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Memphis: 40 Years of Eccentric Elegance

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In honor of Memphis's 40 year-anniversary, discover the fascinating history of one of the most iconic Italian design brands. In the 80s, their bright colors and playful patterns became an unconventional statement against rigorous functionality. Read our interview with Memphis's owner Alberto Bianchi Albrici for an insider's look at this sophisticatedly irreverent brand.



Post Design Gallery - Credits Luca Miserocchi



Plastic Field Exhibition - Credits Luca Miserocchi

At the end of 1980, a group of designers and architects gathered in Ettore Sottsass' living room and lay the foundations for a new way of imagining design, bringing to life a veritable artistic movement. With Bob Dylan's song "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" playing in the background, Memphis was born - a name referring to the ancient capital of Egypt as well as the birthplace of Elvis Presley and Aretha Franklin. The first collection of 55 products was presented at Salone del Mobile in 1981, at Arc '74 showroom in Milan. A multitude of people crowded outside the gallery to discover this new design language made of irrational shapes, playful patterns, and unconventional materials like plastic laminates.

The first group of designers, made of **Aldo Cibic**, **Matteo Thun**, Marco Zanini, Martine Bedin, **Michele De Lucchi**, **Nathalie Du Pasquier**, and George Sowden, under the guidance of **Ettore Sottsass**, soon expanded into a vibrant talent's nest. Memphis quickly gained great public success, winning the hearts of international artists and celebrities. Its collections stand out for a particular imaginative enthusiasm, for breaking the rules of academic design opening up its boundaries to colors, patterns, and bizarre shapes. With Memphis, eccentricity became a signature style, the expression of the cultural melting pot of the time.

The Memphis dream came to an end in 1987, but the creative production continued to look to the future with Meta Memphis and Post Design, remaining true to its native irreverent spirit. Read our interview with Memphis's owner Alberto Bianchi Albrici to learn more about an icon of Italian design.



"Tawaraya" boxing ring by Masanori Umeda 1981 with the Designers of the Memphis Group - Credits: Studio Azzurro, 1981

Memphis was born out of a convivial occasion: an evening with friends who shared the same passions and urgency to redefine the terms of design. How much has this aspect influenced the development of its playful and irreverent aesthetic, in defining not only a movement but also the real "Memphis Spirit"?

Conviviality was part of Ettore Sottsass's way of life, but there are no particular links to Memphis and its aesthetic language. Sottsass had always challenged the bourgeois self-righteousness of the elite circles with intelligence and irony, both before and after Memphis. With Memphis, Sottsass believed it possible to create an industrial production that was within everyone's reach - colorful, affordable, and approachable - but his dream immediately turned out to be a utopia.

How significant was the city of Milan in the founding of the movement? Could Memphis have been born in another city?

Milan offered all the necessary external conditions: the lender, the producer, the exhibitor, the distributor, the site of Sottsass's studio (where designers either worked or gravitated towards), the international press, and the Salone del Mobile. However, the movement could have also been born elsewhere: in the past, Tuscany and Florence had seen the birth and development of other important movements and companies linked to design and Sottsass, like Poltronova or Superstudio.