

FEATURE

# BACK TO MEMPHIS

Why a design school  
named after a Dylan  
song is looking cooler  
than ever

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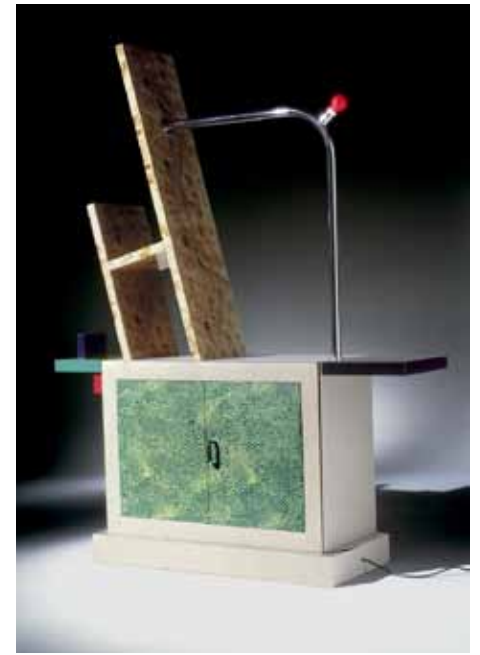
Emma Crichton-Miller



The Memphis group, that irreverent, joyful, plastic, brightly-coloured design movement, was born in a party mood in December 1980 at the Milan apartment of Ettore Sottsass. Then a venerable figure in Italian post-war design, Sottsass had gathered around him a group of young designers – Martine Bedin, Aldo Cibic, Michele De Lucchi, Matteo Thun and Marco Zanini – to brainstorm a new collection. This was to be called the New Design, a break with the tasteful orthodoxies of Italian modernism. But, according to writer Barbara Radice, the needle of Sottsass's record player stuck repeatedly on the last three words of Bob Dylan's 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again', and the name Memphis was seized upon.

By February 1981 the group, now including George Sowden and Nathalie du Pasquier, had produced more than 100

COVER: 'KRISTALL' TABLE BY MICHELE DE LUCCHI, 1981.  
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'CARLTON' DRESSER BY ETORRE SOTTASS, 1981; 'BEVERLEY' CABINET BY ETORRE SOTTASS, 1981; 'D'ANTIBES' CABINET BY GEORGE SOWDEN, 1981; 'FIRST' CHAIR BY MICHELE DE LUCCHI, 1983





drawings for furniture, lighting and textiles, pursuing with exaggerated bravura and post-modern freedom the experiments with materials, forms, colours and motifs begun earlier by Sottsass at Studio Alchymia. Inspired by Pop Art and 1950s kitsch, and avowedly political in its alliance with suburban taste, the first exhibition, in September 1981, marked a watershed in contemporary design.

ABOVE: GROUP PORTRAIT OF THE MEMPHIS DESIGNERS, 1981

There are plenty of celebrated iconic designs – trophy pieces for those lucky enough to own and live with them. Sottsass’s 1981 Beverly cabinet, with its green and yellow “snakeskin” laminate doors and brown “tortoiseshell” book shelves at a topsy-turvy angle, for example; Sowden’s 1981 Oberoi armchairs combining tomato-red upholstery with bright yellow or blue legs; and Bedin’s Super Lamp, a light like a primary-coloured child’s wooden hedgehog on wheels. By 1985, licence had been granted for designers such as Philippe Starck to dare and be damned, and Sottsass withdrew.

For its critics, Memphis was a daft episode of playfulness, producing amusing but flimsy furniture. But for the past ten years, and especially since the death of Sottsass in 2007, there has been renewed interest, and auction prices for authentic early works have risen. A 1981 model of Sottsass’s emblematic Carlton bookcase, for instance, fetched \$18,750 at Wright’s of Chicago in December 2010. Proof, then, that beautiful, valuable things can come out of a party spirit.

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