
Ettore Sottsass During the 1960s: Focusing on the 'Totem' Series

SUGIMOTO Nagisa

Introduction

In 2023, the Ishibashi Foundation acquired thirty works (including twelve drawings) by the Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007). Today, Sottsass is best known as the leader of 'Memphis,' an international group of designers who took the world by storm during the 1980s, and as a standard-bearer of post-modern design. Renowned for the novel furniture designs, employing bold colors and unconventional forms, that he produced during his 'Memphis' years, Sottsass created a wide variety of other works over the course of his life. From the beginning of his career to his later years, Sottsass concentrated primarily on cabinet and other furniture design, but it was during the 1960s that he first achieved fame with his designs for Olivetti typewriters, then in 1970s he moved away from the design field, to concentrate on conceptual photography. After his activities with the 'Memphis' group during the early 1980s, he went on to become passionate about architectural design during the latter half of the eighties and continued to energetically develop unique designs until his death in 2007 at the age of ninety. In Japan, he is known for his association with designers such as KURAMATA Shiro, UMEDA Masanori, and TATEISHI Taiga, and in 2011 he participated in the "Kuramata Shiro and Ettore Sottsass" exhibition (21_21 DESIGN SIGHT, Tokyo).¹

This report will examine the works in the 'Totem' series, which comprise five of the thirty Sottsass works in the foundation's collection. Made of ceramics, this series of works consist of multiple parts stacked on top of each other to create column-like forms almost two meters in height. He created the majority of the design drawings from early to mid-1960s, then initially produced a series of twenty-one of the works for the "Menhir, Ziggurat, Stupas, Hydrants & Gas Pumps" exhibition, (hereafter referred to as the "Menhir" exhibition in this paper), that was held in Milan, Italy, in 1967.

It should be pointed out here that although today it is customary to group all these huge ceramic works together under the title of the 'Totem' series, Sottsass himself did not think of them as comprising a single series, at least not in the 1960s. Although he had provisionally grouped his other ceramic works together, creating and exhibiting them in the form of series, his large-scale works from 1967 onwards were produced and exhibited as individual pieces. For instance, if we look at the works in this foundation's collection, the *Odalisca Totem* was produced for the 1967 exhibition, while his *Totem No. 1* and *Totem No. 2* were not produced until 1996, by the New

York-based design and production firm, Urban Architecture. Therefore, in order to achieve a greater understanding, it is clear that the so-called 'Totem' series should be divided into smaller groups, depending on the period and circumstances of the production of each individual work.

For this reason, this paper will look at the 21 *Totems* exhibited in the 1967 exhibition as comprising a single group as they represent a good example of the early concept of Sottsass' large-scale ceramic works. A study of this group will not only help provide an overall understanding of the 'Totem' series as a whole, but also provide an insight into Sottsass' design in general during the 1960s. However, due to the difficulty of examining all 21 works, this report will focus on the *Odalisca Totem* (fig. 1) belonging to the Foundation collection.

1. Basic Information Regarding the 'Totem' Series

I will start by presenting an overview of the development of Sottsass' ceramic designs, including the 'Totem' series. His involvement with ceramic design began in 1956 with a commission from the American businessman, Irving Richards. Known as the business partner of the designer, Russell Wright, Richards had achieved commercial success in 1939 with the 'American Modern' series of tableware and he planned to produce works designed by Sottsass at the Bitossi Ceramiche company in Montelupo Fiorentino, Italy, that would then be sold in the United States. At that time, Sottsass was a complete novice when it came to ceramics, but he later reminisced that with the expert help of Bitossi's art director, Aldo Ronchi, he was able to learn about every step involved in its production, from the clay, to the glazes, to the kilns.²

Sottsass' ceramic works evolved through his early 'Lava' and 'Tondi' series to those created in homage to Eastern religion resulting from his stay in India in 1961. Beginning in 1963 with 'Tenebre' and 'Offerta a Shiva' in 1964, he then went on to produce the twenty-one giant ceramic works he exhibited in the "Menhir" exhibition in 1967.³ In 1969, he produced a series of 'Totem' with a different design to those produced in 1967 for the "Landscape for a New Planet" exhibition was held at the National Museum, Stockholm.

The exhibition title, "Menhir, Ziggurat, Stupas, Hydrants & Gas Pumps," represents a list of the pillar-like structures that provided the inspiration for Sottsass' giant ceramic works. 'Menhir' is the name given to the prehistoric megalithic monuments, consisting of a single, tall standing stone, thought to be tombstones or connected with religious services, that can be found in the

Brittany region of France. A 'ziggurat' is a kind of pyramidal, stepped temple tower that was constructed in the major cities of ancient Mesopotamian. 'Stupas' are type of tower that was built to house Buddhist relics and are also referred to as pagodas. In addition to these ancient religious structures, he also included the contemporary motifs of fire hydrants and gas pumps, which can also be said to share the same basic tall, vertical form as the menhir, etc.

Odalisca Totem was designed between 1964 and 1966 and was one of the works selected for the 1967 exhibition. However, at that time it had been given the completely different title of *Pus Distributor (for use by war propagandists)*, a title evocative of the anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s. Later, in the late 1980s, when the Italian furniture company, Mirabili, produced and sold limited editions of several of these *Totems*, this design was one of those selected, and it is thought that it was at this time that the name was changed to *Odalisca Totem*. The Ishibashi Foundation owns one of this limited edition of twenty-nine.

2. Within 1960s Society

Based on the basic information regarding the structure the 'Totem' series given above, this section will examine the *Totems* produced in 1967 with reference to the historical background of the 1960s, focusing on Sottsass' interest in the popular culture of the times and his critical attitude regarding politics and society.

2-1. The Image of Popular Culture

The latter half of the 1960s is sometimes referred to as being the 'political season,' with anti-establishment political movements, led by students, springing up around the world. In the U.S., this could be seen in the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, in France there was widespread civil unrest that came to be known as 'The May Revolution' and in Milan, where Sottsass was working, it came to a head in 1968 with students took over and occupied the venue of the Milan Triennale during the opening ceremony. These young people's political movements were closely linked to various counterculture movements critical of the basic values of conservative bourgeois high culture, and expressed themselves through diverse cultural phenomena, including hippies, pop culture, the underground, rock music, etc.

The design world was no exception to this rising antiestablishment trend. In Italy, it became focused in Florence and the period between 1966 and 1967 saw the emergence of several groups of architects, including the 'Archizoom Assoicati,' led by Andrea Branzi and others, 'Superstudio,' led by Adolfo Natalini and others and 'Gruppo 9999,' led by Carlo Cardini and others, that sought to express their objection to society through design. Today, this movement is referred to as 'radical design' (anti-design).

Although Sottsass was more than twenty years senior to these young designers, he had been associating with them since 1966 and was sympathetic towards their activities. Sottsass had already made a name for himself in the Italian design world during the early 1960s, causing a stir with his innovative ideas. In 1956 he had been invited to become a designer for the Italian furniture company Poltronova, where he produced

numerous colorful striped pieces, such as the *Double-bodied Sideboard (Model MS. 120)* (fig. 2) from 1959 to the early 1960s, in addition to the 'Flying Carpet Furniture' series (1965) that consisted of innovative forms and vivid colors evoking the robots and rockets of the space age, and the 'Superbox' series of striped wardrobes made of a plastic laminated plywood developed by the Italian material manufacturer Abet Laminati (1966, fig. 3).⁴ In 1958, he became design advisor to the Italian office equipment manufacturer, Olivetti, where he produced many famous designs such as the computer system *ELEA 9003* (1959) and the *Valentine Portable Typewriter* (1968, fig. 4).

While creating the innovative designs mentioned above, Sottsass kept his eye on the popular culture of the day, looking to it for inspiration. In particular, the art of the time provided an important source of ideas. As a young man, Sottsass had painted and sculpted himself and was familiar with the works of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, and others, but it was during a stay in the United States during the late 1950s, that he deepened his interest in the art of times, becoming an admirer of abstract expressionists, such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

As with so many other designers of that period, Pop Art was to provide Sottsass with an important source of inspiration. For example, in 1965 he designed a picture frame to go with his bench seat, *Lucrezia* (1964) (fig. 5), mounting Roy Lichtenstein's lithograph, *Crying Girl* (1963, lithograph, edition c. 150), in it and presenting the two together in *Domus* magazine (no. 433, December 1965) as a single work. In another work in the same style, he combined a cabinet with a silkscreen print by Andy Warhol. Originating in the U.K. during the mid-1950s and emerging in the U.S. during the 1960s, Pop Art looked to images from popular culture, such as advertisements, comics or celebrity portraits for its subject matter, using them to glorify and criticize contemporary society. Sottsass' fascination with popular images of contemporary society was probably one of the reasons why incorporated Pop Art into his designs. In an article for the Italian architectural magazine *Domus*, he wrote the following concerning young women's fashion:

'They had beaten me to the punch, because what I would have wanted to do with furniture they had already done with their clothes, with their car paint, with their white oilcloth boots, with their multicolored stockings, with stripes, checkers or polka dots. [...] It is nothing and does not count for anything. But the idea would be to invent new total possibilities, new forms and new symbols, climbing over dying things to see if it is possible to throw more energy, more life, more dynamism into people's lives.'⁵

In this way, Sottsass, was stimulated by popular culture, including young people's fashion, to try to create his own image of the new era, thereby bringing further vitality into people's lives. Bearing this in mind, we can discern a similar interest in the image of popular culture in his 1967 'Totem' series. The rhythmical, round silhouette of the *Odalisca Totem*, the striped pattern, and the combination of yellow, white, and black colors are eye-catching, its shape not unlike that of a sign pole, giving it a humorous appeal. When we look at pictures of the 1967 exhibition, we see that the colors and shapes of other *Totems*

all share similar playful mood (fig. 6). These pillar-like structures, standing almost two-meters tall, really do resemble the hydrants or gas pumps of the exhibition's title, or perhaps road signs, or a telegraph poles, all of which are suggestive of modern urban landscapes. If we look at their colors, the bright reds, yellows, blues and greens provide great variety, the exhibition space seems filled with garish, colorful striped columns creating a truly 'pop' space, overflowing with the same innovative vitality as was seen in the young people's fashions of the time. Sottsass' endeavor to explore new possibilities in design, resonating with Pop Art and absorbing images from popular culture, is clearly apparent in his 1967 'Totem' series.

2-2. Criticism of Politics and Society

Like the numerous subcultures that emerged during the 1960s, the new forms of artistic expression that appeared at this time were also a form of rebellion against existing society. Although Sottsass did not agree with violent anti-establishment action, he was extremely conscious of political and social issues. As Deyan Sudjic pointed out, Sottsass seemed to identify more with the moderate approach of American counterculture than with the radical European movements.⁶ In the 1967 "Menhir," exhibition, Sottsass' ironic, satirical attitude toward society was evident in the titles of the individual works, some of which are listed below:

Menhir of Life (to the irreverent, nomadic, long-haired people without plans)
Triptych of Peace (dedicated to conscientious objectors)
An Urn too Chic for the Ashes of a Political Party
A Large Chinese Jar for Preserving Drugs.
Pus Distributor (for use by war propagandists)

Sottsass' cynicism regarding politics or society and his desire for peace are obvious, but it is expressed in a witty rather than direct manner. For example, *Menhir of Life (to the irreverent, nomadic, long-haired people without plans)* is a humorous title evocative of the late 1960s, when modern-day hippies, who were free from accepted norms, prayed to ancient menhirs. In *Triptych of Peace (dedicated to conscientious objectors)*, it can be said that Sottsass expresses his attitude towards peace quite in a frank manner (in the flyer for the 1967 exhibition (fig. 7), a peace symbol is prominently displayed next the word 'peace'). The 'urn' in *An Urn too Chic for the Ashes of a Political Party* and the 'jar' in *A Large Chinese Jar for Preserving Drugs*, seem to refer to the fact that a stupa is shaped like a giant urn or jar (or perhaps the stupa-shaped Buddhist reliquaries). The former pokes fun at politics, suggesting that as stupas were built to contain the ashes of Buddha, it would be a waste to use them to preserve the ashes of modern political parties, ridiculing modern politics, while the latter is a black humor, referring to the drug culture that flourished during this period and suggesting that a stupa would be a good place to store drugs. Then there is the original title of *Odalisca Totem—Pus Distributor (for use by war propagandists)*—seems to be a play on 'distributore di gas' (gas station). Combined with the term 'war propaganda,' 'distributore di pus' can be taken to mean 'to distribute pus = war,' and can be said to express the anti-war attitude toward the Vietnam War that was raging at the time.

In this section we have looked at the way in which Sottsass developed his own methods of expression while being stimulated by the popular culture of the time, expressing his views on politics and society in a humorous manner through the 1967 'Totem' series. He succeeded in capturing the anti-establishment mood of the times, demonstrating a critical stance towards existing values through his design work.

3. Sottsass' 'Orient'

While the previous section focused on Sottsass' relationship with popular culture, this chapter will look at the 1967 'Totem' series from the viewpoint of his interest in Eastern religion and philosophy. However, before continuing, it is important to remember that Sottsass' views on Eastern religion, philosophy and arts, particularly regarding India, represent those seen through the eyes of a Western person living in the 1960s. The purpose of this section is to examine how Sottsass arrived at his original ideas inspired by Eastern culture.

3-1. Sottsass' Ceramic Design and the East

Sottsass' ceramic designs subsequent to 1963 are inextricably linked to Eastern religion and philosophy. After returning from his trip to India in 1961, he contracted an unidentified illness and while lying in his hospital bed he produced countless drawings for ceramic works. After recovering, he went on to create several series of ceramic works based on these drawings that paid homage to Eastern religions. The first of these was the 'Darkness' series that he began in 1963. Based on the theme of death, which he felt to be very close to during his stay in India and his subsequent battle with illness, it consisted of geometric figures such as circles and semicircles together with motifs evocative of Sanskrit script applied to black, cylindrical pottery as a form of homage to mandalas. His 1964 'Offerings to Shiva' series was named after the Hindu god, Shiva, and consisted of earth-colored cylindrical ceramic objects painted with geometric figures, again inspired by mandalas and other Oriental religious art. In 1969 he produced the 'Tantra,' 'Smoke (Fumo),' and 'Yantra' series, that were followed in the early 1970s by 'The Indian Memory,' all of these designs being heavily inspired by Eastern religions and art, particularly those of India.⁷

Sottsass' interest in Eastern religion and philosophy was first aroused during his visit to India in 1961. That year, Sottsass had been commissioned by Montecatini, an Italian chemical company, to design a booth for an industrial trade fair to be held in New Delhi and he took this opportunity to visit the city. After completing the assignment, Sottsass and his then wife, Fernanda Pivano, traveled around India and several other Asian countries. At this time, very few Westerners were traveling to India, and photographs or films of the country were not generally available. When Sottsass saw the landscapes there for the first time he became enraptured, talking a huge number of photographs during their travels. Among these he captured scenes of showing the bodies of people who had died due to poverty or the unsanitary conditions, piled up on the roadside, old Indian architecture and scenes of the daily lives of ordinary people. The various sights he saw in India were to become an important inspiration for his subsequent designs.

Returning from this fulfilling visit to India, Sottsass suddenly

fell ill with an unidentified disease and was in danger of losing his life. However, with the strong support of the design manager at Olivetti, he was able to travel to the U.S. in search of a good doctor finally being admitted to a hospital in San Francisco. His subsequent convalescence on the West Coast was to prove significant in the development of his ceramic designs, the reason being that this was when he first became acquainted with the American 'Beat' poet, Allen Ginsberg, allowing him to absorb the trends of the counterculture, and become more influenced by the spiritual world of the East.

The early 1960s, saw the spread of American counterculture, embodied in the Beat Generation or as it was also known, the Beatnik movement, the central figures of which were poets and writers, such as Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. They experimented with drugs, sex, religion, and spirituality as they explored new forms of literary expression, their novel and scandalous works making them unique in the postwar American literary world and later winning the enthusiastic support of the hippies and other young people. It would appear that Sottsass first met Ginsberg through his wife, Fernanda Pivano, a successful writer and translator who was later to introduce Ginsberg's and Ernest Hemingway's works in Italy and in 1967 helped arrange for Ginsberg to give a poetry reading at the Spoleto Festival. In a private capacity, Sottsass and his wife were to become close friends with Ginsberg, making various trips together. In 1967 Sottsass and Pivano published the short-lived underground magazine, *Pianeta Fresco* [Fresh Planet], and Ginsberg cooperated with them on this. Speaking of his relationship with Ginsberg, Sottsass said '*Allen Ginsberg spoke his thoughts clearly. I listened. I wanted to bring these thoughts home*,'⁸ and from this we can see that he was greatly influenced by the poet.

Ginsberg contributed significantly to Sottsass' understanding of Eastern religion, thought, and art. Having also spent time in India, Ginsberg possessed a deep knowledge of Zen Buddhism as well as other Eastern religions and philosophy. He introduced Sottsass to Ajit Mookerjee's study of Indian religious art and this book is known to have been a major source of inspiration for Sottsass' ceramic designs from the 'Tantra' series onward.⁹ Influenced by the Beatniks who used hallucinogenic drugs and meditation to achieve a trance-like state, considering this an important tool in creating their works, Sottsass also appears to have practiced meditation as a means of exploring the spiritual world. He wrote in 1967 of the love he shared with the god Shiva¹⁰ and says that the side effects of the medication he took during his illness influenced the creation of his 'Darkness' series of ceramics.¹¹

During his hospitalization in San Francisco from 1962 to 1963, Sottsass made countless drawings for ceramics. He went on to produce a numerous series of ceramic works but it is probably safe to assume that nearly all of these were based on the drawings he produced at that time. Immersed in the American counterculture and inspired by Eastern religions, Sottsass produced innovative ceramic designs that strongly reflected these influences.

3-2. Tools For Life

As described above, strongly influenced by the counterculture, Sottsass continued to expand his interest in Eastern religion and

philosophy while simultaneously observing the Eastern world from his own unique perspective. This was probably due to his background as an architect and designer allowing him to notice the relationships between people and objects within Indian living spaces.

One of the reasons why Sottsass became interested in Indian life in this way was probably due to a sense of crisis regarding the mass consumption society within which he lived. As mentioned above, Sottsass found himself fascinated by the image of a vibrant popular culture, but at the same time, he was also becoming increasingly critical of postwar capitalist society. In his view, the excesses of consumer culture had caused contemporary people to become obsessed with the joy of 'filling their homes with a thousand small trophies of personal status, objects that would not in any way sacrifice themselves to currency values,'¹² their competitive purchasing behavior filling them with a sense of isolation and obsession and leading eventually to depression. Aware of these issues at home, Sottsass was impressed by spiritual richness of the people in India that resulted from their material poverty. Among his notes regarding pottery, Sottsass wrote of the spirituality of the people of the East as follows:

'In my opinion Eastern craftsmen have always striven to raise the poorest materials from their vulgar origins to the very high, tautly concentrated realms of cultural and psychic adventure. I have never seen everyday life in the Orient reduced to comedy. [...] in fact, I have always seen gestures of all kinds transformed into magical and religious acts; I have always seen people attempting to transform their lives into cosmic acts. People in the East have always endeavored to endow the poorest materials with magic tension, meditative silence and patient appreciation.'¹³

Here he describes how clay, one of the 'poorest materials,' is transformed through the hands of artisans into pottery, that belongs to a 'very high, tautly concentrated realms of cultural and psychic adventure,' but interestingly, in the same way that he saw clay sublimated from the mundane to the sacred, Sottsass also saw a similar transformation from the commonplace to the spiritual in people's lives. During his stay in India, Sottsass was struck by the way in which poverty and unsanitary conditions brought people into close familiarity with death but was amazed by how gracefully and resolutely people faced it.¹⁴ Sottsass felt the tension and poignancy of such an environment and believed it provided a space that allowed religion to enter into their lives. He came to think that this proximity to material poverty and spiritual richness was a universal aspect of Eastern life and culture:

'They sit on the floor, eat with their hands, and their clothes consist simply of a single piece of cloth. Within this kind of environment, even a small bronze bowl, for example, becomes extremely important. It becomes a tool for contemplation, a tool for meditation and signifies that someone is a leading figure in society. And because these objects are so important, craftsmen strive to make them more carefully, more precisely, so that they become beautiful objects emanating a sense of mystery and magic.'¹⁵

In a life of material poverty and scant material goods, even a small piece of tableware is cherished and used with great care. As a result, these objects become imbued with 'mystery' and 'magic' through people's hands. Here, too, we see objects sublimated from the mundane to the sacred through the rich spirituality of the people. When Sottsass describes objects as becoming 'tools,' indispensable to people's lives, he seems to imply that these differ from the useless 'trophies' that are merely placed in a room.

However, it should be noted that when Sottsass speaks of 'tools,' he uses the term in a much wider context than is usual. In an essay for *Domus* magazine prior to his stay in India in 1961, he traced the origins of design back to mankind's earliest days, saying, '*If there is a reason for the existence of design, the only one possible is that design succeeds in restoring or giving to tools and things that sacred element for which human beings leave the automatic and mortal sphere and return to the ritual one, i.e. life.*'¹⁶ The ideas expressed here were to continue to represent the essence of Sottsass' design for many years to come.¹⁷ Already, in 1961, we can see that what he referred to as 'tools' went beyond items created to increase the efficiency of daily life and had taken on a strong spiritual aspect. In 1969, Sottsass developed this concept of design further, becoming more critical of the mass-consumption culture described above.

'I began then to think that if there was any sense in making things that might help people in some way or other—help them to recognize and free themselves—if there was any justification at all for designing objects, it could only be found in the performance of a kind of therapeutic act, an act that would enable objects to heighten the awareness all human beings have, or can have, of their own adventure.'¹⁸

Sottsass was questioning the meaning of his existence as a designer, asking himself what justification there could be for design if it only resulted to people surrounding themselves with an overabundance of things, leading to mental illness. After much contemplation, he concluded that he had no alternative but to create designs that would liberate the spirits of those who were suffering from obsession and arouse in them an awareness of their own inner feelings, that is to say, designs that would encourage meditation. His 1969 'Yantra' series was the result of this thinking. He said that a single ceramic *yantra* should be placed in an otherwise empty room or viewers would lose their focus and the work become something else entirely.¹⁹ He believed that if people focused on a 'Yantra' in an empty space it would stimulate meditation, leading to spiritual release.

Regarding Sottsass' aim of creating designs, his second wife, Barbara Radice, an artist who was also deeply involved in the Memphis group, had the following to say: '*It was necessary to extend the idea of function to the psychic sphere, paying homage to Freud—something the Bauhaus people never thought of doing.*'²⁰ As Radice states here, that 'Sottsass' extension of the meaning of the word 'tool' is in essence, an extension of the meaning of 'function.'²¹ Sottsass, who had been working on designs to provide people with a new way of life since shortly after the Second World War, considered Bauhaus design outdated. In 1956, Asger Jorn (a member of the CoBrA art movement) invited him to participate in a meeting of The International Movement

for an Imaginist Bauhaus (MIBI), where he gave a lecture in which he was critical of the Bauhaus.²² Sottsass was soon to leave this radical group, but his criticism of conventional design, as represented by Bauhaus, was to continue for many years.

This idea is simply a way of widening the concept of the functional to embrace the subconscious and the unconscious, something that the Bauhaus and the whole of that generation never thought of doing. The idea of the Bauhaus people was that man could deal with everything rationally.²³

It should be noted that Bauhaus, which aimed to integrate art and technology, did not have the primary goal of being completely rational. However, Sottsass, who at the time was deeply involved in 1960s counterculture, considered Bauhaus designs to be overly rational and focused instead on 'the subconscious' and 'the unconscious' that had been excluded from such designs.

During the 20th century, artists who focused on irrational forces such as 'the subconscious,' 'the unconscious' or 'dreams,' created a plethora of movements—Surrealism, Art Brut, Informel, CoBrA, and the aforementioned Beatniks, to name but a few. One thing these artists all shared in common was an attitude of rebellion towards the rationalism of modern society, and in this respect, Sottsass can be said to be part of this trend. However, in his 1967 memoir, Sottsass wrote: '*I certainly don't want to end up [...] in books on art history. [...] I simply want to migrate and make implements for living,*'²⁴ so it can be said that by adhering to his use of the word 'implement' he continued to retain a strong consciousness of himself as a designer.

As described above, Sottsass expanded the meaning of the Bauhaus concept of 'function' to include 'the subconscious' and 'the unconscious,' which can be said to have previously been considered to belong to the realm of 'art,' within design. He made it his mission create 'tools' or 'implements' that would lead people to meditation, not as an artist, but as a designer.

4. A Space for Meditation

In this way, Sottsass gave a lot of thought to the development of 'tools' for the sake of living, and at the same time he also produced the 'Yantra' and other series of ceramic works but where should his 'Totem' series be positioned within the development of his work? An important thing to bear in mind when considering this is the huge size of his 1967 *Totems*. Unlike the 'Yantra,' and other series that could be held in the hand or placed on a table or cabinet, this was not possible with these huge ceramics that measured up to two meters in height. Furthermore, the 1967 *Totems* were created for an exhibition, not for domestic use. Sottsass reminisced on how he came up with the concept for the 'Totem' series.

'I came up with the idea of creating a series of large, brightly colored columns. By stacking colored ceramic rings, one on top of the other, I was able to create a column of more than two meters in height. I felt that perhaps by placing these columns in groups of two, three, or four, it might be possible to produce the impression of some strange building,

resembling a small temple.²⁵

Looking at photographs of the 1967 “Menhir” exhibition, we can see several *Totems* rising up from the floor like giant pillars, and as Sottsass said, they certainly created an impression of ‘some strange form of architecture’ or ‘small temple.’ The use of the word ‘temple’ would seem to suggest that Sottsass hoped that visitors to the exhibition would pray or meditate there. In a leaflet written by Pivano and distributed at the Agliana venue for the “Menhir” exhibition, he noted that Sottsass purposely designed the *Totems* to overshadow the ordinary sized objects or furniture to be found in a room in order to influence the space itself.²⁶ Bearing this in mind, if we agree that he considered the ‘Yantra’ to be ceramic tools to aid meditation, then it can be conjectured that by filling the room with *Totems* he aimed to create a mediation space to promote the liberation of people’s spirits.

As an architect and designer, it can be said that it was in Sottsass’ nature for him to design an overall space through the design of a single piece of furniture. For example, when working on the computer system *ELEA9003* for Olivetti, he designed the height of the cabinet to allow colleagues working in an office see each other’s faces, even when seated, in order to facilitate communication. As Burney points out in his book, this demonstrated that his endeavor to ‘humanize the office environment,’ was a result of his pursuit of an ideal human scale.²⁷ In this context, it can be said that the giant *Totems* clearly transcend the human scale and represent a departure or escape from the everyday life.

Writing of his 1967 exhibition, Sottsass said: ‘*At the opening, in addition to strangers, there were poets, singers, artists, together with a whole range of lower-class proletarians with long hair who came hiding hand-rolled cigarettes laced with marijuana.*’²⁸ If we look again at photographs of the 1967 exhibition, we see young, hippy-like people sitting down, leaning against *Totems*, or even lying next to them, each interacting freely with the space created by the *Totems*. The scene bears more resemblance to a peace rally or a hippie music concert than an exhibition. They seem to be simply passing the time without doing anything within in the ‘small temple’ created by Sottsass’ *Totems*. Writing in the magazine *Domus*, the art critic, Tommaso Trini, described the exhibition as resembling ‘*The circular radiation of intense chromatic vibrations as corrective therapy for the somnambulist state induced by the mass media. [...] not forms so much as spiritual symbols exerting a stimulus on us which is powerful but non-violent, freeing us of our inhibitory tensions.*’²⁹ It can probably be said that this is precisely the effect that Sottsass hoped to achieve with his *Totems*. The space created in this way by the “Menhir” exhibition provided a place where people could meditate or find temporary escape from their daily lives, functioning exactly as Sottsass had wanted.

In 1969, two years after the “Menhir” exhibition, the “Landscape for a New Planet” exhibition (fig. 8) was held at the National Museum in Stockholm, presenting a different concept and inviting people to visit another world. In addition to the ‘Totem’ series, it also displayed the ‘Superbox’ series of wardrobes, a lighting system emitting red, orange, and green lights, and even a Buddhist altar containing a statue of Buddha, all these elements combining to create a fantastic space with a

mysterious, psychedelic atmosphere. The *Totems* exhibited at this exhibition were of a completely different design to those of 1967. Although they shared the same basic structure with ceramic parts stacked on top of each other to create a column, all the parts were of the same shape the same size and a single color. Several of these column-like works, consisting of stacked, disk-shaped parts, were arranged so that they formed a mandala-like design when viewed from above. The inspiration for this work came from the thirteenth-century Sun Temple in Konark, India, a photograph of which was included in the exhibition catalog together with a line from one of Ginsberg’s poems. Whereas the 1967 *Totems* presented a playful, colorful and humorous appearance, the 1969 *Totems* were serene, possessing a mysterious atmosphere and resembling religious monuments. Looking at the exhibition as a whole, the works such as ‘Superbox’ series gave it a pop atmosphere, but generally speaking, the unrestrained, open atmosphere of the “Menhir” exhibition had been completely eradicated. It would appear that Sottsass was heading towards a deeper spiritual world.

The fact is that the social climate was also undergoing a dramatic change at this time. The students’ anti-establishment movement reached its peak in 1968 as Italy headed into what were known as the ‘Years of Lead’ a period when government suppression and anti-government terrorism led to frequent violence. During the 1970s Sottsass tried to escape from the situation that gripped the country, temporarily abandoning his design work to devote himself to photography as he traveled around. His ceramic work also came to a sudden halt with the end of the 1960s, although it can be said that this was only natural. The reason being that, as described above, Sottsass’ ceramic designs were deeply linked to the 1960s. The new age called for new ‘tools’ and Sottsass’ design underwent another change.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on Sottsass’ ‘Totem’ series, in particular, on the group of works that he produced for the 1967 exhibition. In the midst of the anti-establishment tendencies of the 1960s, Sottsass was highly aware of political and social issues, pursuing new designs that captured the cultural zeitgeist of the times. Among the various works he produced during this period, the ‘Totem’ series is thought to have been conceived to function as a ‘tool’ to liberate the spirits of people who were exhausted by the stress of modern society and allow them to live better lives.

In 1986, the totem originally entitled *Pus Distributor (for use by war propagandists)* was renamed *Odalisca Totem* and a limited edition produced by the Mirabili company. At this time Sottsass had already distanced himself from the Memphis group and was beginning to move in a new direction so what was his thinking behind the reintroduction of the ‘Totem’ series? We can only surmise that Sottsass’ design philosophy was influenced by the political, social, and cultural factors of the times. We would like to continue our research into Sottsass’ work during the 1980s and present the results in a future paper.

(Curator, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation)
(Translated by Gavin Frew)

Notes

1. Shiro Kuramata and Ettore Sottsass, exh. cat. (Tokyo: 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT, Miyake Issey Foundation, 2011).
2. For further information on Sottsass' relationship with Rondi, refer to: Ettore Sottsass, *Scritto di notte* (Written at Night), Adelphi Edizioni, 2010.
3. The exhibition opened at the Galleria Sperone in Milan before traveling to the Poltronova showroom in Agliana and the Galleria la Bertesca in Genoa.
4. For further information on the work of Poltronova and Sottsass refer to: Ivan Miettton, ed., *Sottsass: Poltronova 1958–1974* (Paris: Editions Skira, 2022).
5. Ettore Sottsass, "Ettore Sottsass Jr.: Furniture 1965," (1965), in *Domus*, vol. VI (1965–1969), ed. Charlotte and Peter Fiell, trans. Bradley Baker Dick (Köln: Taschen, 2006), pp. 558–559.
6. Deyan Sudjic, *Ettore Sottsass and the Poetry of Things*, London: Phaidon, 2015, pp. 146–165.
7. More on Sottsass's ceramic designs can be found in: Bruno Bischofberger, ed., *Ettore Sottsass: ceramics* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996).
8. Sottsass, *Written at Night*.
9. Emilia Terragni, ed., *Sottsass* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 209.
10. Ettore Sottsass, "Episode Three," (1967), in *Ettore Sottsass: ceramics*, p. 83.
11. Ettore Sottsass, "Ceramics of Darkness," (1963), in *Ettore Sottsass: ceramics*, pp. 32–35.
12. Ettore Sottsass, "Experience with ceramics," (1969), in *Ettore Sottsass: ceramics*, p. 8.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
14. Refer to: Barbara Radice, *Ettore Sottsass: a critical biography*, trans. Rodney Stringer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), pp. 59–61; Jan Burney, *Ettore Sottsass*, Design Heroes (HarperCollins, 1994).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
16. Ettore Sottsass, "Design," (1962), in *Domus*, vol. V (1960–1964), ed. Charlotte and Peter Fiell, trans. Bradley Baker Dick (Köln: Taschen, 2006), pp. 554–556.
17. Terragni, ed., *Sottsass*, p. 149.
18. Sottsass, "Experience with ceramics," p. 9.
19. Terragni, ed., *Sottsass*, p. 209.
20. Radice, *Ettore Sottsass*, p. 50.
21. Please refer to the following: Jacopo Galimberti, "Function and Fantasy: Ettore Sottsass and the Thresholds of Modernism," in Gean Moreno, ed., *Ettore Sottsass and the social factory*, exh. cat. (Miami: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2019), p. 118.
22. Ettore Sottsass, "For an Imaginist Bauhaus Against an Imaginary Bauhaus (1956)," (1956), in *Ettore Sottsass and the Social Factory*, pp. 61–64.
23. Sottsass, "Experience with ceramics," p. 10.
24. Sottsass, "Episode Three," p. 86.
25. Sottsass, *Written at Night*.
26. Terragni, ed., *Sottsass*, p. 209.
27. Burney, *Ettore Sottsass*.
28. Sottsass, *Written at Night*.
29. Tommaso Torni, "Sottsass: Ceramics 67," (1967), in *Domus*, vol. V (1965–1969), p. 360.

List of illustrations (pp. 28–37)

- fig. 1—Ettore Sottsass, *Odalisca Totem*, 1964–66 (design) / 1986 (produced by Mirabili Arte d'Abitare), Glazed ceramic with formica particle board base, 215.0 × 48.0 × 48.0 cm, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 2—Ettore Sottsass, *Double-bodied Sideboard (Model MS. 120)*, 1959 (design) / 1959 (produced by Poltronova), Beechwood, santos veneer and brass, 138.0 × 118.0 × 46.0 cm, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 3—Ettore Sottsass, *Superbox (green/gray)*, 1966 (design) / 1968 (produced by Poltronova), Plastic laminate over plywood, 200.0 × 80.0 × 80.0 cm, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 4—Ettore Sottsass, *Valentine Portable Typewriter*, 1968 (design) / 1968 (Produced by Olivetti), ABS plastic and other materials, 9.8 × 32.4 × 34.3 cm (typewriter), 11.1 × 34.3 × 35.2 cm (case), Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 5—Bench: Ettore Sottsass, *Panchetta Lucrezia*, 1964 (design) / 1964 (produced by Poltronova), Walnut laminated with white formica, natural walnut and fabric, 85.5 × 117.5 × 50.3 cm, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation
Frame: Ettore Sottsass, *Wooden frame with Roy Lichtenstein Crying Girl lithograph*, 1965 (design) / 1965 (produced by Poltronova), Lacquered wood, 55.0 × 120.0 cm, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein, New York & JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 6—Installation view: "Menhir, Ziggurat, Stupas, Hydrants & Gas Pumps" (1967, Milano, Galleria Sperone)
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Fonds Ettore Sottsass / distributed by AMF
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 7—Exhibition flyer by Ettore Sottsass: "Menhir, Ziggurat, Stupas, Hydrants & Gas Pumps" (1967, Milano, Galleria Sperone)
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Fonds Ettore Sottsass / distributed by AMF
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778
- fig. 8—Installation view: "Landscape for a New Planet" (1969, Nationalmuseum Stockholm)
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Fonds Ettore Sottsass / distributed by AMF
© erede Ettore Sottsass, JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4778