

by Anvar Ali Khan

ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST ICONIC DESIGNS: AND THE INDIAN SECRET BEHIND IT

Photo: The curious
story of the Olivetti Valentine
typewriter.



At a discussion on the social history of the typewriter at Times Litfest in Mumbai in early December, the conversation turned inevitably to the Olivetti – the iconic Italian typewriter of the 1960s.

Olivetti was, arguably, the forerunner of Apple, as one of the first companies to embrace the idea of style, flair and passion in its industrial design, resulting in a range of products that consumers would lust after. Even today, half a century later, many of Olivetti's products are proudly on display in design museums in the United States and Europe.

But of all Olivetti's products, perhaps none was as brilliantly designed – or as lusted after – as its Valentine typewriter. Designed by Ettore Sottsass, the Valentine looked more like a piece of modern art than a typewriter. It was available in a selection of candy colours (as Apple's iMac would, 30 years later), but the most popular model was a luscious, juicy red.

Few people realise that this great icon of modern industrial design was inspired (at least partly) by the experience of everyday Indian life.





'The ball-pen of typewriters'

In the late 1960s, Olivetti wanted to create a typewriter that was light, portable, convenient, modern and economical. And that was the brief given to Ettore Sottsass.



From his recent travels in the US, Sottsass brought to the project elements of pop art, and from his travels in India – especially South India – he brought elements of exuberance and colour. Two years later, the Olivetti Valentine was launched – an audacious new design that eliminated the conventional carrying case, and was available in a choice of lime-green, ice-blue, polar-bear white and, most famously, lipstick red. It was, suddenly, “the ball-pen of typewriters”.

The Olivetti Valentine was a runaway success.

As Sottsass later confessed, he had created it “for use anyplace except in an office, so as not to remind anyone of monotonous working hours, but rather to keep amateur poets company on quiet Sundays in the country, or to provide a highly coloured object on a table in a studio apartment”.

The Valentine was not just a great commercial success, it also won several awards for its radical design, and became one of the great icons of industrial design: just a couple of years later it was accepted into the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Today, forty years later, a second-hand Olivetti Valentine can cost up to \$1,000 on websites like e-Bay – more than it cost when it was brand new.

But the story doesn't quite end there.



Photo: Ettore Sottsass.
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

'The godfather of Italian cool'

Ettore Sottsass, the designer of the Olivetti Valentine, was described by fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld as "one of the design geniuses of the 20th century". But the description he would himself prefer is "The godfather of Italian cool".

Sottsass began life as an architect, but he promiscuously diversified into multiple areas of design: industrial products, furniture, ceramics, graphics, textiles and jewellery. He was one of the flag-carriers of Italian design at a time when it was Italy's greatest export to the rest of the world.

He had a very successful collaboration with Olivetti, for whom he designed typewriters (as well as presciently stylish models of their early computers). Yet, he simultaneously designed things like earthenware pottery, inspired by a passion for all things Indian. He also had an extraordinary circle of friends, which included people like Pablo Picasso and Ernest Hemingway, as well as 1960s American Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Bob Dylan.

In fact, it was Allen Ginsberg who, having backpacked through India himself, inspired Sottsass to make his own discovery of the country. Sottsass made several trips to India in the 1960s and '70s and, as a critic once observed of him, "the celestial beatnik dips his pencils again in the Ganges".

Sensuality, pleasure and melancholy

Sottsass had a uniquely humanistic approach to industrial design. He hated pure functionality and revelled in elements like uncertainty, inconclusion, sensuality, pleasure and melancholy. He wanted consumers to not merely overcome their fear of machines, but to fall in love with them for their own sake.

When he designed a typewriter or a computer, for example, his primary concern was not the technology it contained, but the feelings of the person who would use it. He wanted the machine to suggest to the user a whole new way of working and, simultaneously, to open a small window to a future world. When he later designed furniture, his primary concern would be not the chair itself, but the room in which it would sit, and the life that would be lived around it.