



Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Jewelry Boxes

"Cartier Design Viewed by Ettore Sottsass"

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
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Reviewed by Carolyn Foug

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has mounted a powerful decorative arts show with *"Cartier Design Viewed by Ettore Sottsass."* The concept—an iconoclastic designer presenting a collection of fine jewelry—provokes questions about the nature of exhibitions and authorship. Particularly, what happens when aesthetics rather than expertise drives the makeup of a show?

Sottsass has had a long and distinguished career in product design and architecture, but he gained special fame in the early '80s for his role as founding member of Memphis, the Milan-based collective of designers whose willfully graphic furniture broadcast the ideas of postmodernism to the general public. At the exit to the Cartier exhibit, the museum shows three newly acquired Sottsass furniture pieces, one of which—the iconic Carlton room divider—is from his Memphis period. This piece—a totemic assembly of multi-colored, plastic laminate shelves joined at 60- and 90-degree angles—offers physical evidence of Sottsass' famed irreverence toward modernist design standards such as the oath of truth to materials, the goal of formal rigor, and the commitment to rational function. The Carlton demonstrates a selective view of preciousness, one that values clever assembly over material purity and wit over beauty.

The unrestrained preciousness and earnest beauty of Cartier's jewels tested Sottsass to construct his own world in a foreign land. In published interviews he acknowledges his unfamiliarity with Cartier at the time he was approached by the company in 2000 to interpret its in-house collection of over 1,200 items. Instead of rushing to become a fine jewelry historian, however, Sottsass chose to trust his eye when selecting 209 of the collection's pieces, created during the years 1902 to 1975. Further, he wanted the museum visitor to have a similar experience: to connect viscerally with jewels presented as art objects rather than study them as cultural artifacts. What comes

through in the exhibition is Sottsass' faith in the ability of an object to speak for itself and in his own ability to set the stage for such a soliloquy.

Sottsass transformed two of the museum's generous ground-floor gallery rooms into cavernous black-box spaces, lit only by fiber optics in the casework and, in turn, by the glowing jewels housed within. Wall text is absent, except for small numbers on pedestals that key into a reference booklet. Entering the darkened exhibit from a bright gallery of surrealist paintings with well-informed wall plaques next to them feels like crossing a threshold from a museum of high art and scholarship to an aquarium of luminous creatures and scenography.

In each room, more than 20 black phone booth-sized vitrines are wired together at their tops to form a curved peninsula on the gallery floor. This arrangement of cases, in which the gallery walls are pointedly ignored, creates a science-fair effect, where viewers follow a path through the visions that came to Sottsass via Cartier. The display reads as a linear series of composed portraits to behold singly rather than a spatial landscape of sights to wander around in.

The design of the individual vitrines underscores this staging tendency. Behind full-height glazing, matte-black pedestals—often theatrically attenuated—reach from the floor of a typical cabinet to lift the pieces to eye level. The pedestals reflect light and cast strikingly graphic shadows in the lower part of the case, marking the presence of a designer. The chunky base that is seen in much of Sottsass' work appears here along with an equally heavy crown to weigh the vitrines down. It is a telling moment—a reveal at the base and crown would have allowed the case to quietly levitate and the viewer to look right past the casework to its contents.

In the exhibit, Sottsass expresses his own love of beautifully designed and well-crafted objects with spectacular clarity. His strategy of downplaying historical context demonstrates a trust in the intrinsic charisma of Cartier's work to command attention. However, his forceful director's hand reveals a skepticism of the viewer's own resources to experience the work without some sort of script. Perhaps when such a curator does not have history at his disposal to frame his subject, he is compelled to use himself. ■