

## Why Memphis is the colourful and ultra-collectible design to invest in

Bold compositions in illuminating colours, Memphis designs are for the discerning art collectors

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Memphis: Plastic Field installation at MK Gallery produced in partnership with Memphis srl, Milano

Go on, cheer yourself up and get over to Milton Keynes next week. Seriously. There's an exhibition of Memphis - the design collective - at its [recently refurbished art gallery](#) MK Gallery, and even if the journey along the town's spookily quiet, car-oriented boulevards doesn't stir your heart, there's a good chance that this exhibition will.

A hectic array of furniture in dizzyingly artificial colours, crazy patterns and wild compositions of juxtaposed geometric shapes, Memphis will take you right back to the 1980s, or make you wish you'd actually been there if you're too young to remember them. Should you fall in love with it, then you will have something in common with Cara Delevigne, who recently furnished her new home with some of Memphis's most iconic designs, created between 1981 and 1988.



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While most historic design shows are focused on original works that have survived the decades, Memphis is a little different. All the designs are still faithfully produced in Pagnano in Italy's northern Veneto region by Alberto Albici, who acquired the Memphis srl company in 1996 and can produce the pieces in unlimited numbers, albeit slowly. These are very complicated works to make, and what is on display here is wonderfully shiny and new.

“Memphis believed the designs should be seen as a means of communication, not as an expression of elitist art,” says Albici. Though with a price tag of €13.800,00 (this will be repriced at €14.600,00 on January 15 2021 after inflation) the most iconic piece of all – Ettore Sottsass's Carlton bookshelves – is hardly an entry-level acquisition.

With its anthropomorphic form of a (Vitruvian) man with arms raised and legs apart; colours including lime green, pale primrose and baby blue; and its speckled laminate base, it is practically a manifesto for the movement: that design should push the very limits of play colour and formal complexity.



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However, as Domenico Raimondo, the senior director for Europe and International Specialists at Phillips auction house in London, can confirm, the original pieces are now rare and even more expensive. He sold a Sottsass Clair de Lune totem – a sublime creation of cones, pillars and circles in glazed ceramic – for £42,840 at a recent sale in November.

“With hindsight, people really appreciate the beauty of this work, and Sottsass’s fascination with primitive forms like the totem, or the stupa (Buddhist burial mound). He had a passion for India and the colours he saw there. It resonates with collectors.” He says that for the slightly less pricey works, it is younger collectors who do the bidding. “They’ll be collecting contemporary art, too, and be attracted by the language of Memphis.”

Memphis was a collective, which over its eight years of existence involved over 50 designers from several continents. Ettore Sottsass, already a master designer and architect in Milan who had headed the design department at Olivetti, and been involved with the Radical Design movements in Florence, decided in 1981 to fly in the face of “form follows function” that was dominating industrial design.



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His accomplice was the 29-year-old Matteo Thun, with whom he had formed Sottsass Associati a couple of years before. “We were totally pissed off about design,” says Thun, who has gone on to be a successful architect in his own right. “It was 100% Bauhaus and grey and boring. It was about functionalism and ergonomics. Our idea of ergonomics was based on fun.”

Thun describes how Sottsass Associati closed its industry-facing office at 9pm, “And then Memphis began. We’d all be drinking, and Sottsass was always right in the middle of everything. There were a lot of fights, a lot of craziness.” Afterwards, they’d head off to Plastic, the now mythical disco where Keith Haring’s boyfriend sometimes DJ’d.

While Thun turned to ceramics that pushed the limits of feasibility, both in material and function (you can see the round Chad teapot and the Titicaca vase, with its serrated edge at Milton Keynes), a young Aldo Cibic experimented with tables that combined granite, marble, stone and lacquered wood (his Belvedere table is great example, also here).

Martine Bedin made a lamp that looked like a little robot-dog you could pull along behind you on a lead. Called Super, it’s still a bestseller. Albrici could make you one today for just under €980,00, (repriced at €990,00 on January 15 2021 after inflation) or you can trawl [1stDibs](#) for an original which, depending on condition, could come in at around the same price.



When Memphis had its first launch party in 1981, nearly 2000 people turned up, though many of them declared the work to be in bad taste. With its mixture of high and low culture, classical geometry, and bright bespoke laminate patterns that imitated anything from wood grain, to animal prints, to scattered pill-cases, it flew in the face of modernism and questioned ideas of both luxury and over-consumption. This, really, was craft.

Memphis went on to find fans in high places, however. Karl Lagerfeld bought a job lot for his Monaco apartment in the early 1980s, and when David Bowie's private collection went on sale posthumously at Sotheby's in 2016 in three sections, part three – called Post Modern Design – was dominated by the group's work.

Thun left in 1983, but Sottsass kept the group going until 1988, by which time it had influenced everything from Hollywood (take a look at the film *Ruthless People*) to fashion. The Esprit headquarters near Dusseldorf is still a monument to the world of mad laminate. And then, as Thun says, “minimalism came from London”.



Karl Lagerfeld's apartment featuring Memphis designs

The London interior architect, Tom Bartlett, who created Delevingne's home, says that he frequently looks to Memphis today for inspiration. "It probably looked so wrong in the 90s, and even the noughties, but now we take inspiration from it all the time – the sherbet colours, the gorgeous terrazzos, the circles and squares. It's about being witty without being arch or cynical. It's positive. And when you have a punchy young client like Cara, you can even go for the real thing."

At Milton Keynes, a town that emerged as a potential utopia in the 1960s, and bears progressive marks of each subsequent decade's architecture, this Memphis show shines very brightly. And it's a cheerful reminder that a design movement can still shock, after years and years.

*Memphis: Plastic Field installation at MK Gallery will be opening 2nd December 2020 until 25 April 2021; [mkgallery.org](http://mkgallery.org)*