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A look back at the colorful work of the Memphis Group

An exhibition of the Memphis Group's vivid, unconventional furnishings is on view at Koenig & Clinton in New York

Text by [Tim McKeough](#)



A show of furniture by the Memphis Group, at Koenig & Clinton gallery in New York. Photo courtesy of Koenig & Clinton

In 1981 the influential Italian architect Ettore Sottsass sent shockwaves through the design world when he unveiled the first collection from the Memphis Group, a design collective he founded with collaborators such as Martine Bedin, Michele De Lucchi, and George Sowden. Exploding with a

riot of off-kilter forms, bright colors, and outrageous patterns, the group's cabinets, bookcases, tables, and lamps (which used plenty of plastic laminate) joyously broke all the rules of subdued modern design.

“You have to think of Memphis as sort of a punk movement against modernism,” says Leo Koenig, co-owner of Koenig & Clinton gallery in New York City, which is currently hosting an exhibition of Memphis furniture. Mr. Koenig, who normally focuses on fine art but is a longtime personal collector of Memphis Group pieces, says he decided to organize the show after noticing increasing interest in the movement's work among contemporary painters.

Just don't expect to see highly practical furniture where form follows function. “It's not easy design to live with,” conceded Mr. Koenig. “I lived with Carlton for a while, which you think of as a room-dividing bookshelf—until you realize it's very difficult to put books on it.” But of course, revolution has never been easy.

“The Memphis Group” is on view through January 31, 2015, at Koenig & Clinton, 459 West 19th Street, New York; koenigandclinton.com. A partner Memphis exhibition is on view through January 11 at Joe Sheftel gallery, 24A Orchard Street, New York; joesheftelgallery.com.