

# Ettore Sottsass

## Magical thinking

11 October 2023 – 25 February 2024

**"I have always thought that design begins where refinements by rational processes end, and where refinements by magical processes begin."**

As a designer, architect and writer, Ettore Sottsass Jr. (1917-2007) was a precursor at every stage of his life. This exhibition underscores Sottsass's concept of «magical design», as opposed to rationalism, asserting an emotional experience of objects with reference to their ritualistic and symbolic presence.

The tour begins with his first works dating from the 1940s, inspired by artistic and architectural avant-gardes. Sustained by Oriental philosophy and ancestral cultures, the creation of ceramics with a "therapeutic function", which he began in 1956, has a lasting place in Sottsass's work. In 1958, he became consultant designer for the Olivetti company, in which he developed the first Italian computer, followed by many typewriters and office furniture.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of radical experimentation. Sottsass went beyond the scale of individual objects, designing domestic environments and monumental ceramics. He championed design as a manner of revolutionising architecture and weaving a new link between people and objects. In Milan in 1981, Ettore Sottsass founded the Memphis group whose iconoclastic approach showcased the sensory dimension of objects and the creative freedom of the designer.



Ayuntamiento  
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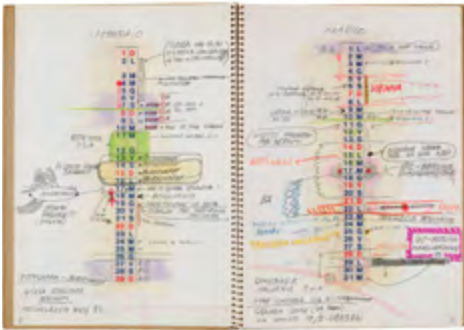
AGENCIA PÚBLICA PARA LA GESTIÓN DE  
LA CASA NATAL DE PABLO RUIZ PICASSO  
Y OTROS EQUIPAMIENTOS MUSEÍSTICOS  
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## Diaries

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The diaries enable us to reconstitute part of Ettore Sottsass' private life and contextualise important professional events. While he used existing diaries in the early years, Sottsass began to make them himself in 1974. As in diary 10 (1976), the months are represented using chronological friezes, which Sottsass then glued on the pages of drawing pads. On either side of these vertical timelines, he noted different events and meetings, which he made a point of enhancing with a multitude of coloured notes and drawings. From being a mere standard organizational item, the diary was transformed into a unique artistic object.

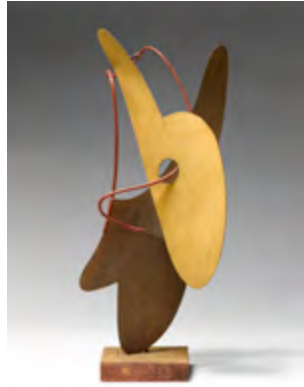


Diary-booknote, from January to end of 1976, 19 x 26 cm.  
Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM-CCI, Centre Pompidou.  
Ettore Sottsass archive.

## *Spatial model*, 1946-1947

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*Spatial model* is the only sculpture that remains from this period. Sottsass was marked by his Paris encounter with sculptor Antoine Pevsner. The title, *Spatial model*, evokes an architectural experiment with space. The use of unfinished industrial materials such as sheet metal and the concept of «spatial construction» place this work in the field of Constructivism. With its planes cutting through space and winding metal rod, *Spatial model* creates motion through the tension between stability and movement. The emphasis is on the spatial trajectory and the light captured by the work, which questions the materiality of space and time.



*Plastico spaziale* [Spatial Model], 1946-1947. Metal sheet, wire, wood, 53.3 x 17 x 18. 5 cm © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/ Georges Meguerditchian/Dist. RMN-GP

## *Grassotti Cabinet*, 1948-1949

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Made in 1949, the cabinet in the Turin apartment of Aldo Grassotti, the owner of aperitif brands, is structured by orthogonal planes and was made in the wake of Neoplasticism. Sottsass aimed to develop total spatial construction, beyond the limits of objects. Here, colour constructs the space. This cabinet of green lacquered wood with its brass frame was designed like a piece of architecture, a façade punctuated with volumes and voids. It also functions as a spatial partition, similar to the principles of Japanese architecture with which Sottsass was fascinated. The *Grassotti cabinet* features the same structural language as the architectural drawings he made during this period.



*Cabinet*, 1948-1949. Lacquered wood and brass, 250 x 200 x 50 cm  
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP

## *Offerta a Shiva* ceramics, 1964

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The *Offerta a Shiva* [Offering to Shiva] series is dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva, symbol of rebirth. For Sottsass it symbolised the return to life and to "light", following a period when he was ill. It came after the *Ceramiche delle Tenebre* (1963), which translated the dark side of his hospitalisation in Palo Alto, California. The *Offerta a Shiva* ceramic pieces thus mark victory over darkness. In accordance with traditional Indian usage, the formal vocabulary of this production is based on elementary geometry; the motifs represent simple figures in reference to the rhythms of the cosmos (points, triangles, squares, circles, lines). These plates were handmade with red clay. They were mainly designed for symbolic and ritual uses. Sottsass wished to present instruments of liberation with a therapeutic function rather than everyday objects.



*Offerta a Shiva* [Offering to Shiva] (no. 534), 1964. Plate. Painted red clay, 3.5 x 32 cm © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Audrey Laurans/Dist. RMN-GP



Advertising poster by Ettore Sottsass for the *Valentine* typewriter, 1969. 25 x 33 cm. Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM-CCI, Centre Pompidou. Ettore Sottsass archive.

## *Valentine* typewriter, 1969

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Having created several models of typewriters and calculators for the world of office technology, Ettore Sottsass and Perry King designed the *Valentine* portable typewriter destined for a broader public. A veritable industrial revolution, the *Valentine* was light and portable due to the injection-moulded plastic used for the structure and the carry case. The colours, red for the machine and yellow for the ink caps, reflect pop culture, as did the collages of images used for advertising campaign posters at the time. As an icon of the Olivetti company, the *Valentine* testifies to Sottsass's playful and sensory approach to producing industrial objects.

**"I then began to think that if there was a sense in making objects, it was that they would help people to live (...), in short I mean that if there could be a reason to design objects, it could be no other than to perform a kind of therapeutic action." (E. Sottsass)**

## Exhibition « Miljö för en ny planet » (Landscape for a new planet), 1969

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In 1969, Ettore Sottsass held a solo exhibition in the National Museum in Stockholm for which he designed monumental ceramics inspired by his trip to India and which resembled shamanic totems and primitive architectures. These works were presented alongside large-scale *Superboxes* in a contrast of organic and geometric forms. Sottsass described these works in exhibition catalogue as “exercises in concentration”, allowing everyone to create their own “most unexpected and most fantastical” environment. The exhibition testified to both the influence of Pop Art and oriental philosophy in the work of Sottsass.



« Miljö för en ny planet » exhibition view, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1969 © Centre Pompidou, Mnam-CCI/Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Ettore Sottsass archive. Photo: Alberto Fioravanti



*Progetto di architettura monumentale per la conservazione delle memorie nazionali – popolari*, [Design for a monumental building to conserve national-popular memories], 1976. Coloured gouache and Indian ink on thick paper, 47.2 x 34.5 cm © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP

## ***Metaphorical architectures***, 1976

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These architectural drawings were made for a collective exhibition in Bologna on radical architecture and, for Ettore Sottsass, constituted «manifestos» that rejected functionalism and broke free from all architectural codification to unleash unfettered imagination, heralding the nascent post-modernism. Here Sottsass undermines the monumentality of architecture. The buildings seem to come from a process of collage, with hybrid historical references and materials and advocating the parasitisation of surfaces or referencing vernacular architecture.

## ***Beverly*, 1981**

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*Beverly*, which was designed for the Memphis group exhibition in 1981, is one of Ettore Sottsass's emblematic works. It features bold polychromy and combines contrasting patterns that Sottsass designed, such as *Serpente*. The patterns cover the surface and integrate the object into its environment. Sottsass used laminates, considered to be working class, and faux wood, hybridising materials in a deliberately kitsch and ironic spirit. This iconoclastic language is combined with a form of ambivalence concerning the functional identity of the object. Somewhere between a buffet, shelf and console, *Beverly* escapes all typology, calling for a new lifestyle free from the banality of everyday life.



*Beverly*, 1981. Abet plastic laminates and briar veneer, multifold structure with external lighting, 228 x 175 x 49 cm  
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Service de la documentation photographique du MNAM/Dist. RMN-GP



*Bacterio* pattern by Ettore Sottsass for laminate coating, 1978. Manufacturer: Abet Laminati. Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM-CCI, Centre Pompidou. Ettore Sottsass archive.

## **Laminates, Abet Laminati, 1978**

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After experimenting with the use of laminates in the design of *Superboxes* in 1966, Ettore Sottsass developed a research, combining patterns and laminate. The patterns are like an archaeology of his visual culture, between personal reminiscences and historical references. The patterns he designed in the late 1970s, such as *Bacterio* and *Serpente*, refer to organic life and to the decorative patterns of Indian temples. The Abet Laminati company supported Sottsass over several decades as he carried out this research, in which the decorative surface merges with laminate. These decorative patterns would be one of the principal constitutional elements of the objects and fabrics designed by the Memphis group.

**"I am curious about other cultures. That's why I have travelled, read and looked around a lot. I have also taken many pictures to know, to see what is beyond the wall of my garden. To know broadens, it opens your visual horizons." (E. Sottsass)**



Portrait of Ettore Sottsass, 1984. Unknown photographer. Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM-CCI, Centre Pompidou. Ettore Sottsass archive.

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#### Mediation

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GAP and co

## Guided tours

The mediation team offers you guided tours to discover the works from the exhibition, in an active and sensitive way.

#### Individual tours

Visit in Spanish included in the price of the ticket. Inscription on the same day at the reception.

25 people maximum.

Wednesday at 6 pm

#### Groups

From a group of 25 people. In Spanish, English and French.

25 people maximum.

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## Information

### Opening hours

9.30 am to 8.00 pm, every day

Ticket offices close at 7:30 pm

The museum is closed on Tuesdays (except holidays and days before holidays), 1 January and 25 December

### Prices

Temporary exhibitions: €4,  
concessions: €2.50

Semi-permanent exhibitions: €7,  
concessions: €4

Semi-permanent and temporary  
exhibitions: €9, concessions: €5.50

### Contact

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