



PETER SHIRE: ICON IN THE REMAKING

The L.A. artist, a perennial face of Postmodernism, is being discovered by a new generation of fans

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Tucked behind a hair salon and a Pilates studio on L.A.'s Echo Park Avenue, the workplace of artist Peter Shire hides in anything-but-plain sight. His metal gates are painted chartreuse and topped by brushed stainless-steel angels and a mermaid whirligig; beyond them, a paint-splattered staircase leads to the studio, once a car-repair shop.

That's where the real fun begins. Inside the 6,500-square-foot space is a riot of color and pattern. Industrial shop machines for shaping metal are painted in vivid swaths of green and saffron, the drawers of tool cabinets colored in an ombré from light to dark. Even wrenches are drenched in orange and olive green. Then there is the work: Shire's Constructivist metal assemblages and whimsically sculptural chairs in a rainbow of candy-colored polyurethane coatings and low-fire ceramic teapots and mugs in Miami Vice pastels with abundant black stripes.

To the sound of Haydn on the local classical radio station, Shire enters, dressed like one of his artworks, wearing a striped T-shirt, red apron and mismatched color-blocked socks tucked inside a pair of leather sandals. It all might seem like an homage to the 1980s—call it Peter's Pee-wee's Playhouse. In fact, Shire,

one of the few American Postmodernists to have been a key member of the influential Milan-based



The artist in his studio

decorative-arts collective known as Memphis, has been a working artist since the 1970s. “The people who like my work say I have a true vision and constancy. I have never thought, ‘I’d better switch things up and go with the market,’” he says, pointing to a teapot made in the 1990s and one he recently made, both of which bear his unmistakable design signature. “Now they call me a designer-maker with a studio practice,” he adds with a laugh. “Have you ever heard such shit?” This designation may amuse him, but, gratifyingly, it has come from all corners: critics, curators, decorators, collectors and the crafts-obsessed Etsy crowd.

At 65, the lifelong resident of bohemian Echo Park—son of an entrepreneur mother and carpenter father and brother of Billy Shire, who founded the groundbreaking L.A. lowbrow gallery La Luz de Jesus—is suddenly being rediscovered by a younger audience captivated by his upbeat style. Recently, at the inaugural Parachute Market, a fashion-and-design pop-up in L.A.’s downtown arts district, Shire’s Echo Park Pottery, a diverse collection of ceramics that he designs, drew a crowd of admirers that included Tyra Banks. “You combine his work with Memphis in the 1980s and all the attention that postwar California design has been getting and it’s 100 percent time for Peter Shire,” says interior designer Oliver M. Furth, chair of the Decorative Arts

and Design Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). “Peter is Postmodern and prepster.”

A quick history lesson: Postmodernism, a broadly applied term used to describe everything from conceptual art to deconstructed literature, clothing or food, had perhaps its most visually powerful realization in the field of architecture in the 1980s. Practitioners such as Michael Graves and Frank Gehry humorously reintroduced classical architectural elements to modern buildings—a vintage example being the broken pediment atop Philip Johnson’s 1984 Sony Building at 550 Madison Avenue that looks like a giant keyhole. Postmodern architecture emphasized the use of pure forms: cubes, spheres, rods and cones.

These shapes became the vocabulary of Postmodern decorative arts as practiced by designers including Shire, Ettore Sottsass and Shiro Kuramata, who joined forces in the Memphis group, a collective that coincided in time with such pop-cultural signifiers as Fiorucci, illustrator Patrick Nagel, Duran Duran and Grace Jones. From 1981 to 1988, the Memphis group incorporated art deco, Pop art, Jetsons-esque flourishes and a broad palette of color and pattern into furniture and accessories that were highly fashionable in certain circles but aesthetically perplexing to the world at large.

“It was not that easy to digest,” says Furth, who has a vintage Shire table in his living room alongside 18th-century Italian chairs and a contemporary sofa. Memphis, Shire says, was a reaction to the standardization of both the lowest-common-denominator design pumped out in factories and bourgeois Italian modernism. “Things that are optimistic and bright are very easy to see as saccharine and cloying,” Shire says. “That contributed to the divisive reception for Memphis—some people can’t handle fun. Sottsass said it was like fashion: good for a season and then it’s gone.”



"Memphis is Context" poster, for the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1986

While Postmodernism evolved—the pared-down Neo-Rococo designs of Marcel Wanders and Studio Job fit the bill today—Memphis has remained largely an outré curiosity. Now, however, like neon fashion and New Wave music, it is being reconsidered by the children of the 1980s, and Shire is the beneficiary. “I grew up with bed sheets that were watered-down versions of the Memphis style, having no idea of what it was,” says Furth. “Now I recognize the beauty of the original work by artists like Peter Shire.”

Though his work straddles the line between fine art and industrial design, Shire has achieved institutional recognition at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, in New York and at LACMA, which has some two dozen Shire works. In the auction market, his work has appreciated in recent years. In 1996, Peter Loughrey, owner of Los Angeles Modern Auctions, sold his first Shire work for under the estimated value; this past October, he sold a single Shire teapot for \$3,125, twice the low end of the estimate.

Though Memphis had a brief existence, Shire has kept the aesthetic alive by diversifying. In 1984, he created artworks for the Los Angeles Olympics and began building massive sculptures found throughout Los Angeles’ parks and streets—including one for the West Hollywood Ramada Plaza—and in Japan. He takes commissions from public arts institutions, architects, decorators and collectors; shows his chairs in galleries and museums; and sells his pottery at regular events in his studio and at retailers such as Hickoree’s in Brooklyn, Gravel & Gold in San Francisco and South Willard in L.A. He has also chosen two functional objects—chairs and teapots—as a continuing point of focus and source of inspiration. “This was one of the most lyrical sculptures I had ever seen,” his wife, Donna Okeya, says of a 1976 piece entitled Ostrich. “Peter called it a teapot.”

For Shire, the key to longevity is simple: “I am either blessed or cursed with knowing how to make things,” he says. “Whether it’s simple teapots and cups or weather vanes or pure sculpture, being a designer is an attempt at being of some value in the world. What I hope to do is bring people unmitigated joy.”