Ettore Sottsass

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Ettore Sottsass (14 September 1917 – 31 December 2007) was an Italian architect and designer of the late 20th century. His body of designs included furniture, jewellery, glass, lighting and office machine design.

Early career

Sottsass was born September 14, 1917, in Innsbruck, Austria, and grew up in Milan, where his father was an architect.

He was educated at the Politecnico di Torino in Turin and graduated in 1939 with a degree in architecture. He served in the Italian military and spent much of World War II in a concentration camp in Yugoslavia. After returning home in 1947, he set up his own architectural and industrial design studio in Milan.

In 1959 Sottsass began working as a design consultant for Olivetti, designing office equipment, typewriters and furniture, despite his lack of technical knowledge. Sottsass was hired by Adriano Olivetti, the founder, to work alongside his son, Roberto. There Sottsass made his name as a designer who, through colour, form and styling, managed to bring office equipment into the realm of popular culture.[2] Sottsass, Mario Tchou, and Roberto Olivetti won the prestigious 1959 Compasso d’Oro with the Elea 9003, the first Italian mainframe computer.

Throughout the 1960s, Sottsass traveled in the US and India and designed more products for Olivetti culminating in the bright red plastic portable Valentine typewriter in 1969, which became a fashion accessory.[2] Sottsass described the Valentine as "a brio among typewriters." Compared with the typical drab typewriters of the day, the Valentine was more of a design statement item than an office machine.

While continuing to design for Olivetti in the 1960s, Sottsass developed a range of objects which were expressions of his personal experiences traveling in the United States and India.[3] These objects included large alter-like ceramic sculptures and his "Superboxes"; radical sculptural gestures presented within a context of consumer product, as conceptual statement.[4] Covered in bold and colorful, simulated custom laminates, they were precursors to Memphis, a movement which came more than a decade later.[5] Around this time Sottsass has said,

I didn’t want to do any more consumerist products, because it was clear that the consumerist attitude was quite dangerous.[6][7]
The feeling that his creativity was being stifled by corporate work is documented in his 1973 essay "When I was a Very Small Boy", and subsequently his work in the '70s was defined by experimental collaborations with younger designers such as Superstudio and Archizoom, culminating in the foundation of Memphis at the turn of the decade.

**Memphis Group**

In 1981, Sottsass and an international group of young architects and designers, came together to form the Memphis Group. A night of drinking and listening to Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again" gave the group its name. Memphis was launched with a collection of 40 pieces of furniture, ceramics, lighting, glass and textiles which featured fluorescent colors, slick surfaces, intentionally lop-sided shapes and squiggly laminate patterns.

The group's colourful, ironic pieces were considerably different from his earlier, more strictly modernist work, and that was hailed as one of the most characteristic examples of Post-modernism in design and the arts. Sottsass described Memphis in a 1986 Chicago Tribune article: "Memphis is like a very strong drug. You cannot take too much. I don't think anyone should put only Memphis around: It's like eating only cake." Memphis collection at: Memphis Design Collection.

**Other works**

As an industrial designer, his clients included Fiorucci, Esprit, the Italian furniture company Poltronova, Knoll International, and Alessi. As an architect, he designed the Mayer-Schwarz Gallery on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California, with its dramatic doorway made of irregular folds and jagged angles, and the home of David M. Kelley, designer of Apple's first computer mouse, in Woodside, California. In the mid-1990s he designed the sculpture garden and entry gates of the W. Keith and Janet Kellogg Gallery at the campus of Cal Poly Pomona. He collaborated with well known figures in the architecture and design field, including Aldo Cibic, James Irvine, Matteo Thun.

Sottsass had a vast body of work; furniture, jewellery, ceramics, glass, silver work, lighting, office machine design and buildings which inspired generations of architects and designers. In 2006 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held the first major museum survey exhibition of his work in the United States. A retrospective exhibition, *Ettore Sottsass: Work in Progress*, was held at the Design Museum in London in 2007. In 2009, the Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture in Maastricht presented a re-construction of a Sottsass' exhibition 'Miljö för a ny planet' (*Landscape for a new planet*), which took place in the National Museum in Stockholm in 1969.

**Bibliography**

- Barbara Radice, *Ettore Sottsass*, Electa, Milano, 1993
- M. Carboni (edited by), *Ettore Sottsass e Associati, Rizzoli*, Milano, 1999
- M. Carboni (edited by), *Sottsass: fotografie*, Electa, Napoli 2004
- M. Carboni (edited by), "Sottsass 700 disegni", Skirà Editore, Milano, 2005
- M. Carboni (edited by), "Sottsass '60/'70", Editions HYX, Orléans, 2006
References

[2] Designer who helped to make office equipment fashionable and challenged the standard notion of tasteful interiors (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article3118052.ece)

External links

• Sottsass design collection and other Memphis design (http://www.flickr.com/photos/memphis-milano/)
• A conversation with designer Ettore Sottsass (http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/1159), television interview with Charlie Rose, 29 November 2004, video.
• Emeco Nine-0 by Ettore Sottsass (http://www.emeco.net/article/content/collaborations/designers/sottsass.html)
• The Life and Times of Ettore Sottsass (http://www.emeco.net/article/content/emecocinema/processfilms/sottsass.html)
• Jennifer Kabat on Ettore Sottsass (http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/this_is_not_a_love_song/)
• Olivetti official site (http://www.olivetti.it/)
• Obituary in The Times, 2 January 2008 (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article3118052.ece)
• Design Museum Collection (http://designmuseum.org/design/ettore-sottsass)
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