

DESIGN & INTERIORS

How Memphis developed from an informal gathering of restless creatives into one of design's most influential movements

Everything you want to know about Memphis Design, from its history to its leading figures to the pieces to know (and buy)

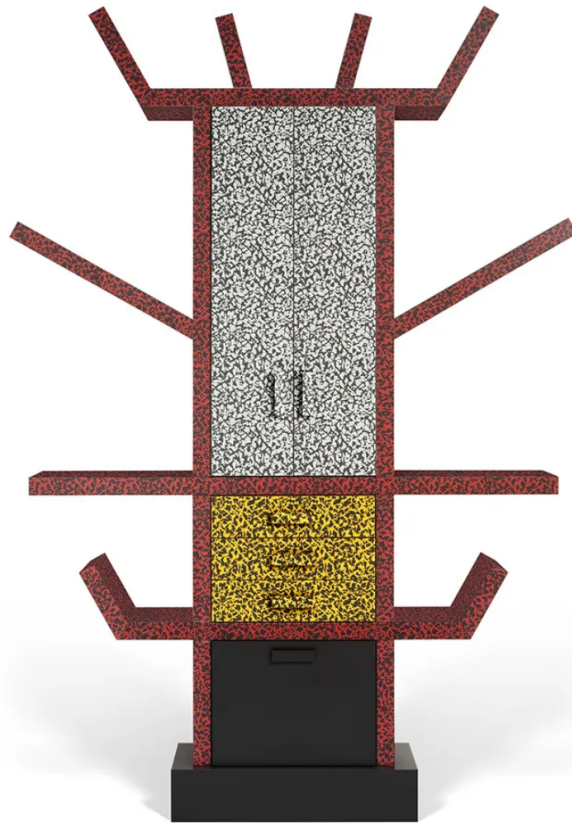
BY FRANCESCA PERRY PUBLISHED 3 DAYS AGO IN [FEATURES](#)



Memphis Group members photographed on Masanori Umeda's Tawaraya Bed, 1981
(Image credit: Studio Azzurro)

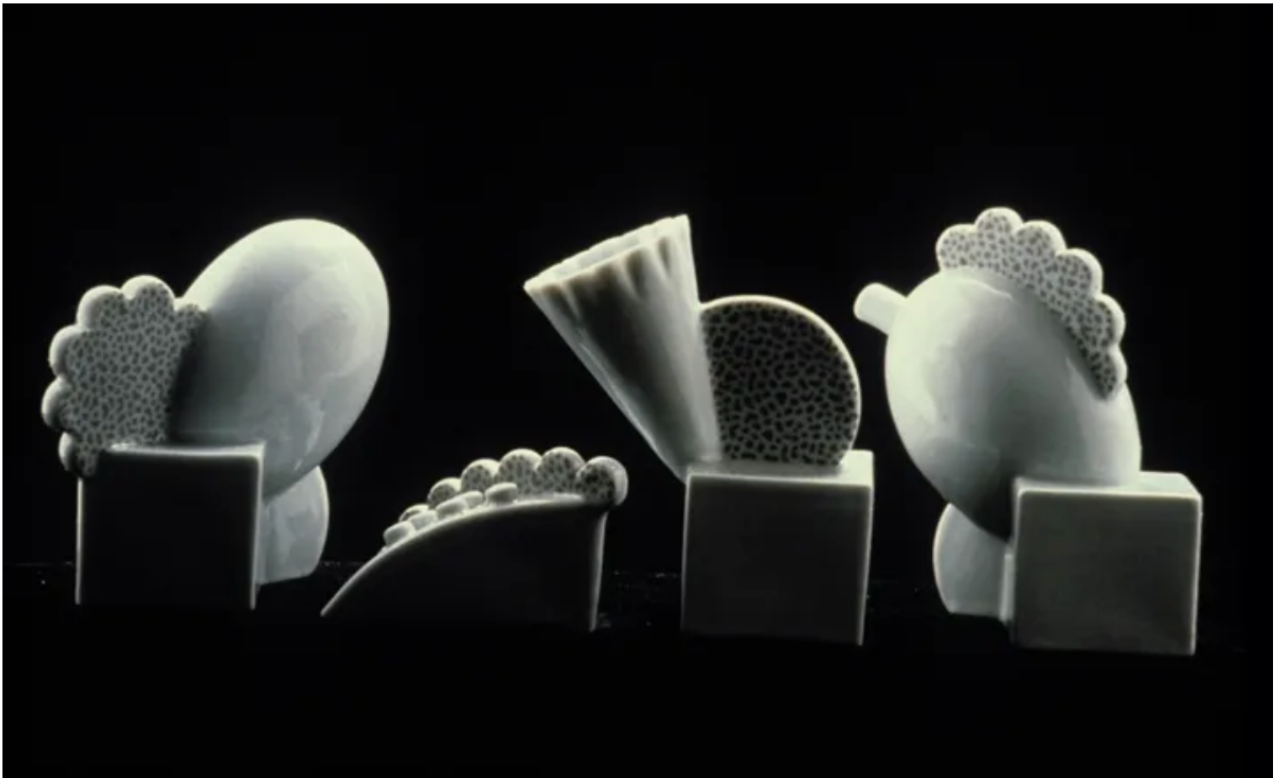
You know a work from the Memphis Group when you see it. Boldly colourful and geometric, often with loud graphic patterns and a jagged playfulness that almost belies function, the furniture and homeware from this group of creatives would go on to all but define the interior style of the 1980s. Its aesthetic seeped into fashion, film, music and architecture, becoming the visual shorthand for a maximalist era that eschewed and subverted the politeness of modernism and grabbed the future with both hands.

The Memphis Design Group story



'Casablanca' by Ettore Sottsass, 1981
(Image credit: Courtesy Memphis Milano)

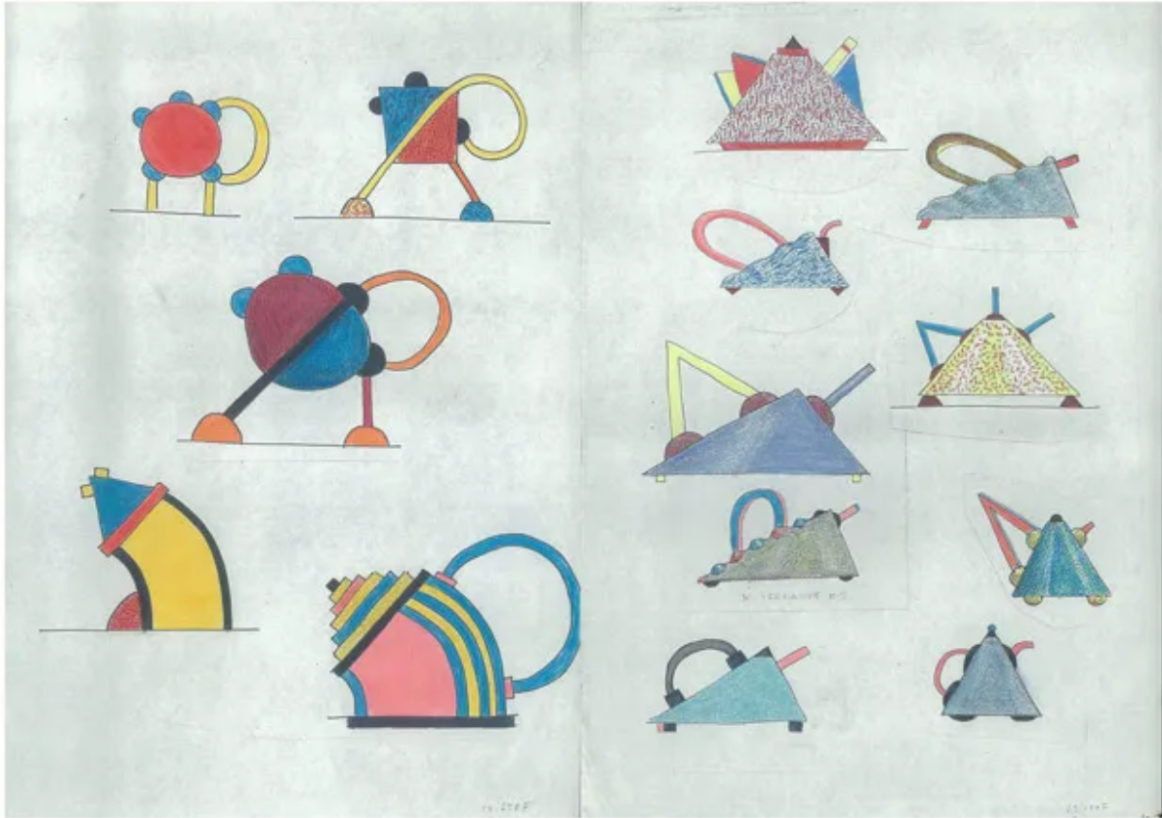
The group started with Italian designer Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007), who remains perhaps the best-known arbiter of the style. In his Milan apartment in December 1980, a gathering of restless creatives catalysed into a movement, intent on provocation and experimentation. Their name, Memphis, made reference both to the American city – a centre of blues, soul and rock and roll – and ancient Egypt's first capital, reflecting the group's desire to blend diverse cultural and historic references (it was also reportedly inspired by a Bob Dylan song playing that evening, 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again').



'Ontario, Erie, Superior, Michigan' by Matteo Thun, 1982, from the Memphis Milano Collection
(Image credit: Courtesy of Memphis SRL)

Alongside Sottsass, the group's founders included designers Martine Bedin, Aldo Cibic, Michele De Lucchi, Nathalie Du Pasquier, Matteo Thun and George J. Sowden – with international designers including Peter Shire, Masanori Umeda and Michael Graves joining later. Their first major show, bringing together furniture, lamps and ceramics, took place at the 1981 Salone del Mobile in Milan. Introducing the postmodern Memphis style to the world with a bang, the exhibition had immediate influence. Even though reception was divided, with critics loving or loathing it, the movement soon grew.

A new radical design voice



Sketches by Matteo Thun
(Image credit: press)

Memphis was radical not just in its aesthetic, but also its choice of materials. Works often turned to plastic laminate, a low-priced material more commonly associated with kitchen worktops. But cheap plastics were combined with hardwood, lacquer and brass, reflecting the Memphis predilection for mixing high and low, precious and tacky – and reframing traditional value concepts in the process.

Memphis designs drew on a wide-ranging mix of cultural and geographical references – indeed a lot are named after places, from Du Pasquier's Arizona rug to Sottsass's Tahiti lamp and Shire's Brazil desk, perhaps reflecting the growing trend of globalisation that was shaping the 1980s.



'Carlton' by Ettore Sottsass
(Image credit: press)

Arguably the most iconic of the Memphis works is the Carlton bookcase by Ettore Sottsass, expressing multiple aspects of the style. The irreverent piece is a riot of colours – green, yellow, blue, red, pink – in laminate-covered wood forms, sitting on a base decorated with Sottsass's wiggling, black-and-white 'Bacterio' pattern (also used for his popular Tahiti lamp). While an overtly geometric assemblage, the bold and somewhat impractical diagonals nonetheless eschew the rectilinear grids of modernism, and work to almost anthropomorphise the bookcase. Its sculptural presence and large size meant it could double as a room divider, and the Carlton has arguably become the statement furniture piece of every room it's placed in.

After Sottsass: an aesthetic revolution and the end of Memphis

In 1985, Sottsass decided to leave the group behind to focus on architecture. Barbara Radice, Memphis's artistic director, described how that year signalled an aesthetic evolution for the group, where colours got darker and references moodier, evoking 'smoke-filled urban atmospheres, the streets of Blade Runner or a post-nuclear hero roaming scorched landscapes.'



Karl Lagerfeld sits at the 'Unknown' table by George Sowden, with 'Riviera chairs' by Michele De Lucchi, part of his Memphis-inspired home in Monte Carlo, Monaco

(Image credit: Photography © Jacques Schumacher, courtesy of Thames & Hudson)

Only a couple of years later, the movement effectively disbanded. During its existence, the group's most significant collectors included fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld – who furnished his entire Monte Carlo apartment with Memphis works, and called the style the 'Art Deco of the '80s' – and musician David Bowie. For Bowie, Memphis 'sucked on the breath of pop culture with gusto and an enthusiasm that was delightful to witness.'

These days, avid collectors span the globe and different industries – though Memphis continued to have its detractors over the years (the late Sir Terence Conran called it 'joke junk'). While the Memphis style was swept away to make room for futuristic minimalism in the late 1990s, the group's works saw a revival in the late 2010s, leading up landmark exhibitions celebrating its 40th anniversary (at MK Gallery and Vitra Design Museum). Memphis Milano still produces many of the iconic designs, enabling the movement and its inventive, provocative, playful and joyous pieces to live on through interiors far and wide. ✨