



‘A Ritual Whisper’: The Memphis Group’s Cultural Revolution

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“Decoration can be a state of mind, an unusual perception, a ritual whisper.” – Ettore Sottsass, *Design Metaphors*

The Memphis group (sometimes known as Memphis-Milano or simply Memphis) was founded by architects Ettore Sottsass and Michele de Lucchi at the Salone del Mobile of Milan in 1981. Taking their name from a Bob Dylan song off his *Blonde on Blonde* album, the Memphis group was a collective of approximately 25 Post-Modern architects, furniture designers, industrial designers, and graphic designers who rejected minimalism in favor of bright colors, geometric and asymmetrical shapes, prints such as marble, waves, and zig-zag patterns and unusual materials including plastic laminate, aluminum, fiberglass and sheet metal. One of the most recognizable members of the Memphis group to American consumers is Michael Graves, who had a very successful line of housewares under his name at Target. Although many critics did not understand or appreciate the group’s contribution to the design world at the time, today the influence of the Memphis group has been regularly likened to Punk rock for how the Memphis group shook up the design world in the same manner that Punk shook up the music world.

Although Sottsass left Memphis in 1985, and the group officially disbanded in 1988, the Memphis group’s aesthetic has continued to inspire many influential artists and designers, and has experienced a very recent return to the spotlight as Sotheby’s November 2016 auction of David Bowie’s renowned Memphis furniture collection brought a new wave of attention to the group (Corsillo, 2016). While there have been some popular press articles written about the Memphis group recently, along with a recent biography of Ettore Sottsass, the cultural relevance of the Memphis group has been largely forgotten until very recently. The Memphis group were major trendsetters, described by *The New York Times* in 1989 as “the design story of the 80's” (Slesin, 1989). When one thinks of the caricatures of 1980s design, they are actually thinking of the Memphis group. The influence of the Memphis group on the fashion industry is still highly visible today, as many significant fashion designers are self-professed fans of Memphis, including J.W. Anderson, Angela Missoni, Miuccia Prada, Karl Lagerfeld, Nicholas Ghesquiere of Louis Vuitton, Peter Pilotto, Donatella Versace, Sergio Rossi and Bill Gaytten, formerly of Christian Dior and Phoebe Philo of Celine. Although the group disbanded in 1988, the

movement has continued and has administrative headquarters located on Via Olivetti and the Memphis showroom is located on Via della Moscova (Memphis-Milano.com, 2017).

Theorist James Laver stated (1973), that as a style, look, or lifestyle moves further into the past, the potential for its revival increases as the perception of it changes from dowdy to hideous to ridiculous to amusing and beyond as it returns into fashion. According to Andrew Groves, of the University of Westminster, "The recycling of fashion trends has been speeded up," (Winterman, 2009, para. 7) as technology has increased the speed of the transfer of information. Signs indicating a revival of the 1980s influence in current fashion are evident, as the era's look and feel are now highly visible in other cultural areas such as the 1980s-influenced Netflix television show *Stranger Things*. Now is the optimal time for an academic examination of the Memphis group's lasting impact on fashion and interior design. This research paper presents a detailed history of the origins and founding of the Memphis group, its impact on mainstream fashion in the eighties, the groups' popularity among avant-garde artists in the nineties and aught and its newfound appreciation and renewed influence in fashion in the recent past.

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