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Serious Fun: When Interiors Became More Than Just Practical

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Ettore Sottsass' Agra Totem – Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Ettore Sottsass – Photography by Daniel Kukla

A kaleidoscope of colour, a clash of shapes, and a joyful rebellion against the ordinary; design. At its most playful, refusing to conform. Our homes are not just shelters but expressions of personality, spaces where function meets fantasy, where practicality dances with delight. Fun and frivolity were the key here. Delightful, dandy and delicious design does not just have to be practical.

This celebration of the bold and the beautiful in our interiors is a relatively new phenomenon. For much of history, furniture was bound by utility: chairs to sit on, tables to dine at, cupboards to store. Decoration, if present, was a mark of status rather than a call to joy. But today, design is exuberant, unrestrained, almost mischievous. So how did we get here?

To understand this shift, we must look back to the 1940s. In the shadow of World War II, homes were places of necessity, not indulgence. Interiors were stripped bare, dictated by rationing and practicality. Furniture was designed to serve, not to delight, for most people. Utility reigned supreme, and the idea of playfulness in design was far from people's minds.

Yet, as history has shown, restraint often births rebellion. And rebellion, in design, comes in the form of colour, curves, and a refusal to take itself too seriously.

As the world slowly healed, creativity surged, breathing life back into design. Colour in living spaces returned, and the glow of joy flickered once more in homes and public spaces alike. The late 1940s marked the first stirrings of a new design movement, one that embraced whimsy and self-expression, though it would take decades to fully blossom. Furniture and interiors began to break free from pure utility, inviting a sense of playfulness and delight back into everyday life.

Design had begun to loosen its collar, shedding the constraints of pure function in favour of something bolder, brighter, and infinitely more playful. A handful of global visionary designers emerged, blending art and utility to create pieces that didn't just serve a purpose, they sparked joy.

Think of Charles and Ray Eames, whose moulded plywood chairs struck the perfect balance between comfort and sculptural beauty, or Eero Saarinen's futuristic Tulip Chair, a seamless fusion of elegance and innovation. These designers proved that furniture could be both practical and visually striking, setting the stage for an interior transformation.

As the late 20th century unfolded, interiors took on a new sense of exuberance. In the years between, interiors became a canvas for experimentation, as the 1970s ushered in earthy tones, organic shapes, and a growing desire for comfort and warmth. The influence of the counterculture and a shift towards environmental consciousness encouraged more eclectic, nature-inspired designs that balanced aesthetics with a renewed focus on sustainability and personal expression.

The 1980s, in particular, saw an explosion of playful, expressive design, with movements like the Memphis Group, founded by Italian designer Ettore Sottsass in 1980, embracing bold colours, unexpected forms, and a sense of unapologetic fun. No longer bound by convention, homes became vibrant reflections of personality, where design was as much about delight as it was about function.

This new wave of design embraced a sense of irreverence: playful, unpredictable, and unafraid to break the rules. Coffee tables resembled giant building blocks, bookshelves leaned at improbable angles, and clashing colours created a deliberate sense of chaos. It was bold, brash, and at times, outright absurd, but that was precisely the point. This wasn't just about decoration; it was about defying expectations. Interiors became more than spaces to live in; they became statements, bursting with energy, personality, and a joyful disregard for tradition.

This playful approach to design was championed by figures such as Dandy-designer, Philippe Starck, whose ghost chairs and outlandish juxtapositions pushed boundaries. His work joined the ranks of other designers embracing colour and whimsy:

Karim Rashid, with his amorphous, plastic-fantastic furniture; Bethan Laura Wood, known for her bold patterns and joyful approach to everyday objects; and Morag Myerscough, whose vibrant installations transform spaces into living artworks. These designers, and many more, have proven that beauty in the home isn't just about aesthetics. It is about emotion, humour and rebellion.



Sideboard Model MS. 120 – Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Ettore Sottsass – Photography by Daniel Kukla

After decades of minimalism, dominated by soft beiges and foggy greys, bursts of vibrancy made a comeback, with recent years celebrating bold and joyful hues as colours of the year. While pared-back minimalism still holds its place, it now sits alongside playful patterns, rich pigments, and expressive forms, creating a balance between calm sophistication and spirited creativity.

A neon-hued sofa, a rug shaped like a giant fried egg, a lamp that resembles a balloon mid-flight; these are elements of modern interiors, where fun and function meet in equal measure. We like to believe it stems from the era of the pandemic; a time when people spent countless hours at home, craving a splash of colour to uplift their everyday spaces. Memphis Group influences are once and again visible in contemporary spaces, proving that good design doesn't just serve a purpose; it sparks joy.

Whatever this era introduced, one thing is certain: our homes have become more than just places to live. They are places to feel. They are canvases for self-expression, filled with irreverent, audacious and brilliantly designed objects. Practical? Yes. But never dull.



Odalisca – Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Ettore Sottsass – Photography by Daniel Kukla

Ettore Sottsass, the Italian architect and designer, founded the Memphis Group, revolutionising design with bold colours and playful forms that defied convention. Sottsass's enduring influence is now being celebrated in *Et Tu, Ettore*, a solo exhibition opening on March 12, 2025, at Galerie56 in New York. Presented by Friedman Benda and Galerie56, the exhibition takes an intimate approach to his work, curated by architect Lee F. Mindel, FAIA.

Featuring rarely seen ceramic prototypes from the 1960s, his iconic totems, and pieces from his *Geology* series, the exhibition encapsulates his ability to blend modernist abstraction with ancient cultural influences. A defining force in postmodern design and founder of the Memphis Group, Sottsass challenged convention. His work continues to resonate, ensuring that interiors remain dynamic, expressive, and alive.

In the spirit of playful design, the Ria Chair by Marco Sousa Santos reimagines modernist aesthetics with a contemporary twist. Its stainless steel tubular frame, reminiscent of early

mass-produced furniture, is transformed into a graceful composition of curved lines. This stackable chair not only offers strength and practicality but also embodies a timeless charm, making it a delightful addition to any interior that celebrates both form and function.

Boom! Art and Design in the 1940s at The Philadelphia Museum of Art is on view from April 12 to September 1. Find out more at: Philmuseum.org

Et Tu, Ettore the solo exhibition on Ettore Sottsass is opening on March 12 until May 14, at Galerie56 – 240 Church Street in New York. Find out more at: Galerie56.com