

Andrea Branzi Remembers Ettore Sottsass

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Italian architect and designer Andrea Branzi, now 78, was a member of the Memphis Group founded by the revolutionary fellow professional, Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), in 1980. “Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical,” the exhibition at the Met Breuer, New York, through October 8, is a nod to the celebrated provocateur on his birth centenary. On the occasion, Branzi recalls his days with Sottsass, and why the time now is right to place him “on a stage more fit for a man of his great stature and eminence.”

The centenary of Ettore’s birth presents us with a dual opportunity: on one end, to uphold the hagiographic image of a great master we all know and treasure; on the other, to reveal the lesser known, and more tragic, side of this towering figure. These two aspects, however, are not unrelated; they are evidence of that very human quality at the core of his life and work.

One hundred years is a long time — and during those years, my life, too, was transformed.

From the moment we met at Poltronova in 1967 up until his death, Ettore and I talked

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together, ate together, traveled together —first with Nanda and later with Barbara. What bound us was not your typical friendship and familiarity, but a sense of conspiracy, a cultural militancy, founded on our shared belief that the world of design must be in constant flux, since the world itself was in constant flux, and we too had a hand in these changes.

Compared to the leading figures in Italian design, who were brought up on the rationalism of post-war Italy, Ettore was already an intellectual by the 1970s, with interests in America's Beat Generation, in Japan, India, the South Seas; and, like an anthropologist, he knew the meaning of great wealth and great poverty. With the bold joyfulness of his designs, he offered a refuge from the tragedy of human existence, from solitude, from the misery of mankind — a gift that eased the world's pain. This profound and multifaceted contribution is what separated Ettore from other, more self-absorbed and ego-driven designers. His creations were often interpreted as an unconscious "Land of Toys," but the real key to understanding his work is better found in Hieronymus Bosch (1453-1516) and in his lucid vision of the world's tragicomic fall — a world populated by thieves, magicians, perverts, demons, and madmen; a decaying world transformed into a carnival, a licentious fairground.

Like every true bourgeois, Ettore declared himself staunchly anti-bourgeois, with no patience for the social formalities of his privileged milieu. An elegant anarchist, equal parts snobbish and fascinating, he never quite found the right balance between accomplished artist and accomplished professional: I saw him cry for love, for donkeys, for a song, for the death of a friend. Because his country had fought on the wrong side of the War, he eradicated his mother tongue (German) from his life, speaking of the war, if ever, only through anecdotes, misunderstandings, brief escapades. His tenderness and fragile nature were the result of a successful life —refined, though filled with scars that he kept hidden through his openness to the strange. Perhaps this was his way of looking at the world: as an apple, round but rotten . . .It is my hope, on this centenary, that we do not paint too superficial an image of Ettore, all clear colors and clean lines, and so distance him further from our lives; Sottsass was nothing of the sort. Today is our chance, at last, to set him on a stage more fit for a man of his great stature and eminence.

— Andrea Branzi, July 2017. Translated from the Italian by Todd Portnowitz

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