

‘The Memphis Group’

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Art in Review

By KEN JOHNSON

Postmodernism may mean different things to different people, but certainly one of its most memorable manifestations was that of the [Memphis Group](#), the wildly influential, much-debated Milan-based designer collective started by [Ettore Sottsass](#) in 1981. Featuring playfully eccentric bookcases, tables, chairs, vases, lamps and other domestic items mostly by Mr. Sottsass and including works by six other group members, this exhilarating pair of exhibitions is a must for students of 20th-century design.

Reacting to Modernism’s law that form follows function, Memphis designers embraced a shamelessly hedonistic, anti-rational aesthetic. They used wood-grain-patterned laminates, molded plastics, fiberglass and bright, confectionery colors along with natural materials like wood and marble. They whimsically combined styles, patterns and motifs from earlier times: ancient Egyptian and Greek architecture, Art Deco, Bauhaus and California Funk. With their confectionery colors and eccentric shapes, Memphis works — now stars at auction — are like cartoon versions of furniture.

Among nearly three dozen pieces at [Koenig & Clinton](#), Mr. Sottsass’s 1981 sideboard called “Casablanca” is emblematic of the Memphis spirit. Thick shelves stick out at different angles like blocky wings from the sides of a central vertical cabinet. Covered in red, yellow and black-and-white imitation-granite laminate, it resembles an exuberant robot. Along with other pieces by Mr. Sottsass at [Joe Sheftel](#) are elegant, oddly proportioned roll-top desks by Shiro Kuramata from 1980 and ’81. “Antibes” (1981) by George Sowden is a wooden cabinet elevated on slender legs lacquered in vibrant primary colors with a fractured crystalline pattern on its sides. High-minded critics reviled Memphis design in its time. Today its anti-puritanical ebullience is delightfully refreshing.

Koenig & Clinton

459 West 19th Street, Chelsea

Jan. 2 through 31

Joe Sheftel

24A Orchard Street, Lower East Side

Through Jan. 11

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