

# Memphis Pop: Bob Dylan Skips, and a Movement is Born



Furniture Design by Ettore Sottsass for the Memphis Collection. Above, Beverly Cabinet (Photo by Kenn Busch); right, Carlton Bookcase

What could Bob Dylan possibly have to do with far-out furniture design?

Legend has it that renowned designer Ettore Sottsass Jr., then in his 60s, was holding court with a team of 20-something designers in his Milan apartment. The year was 1980, and the mission du jour was to rethink home furnishings.

Sottsass was already a celebrated figure in the design world. Born in Austria, he studied architecture in Turin, and after serving for Italy in WWII he moved to Milan and founded a practice as an architect and industrial designer. A visit to New York in 1956 proved to be a life-changing experience, inspiring him to forego architecture and focus on industrial design.

On his return to Italy Sottsass worked as a consultant to furniture manufacturer Poltronova, where he created the influential “superbox” closets with striking striped laminates. In 1958 he began designing for the electronics division of Olivetti. His work there was influenced by his love of pop art and the Beat culture, resulting in several innovative, aesthetically appealing and award-winning products. The bright red Valentine typewriter

(1970) marked a zenith in his work for Olivetti. Although he later dismissed it as “too obvious, a bit like a girl wearing a very short skirt and too much make-up,” the Valentine is still seen as an iconic “pop” product.

Through the 1970s Sottsass worked with Studio Alchymia, a group of avant garde furniture designers including Alessandro Mendini and Andrea Branzi. By 1980 Sottsass had grown weary of the stark, dull, basic black themes too common in traditional minimalist design, a feeling shared by his team of young designers, who included Andrea Branzi, Michele De Lucchi, George Sowden, Matteo Thun and Nathalie du Pasquier. Together they vowed to break the rules with color, shape, and true function.

The group originally decided on the name “The New Design” for their collection, but on the turntable that evening was Bob Dylan’s “Stuck Inside of Mobile (With the Memphis Blues Again),” which happened to skip repeatedly on the word “Memphis.” It was taken as a sign, and the new movement now had a name. They worked independently on their designs based on the spirit they had distilled, unified in their abandonment of traditional modernist design

themes.

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pressure laminate was utilized in abundance, a direct departure from the minimalism prevalent at that time. Sottsass proclaimed Memphis the “new international design.”

Designers from around the globe joined in creating their own Memphis pieces; notables such as Karl Lagerfeld and Michael Graves furnished their offices with Memphis pieces. The core Memphis group officially disbanded in 1988, and Sottsass is still regarded as a leader of the anti-design movement.

Memphis pieces are highly valued as collectibles, and stand out easily wherever they are found. Two Sottsass pieces, the Beverly cabinet and Carlton bookshelf, featured high-character, bold-colored laminates from the Italian HPL manufacturer Abet Laminati.

Abet Laminati bucked the tame white and imitation woodgrain trends of the 1960s with strong colors and bold designs, endearing itself to designers like Sottsass. Sottsass, in turn, inspired ABET to expand its Metalli line of designs, which uses light and reflections rather than pigments of color.

“Abet has great bright saturated colors and subtle textures, more unique than mainstream,” says designer Scott Bevan. “Abet has a range of reds that no other company has. When a project calls for bright, intense colors, Abet is always my first choice. It’s a little more expensive, but it’s the element that’s going to carry the day for your image, so it’s worth every penny.”

*Editor’s note: This story first appeared in Surface & Panel magazine.*

