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SOTTASS' WORKS AT THE RESTORED NEGOZIO OLIVETTI IN VENICE. FROM TOP, 'CERAMICHE A COLAGGIO', 1962-63, AND 'VASI A ONDE' (SILVERWARE VASES), 1969, MADE BY SOCIETÀ CERAMICA TOSCANA; PAIR OF CERAMICS, 1955-59, AND 'CERAMICHE DELLE TENEBRE', 1963, MADE BY BITOSSÌ; ENAMEL PLATES, 1958, MADE BY MASTRO 3 LABORATORY; AND VASE, FROM THE YANTRA SERIES, 1969, MADE BY BITOSSÌ



Photography: Matthieu Salvaing, courtesy of FAI Italia

Against type

A show of early Ettore Sottsass ceramics in Carlo Scarpa's historic Olivetti showroom unites two titans of 20th-century design



‘Ceramics is maybe the best thing Sottsass did, but it’s only known by a few’

of the 1980s, but his early work with ceramic, when the painter manqué, who forewent his first love of art to follow his father into architecture, started applying his painterly eye to terracotta, mixing colour and decoration with structure and form in an original way.

‘Ceramics is a very important part of Sottsass’ work, maybe the best thing he did, but it’s only known by a few collectors and museum directors,’ Zana says. He has been collecting the ceramics since 2000, alongside the work of Andrea Branzi, Alessandro Mendini and Michele De Lucchi. They’re Memphis stalwarts, but it’s their early work, the Alchimia movement, that attracts him. ‘They moved the frontier between art and design – design became a way to rethink society, colours, the furniture industry, comfort,’ says Zana, who trained at Paris’ Beaux-Arts in the mid-1980s, and developed a practice combining architecture with interior design.

Zana takes particular interest in Sottsass’ work from the late 1950s, when he was producing collections with Bitossi for Milan gallery Il Sestante. ‘He had discovered terracotta and was exploring techniques linked to early Italian civilisation, mixing them with modern design,’ says Zana. ‘He would do a collection every year based on his mood. So when he was in a dark place he did one called *Ceramiche Delle Tenebre* (ceramics of darkness), for example, something very new for that time.’

For this exhibition Zana is lending ten to 12 of his own pieces and has persuaded other private collectors to lend theirs, making a total of around 60. The pieces cover 1955 to 1970, from Sottsass’ early forays for Il Sestante to his graphic Tantra and Yantra collections inspired by excursions in India. ‘This is going to be a fantastic way for people to take in two things you wouldn’t usually see together,’ says Zana of his subject and location. ‘It’s very emotional for me to think that the two architects I respect the most in the 20th century were working for the same company. It’s an homage to the two former art directors of Olivetti.’ ★
Ettore Sottsass: La Céramique 1955-1970, Negozio Olivetti, Venice, 11 May – 20 August, negoziolivetti.it

It’s a concrete Valhalla, concealed behind the arches of Piazza San Marco in Venice. The Negozio Olivetti, once a showroom for the company’s typewriters and calculators, designed by its erstwhile art director Carlo Scarpa in 1957-58, and now a museum run by FAI (the Italian Environmental Foundation), is an architectural treat. It’s one that the French architect and design-art collector Charles Zana never tires of visiting.

‘The staircase is possibly one of the most Instagrammed pieces of architecture,’ he says. It was while caressing the concrete balustrades of the interior during 2015’s Venice Art Biennale that Zana struck on the idea of introducing the space to a new crowd – the Biennale art-trippers – by combining it with the work of Ettore Sottsass, another of his design heroes (and another one-time Olivetti art director, who created the brand’s first computer, alongside its Valentine typewriter). The subject of the four-month exhibition this year would not be Sottsass’ Memphis masterpieces

ABOVE, ‘VASI A ONDE’, 1969, AND RIGHT, ENAMEL PLATE, 1958, BOTH OF WHICH WERE ORIGINALLY EXHIBITED AT MILAN GALLERY IL SESTANTE

