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MEMPHIS RISING

An Italian designer's lasting legacy



Mix-matched colors, asymmetrical shapes, and 1950s kitsch defined design in the '80s, as imagined by the Memphis Group, an Italian collective of artists and designers founded by Ettore Sottsass in 1981. Using Art Deco and pop art as guiding principles, the group looked to futuristic themes “to find new extremes of language as an alternative to the unimaginative functionalism,” explains co-founding member Matteo Thun. The movement, though divisive to some, found a devoted audience. And for Thun it was more than a creative outlet—it was a manifesto. “We wanted to break the rules,” he says.

The group soon disbanded in 1988—the manifesto, he explains, could “only stay strong and sustainable when it existed for a certain time limit.” Thun himself had already set out on his own, leaving a position at Sottsass Associati and launching Matteo Thun & Partners in Milan in 1984.

Although the Memphis Group's influence is still visible in the designer's work—though in a subtler and more subversive way—his interests pivoted to the sustainable, demonstrated with the 1990 development of O Sole Mio, a timber-framed wood-clad prefabricated house that combined mass production with an innovative approach to ecology.

Along with his partners Luca Colombo and Antonio Rodriguez, Thun “captures the soul of every place and every brand,” crafting projects and products known for their longevity and timelessness. “We want to avoid architectural eyesores,” he says. With each project, Thun first analyzes the spirit of the site: its cultural and historical background, its climate and morphology, its flora and resources. Often, he says, “I try to visualize the ideas by doing watercolors or drawings.”

His holistic style for the JW Marriott Venice Resort and Spa (an HD Awards winner and finalist this year), for example, emphasizes the property's state-protected island and Venetian lagoon. Other projects on the boards—the ground-up 161-suite Waldhotel, a wellness medical hotel in Switzerland set to open next year, and the 240-bed recovery ward of Waldklinik Eisenberg, Europe's largest university orthopaedic center in Germany—also build on the relationship between physical space and patient/guest care to a “level rarely seen in hospitality environments,” he says.

Thun employs that same all-encompassing, environmental approach in his product design. In April, he launched Matteo Thun Atelier, working as liaison between traditional craftspeople and manufacturers with a collection of objects, lighting, and furniture that shows off the handcrafted work of Italian makers where “every piece has a strong identity,” he says. Whether it's the solid wood ICON table



1. From Matteo Thun Atelier, Murano singing birds and an orange glass vase, an homage to Venetian painter Tiepolo, sit in front of a botanical-themed wallcovering inspired by Thun's watercolors.

2. Chiavari chairs from Matteo Thun Atelier feature a natural beech structure and a colorful woven polyester seat.

for Riva 1920, or his recent Lamé faucet series for Fantini, where colorful handles mix with transparent parts for surprising translucent effects, Thun has always pushed the envelope. “For me, good design means simplicity—less weight and more light, pure and clean lines, save resources and energy,” he says. “We are always searching for the iconic form and to create things that people can understand intuitively.” **hd**

matteothun.com; matteothunatelier.com