-red Valentine Portable Typewriter (1968) for Olivetti and carnivalesque Memphis furnishings (1981-86)—was a Zelig with the universal dream complex of a Carl Jung.

Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical

*The Met Breuer
Through Oct. 8*

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Prodigiously creative as an industrial designer, ceramist, architect, magazine publisher, photographer, and designer of graphics, jewelry and interiors, Sottsass was a fixture on the European design scene from the postwar years in Italy through 2007, when he died at age 90. Along the way he sponged up cultural references both of the moment and from centuries past as he strove to invest his designs with the emotional impact and elemental clarity of a kiss.

“Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical,” at the Met Breuer, tries hard to put the designer in context with the ages. But in the process it does not allow his creative output to make its own case for enduring significance. Always colorful and confrontational, Sottsass’s designs range from the slightly inflated but still sleekly geometric to bulbous collages of form reminiscent of graphic comic strips, to accretions of elemental shapes approaching the archetypal.

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Sottsass's Valentine Portable Typewriter (1968) PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTASS

The show includes some 85 objects and drawings by Sottsass alongside about the same number of works made by other artists and from other times—including Egyptian blue faience from 1400 B.C. and Buddhist shrine figures from the seventh century, classics of the Wiener Werkstätte in Austria circa 1900, and modern and contemporary paintings by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Frank Stella. (Works by such talents of today as Studio Job and Oeuffice are intended to show how Sottsass continues to inspire, but many look more like products of a postmodernist revival.)

Arraying Sottsass's zigzag-shaped ceramics together with ceremonial Aztec burial pots and Tantric cosmology drawings is both revealing and intriguing. And the colored glass jars from the fourth to fifth century look like direct ancestors of his blown-glass vases from the 1980s. But there's a danger in placing, for instance, one of Donald Judd's stacked works next to Sottsass's pinstriped laminated nearly 7-foot-tall cabinet ("Superbox," c. 1970), where the former's mesmerizing precision is likely to upstage the latter's insouciant utilitarianism.

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Sottsass's Power Distributor Menhir (1967)
PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTASS

Presenting Sottsass's fervid imagination as having been fertilized by centuries of precedents is too simplistic. A manufacturing resurgence in postwar Italy—especially among fashion, design and furniture factories in the north— fueled new wealth as well as passionate ambivalence about American-style consumerism. Then came the '60s, churning with disenchantment and political disarray that in Italy disintegrated into chaotic violence. Many creative intellectuals withdrew into utopian theory, experiment, an embrace of American pop culture, and—for Sottsass especially—Eastern cultures and mysticism. That's the context that really informed Sottsass's restless imagination.

But it was world travel in search of raw inspiration that increasingly shaped his emotionally resonant forms. For decades he seemed to land wherever the talent and the

action was, from a brief stint in New York in the 1960s working for George Nelson, the influential midcentury-modern designer, to San Francisco, where he hung out with the poet Allen Ginsberg, who introduced him to Bob Dylan. Back East he participated in the landmark 1972 exhibition "Italy, the New Domestic Landscape" at the Museum of Modern Art, and along the way vacationed with Ernest Hemingway and visited Andy Warhol at the Factory. He followed the truth-seekers to India, returning there almost yearly, and then started going to China, where the ancient round houses stimulated new ideas for architecture in his final years. The show includes vivid snapshots of those travels taken by Sottsass and others, as well as a rivetingly weird film from the 1972 MoMA exhibition.

The last and largest gallery space focuses on Memphis, the company Sottsass co-founded with an international troupe of designer renegades intent on casting off the straitjacket of modernism (already quite threadbare) and injecting household objects with a life force more colorful, irreverent and emotionally charged than the dull mass-produced wares on the market. Described as the New International Style, the first Memphis collection of chairs, cabinets, lamps, jewelry and ceramics shown at a Milan gallery in September 1981 was an instant sensation, with some 2,500 people stampeding the opening. But by 1986 the group that had included the American architect Michael Graves and the Japanese artist designer Shiro Kuramata disbanded. Since then, Memphis has become a byword for expensive postmodernist collectibles.

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Sottsass's 'Murmansk' Fruit Dish (1982) PHOTO: ETTORE SOTTASS

Sottsass did not consider himself a postmodernist and was not trying to make objects holding witty repartee with history. His works for Memphis—particularly the famed Carlton room divider and bookcase (1981), with its Mondrian palette and akimbo-posturing shelves—may be better known, but it is his totemic columns from the 1960s, multicolored, cheerfully phallic and made of shiny industrial ceramic, that better address that impulse.

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In a show chockablock with interesting objects, ancient and contemporary, the gallery holding these sentinel columns speaks the most persuasively about Sottsass as an inimitable force of 20th-century design—one less concerned with design movements and style labels than with creating works that would touch modern lives with their reverberating authenticity.

—*Ms. Iovine reviews architecture for the Journal.*

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