

ART & DESIGN

'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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