

# FINANCIAL TIMES

How To Spend It House & Home

## Why now's the time to collect Memphis design

The irreverent design aesthetic of Ettore Sottsass's influential 1980s collective adds colour, wit and punch to 21st-century interiors

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In April 1981, at Milan's Salone del Mobile, a newly launched Italian design collective calling itself the Memphis Group showed its first collection. The furniture was angular and pop-art bright; set against the quiet sobriety of the rest of the show the display was shocking. The pieces by the Austrian-born architect-cum-designer Ettore Sottsass and his collaborators – including luminaries Andrea Branzi, Nathalie du Pasquier and Marco Zanuso – drew crowds, but received a mixed reception from critics, one of whom described the aesthetic as “a shotgun wedding between Bauhaus and Fisher-Price”.



1983 Riviera carpet by Nathalie du Pasquier, sold at Sotheby's for £27,500

Fast-forward to November 2016 and the Sotheby's London auction of David Bowie's collection of Memphis furniture and objects. A Sottsass Casablanca cabinet – its totemic structure covered in speckled white, red and yellow laminate – sold for £68,750. A sculptural lacquered-wood Big Sur sofa, designed in 1986 by LA

artist Peter Shire, went for a record £77,500, while du Pasquier's exuberant 1983 Riviera carpet achieved £27,500. The auction made almost £1.4m.



1980s silver Murmansk centrepiece by Ettore Sottsass, £12,263 from 1stdibs

The Memphis story over the intervening 35 years is one of mixed fortunes. The Group produced seven more collections, and while press coverage was plentiful, few sales followed and the Group disbanded in 1988 (Sottsass had left three years earlier). Its impact, however, was momentous. As Marc Benda, co-founder of New York's Friedman Benda Gallery, which represents three Memphis artists, puts it: "Memphis is part of the canon of design history." It heralded the beginning of post-modernism and has inspired creatives ever since. "Memphis embraced all those things that modernism had banished: patterns and colours, kitsch and humour. It challenged our notions of functionality and good taste," says Anthony Barzilay Freund, director of fine art at online marketplace 1stdibs, which currently hosts a c1986 Nathalie du Pasquier Madras table (£9,000) and a silver Sottsass Murmansk centrepiece (£12,263).



1986 Big Sur sofa by Peter Shire, sold at Sotheby's for £77,500

Aesthetics aside, Memphis hasn't always been an appealing proposition. "The problem is that Memphis Milano is still making most of the designs, and what collectors want is rarity," says Cheshire-based design dealer Holly Johnson. But for Laetitia Contat-Desfontaines, head of sale for 20th-century design at Sotheby's London, "all that changed with the Bowie sale. The high prices were largely due to the provenance, but the sale raised the profile of Memphis and that's been good for the market." For Alberto Bianchi Albrici, owner of Memphis Milano, "a growing interest in colour and shape after years of white minimalism" has added to demand. 1stdibs saw sales of Memphis designs grow 50 per cent in the first quarter of 2019, while fellow online marketplace Pamono also reports a brisk trade, highlighting Sottsass's playful lamps – from the polychromatic, duck-shaped Tahiti desk design (£1,370) to the oversized Treetops floor style (£2,112). Prices are rising too, especially for first-iteration pieces, including the Sottsass Ashoka lamp being offered by London lifestyle boutique Alex Eagle Studio for £7,200



1980s Tahiti lamp by Ettore Sottsass, £1,370 from Pamono

Designs produced exclusively during the movement's lifetime have an increased rarity value. Only two examples of Shire's vividly clashing, geometry-set 1983 Bone Air chair (£15,810 from 1stdibs) were ever made, while Andrea Branzi's Lampe Foglia, produced as a limited edition prototype, is another rare gem. The Pompidou Centre in Paris has one and Friedman Benda Gallery showed another, priced \$28,000, at Art Basel in June. Provenance is key, but as pieces are neither dated nor signed (they have an official metal Memphis label), buyers should "always ask for the original paperwork if buying with an eye on future investment", advises Johnson. What drives most buyers to Memphis, though, is passion. Photographer Dennis Zanone furnished his Tennessee home almost entirely with Memphis pieces. "They look impractical but none of them are," he says. "I concentrated on the '80s-made designs, searching auction houses and dealers – such as Pron Art & Design in Torino, Italy – daily. I bought my Tawaraya boxing-ring bed, by Japanese designer Masanori Umeda, years ago for around \$10,000 and I found a rare silver Anchorage teapot by Peter Shire on eBay."



one Air chair by Peter Shire,

1981, £15,810 from 1stdibs

Zanone's collection went up for auction at Wright in Chicago on September 26, but his wall-to-wall Memphis look is unusual; it's more often a pick-and-mix approach – as exemplified by New York curator Raquel Cayre's 2018 SoHo townhouse installation, combining pieces such as Carlton and Tawaraya with midcentury furniture and contemporary artworks. Her own home, however, is "like a mini Memphis Milano showroom", and she recently sold two lamps – Tahiti and Michele de Lucchi's zoomorphic Oceanic – to artist Daniel Arsham. "They're now in his modernist, Norman Jaffe-designed home – it's pretty cool to see Memphis Milano mixed in there." Memphis also makes an appearance in the Georgian London home of Andrew Downs, director of media company James English Productions, whose "mishmash" style is augmented by a geometric Marco Zanini mirror. "I have Italian glass, Soviet constructivist plates and subtle English art deco – Memphis sits well with all these," he says. "I would maybe add a du Pasquier rug or a Sottsass vase." When it comes to decorating with Memphis, Cayre concludes: "Anything goes. There are no rules."

Where to buy 1stdibs, 1stdibs.com. Alex Eagle, alexeagle.co.uk. Friedman Benda Gallery, friedmanbenda.com. Holly Johnson Antiques, hollyjohnsonantiques.com. Memphis Milano, memphis-milano.com. Pamono, pamono.co.uk. Pron Art & Design, pron.it. Raquel Cayre, raquelcayre.com. Sotheby's, sothebys.com. Wright, wright20.com. Where to see Centre Pompidou, centrepompidou.fr. Victoria & Albert Museum, vam.ac.uk. What to read Less is a Bore. Reflections on Memphis by Julia Honer and Monika Schnetkamp (Spector Books). Ettore Sottsass and the Poetry of Things by Deyan Sudjic (Phaidon).