

# STAIR



## **MADE IN AMERICA: MARIO BUATTA**

*An interview with Emily Evans Eerdmans*

After decades in the antiques business, design historian and author Emily Evans Eerdmans was asked to handle the sale of property from the collection of her friend and colleague, Mario Buatta. Emily talks with us here about wearing this new hat, organizing Mario's two homes and five storage units, and the series of auctions Stair held in March and April.

**After spending decades in the antiques business, did you find it difficult to put your auctioneers hat on with such a large scale project?**

**EEE:** I studied and interned with Sotheby's in London before entering the antiques world, so I was familiar with the auction process. What I found astounding was how Stair's small staff was so incredibly organized and sorted through the immense volume of material so quickly to choose the right pieces. It was amazing to watch! We spent months organizing Mario's two homes and five storage units, so I know how exhausting it was to sort through this extraordinarily large collection. The only hurdle I had was getting my head around the conservative auction estimates, but I always knew you were the perfect auction house for this huge project. I have long been impressed by Stair's commitment to the decorative arts and how terrifically you market and display your sales.

**Were you surprised we took a different approach to the exhibition than Sotheby's?**

**EEE:** I knew you would celebrate Mario's taste, but when Colin mentioned his vision of a chintz flag to hang outside of your galleries, I knew we were off and running! There was SO much to display – nearly 1000 lots which is not an easy task. I thought your solution of a curated approach that elevated objects

on pedestals and plinths was genius. The window displays were so inventive – the one with garden furniture, mushrooms, and moss was pure fantasy. One of my favorite sections of the exhibition was the wall of Irish mirrors. You highlighted something Mario was passionate about and they sparkled like jewelry. One could feel the overall voraciousness of Mario's collecting. In fact, if he viewed this exhibition, I believe it would have re-ignited his passion for collecting beautiful things all over again.

### **Were you happy with the sale results?**

I was THRILLED – I believe all 1,500 lots sold. Everything rose to (with some exceeding) their level – which is what you all assured me from the beginning. Considering that we were entering a global pandemic with a topsy turvy stock market, I was so impressed by Stair's ability to keep calm, make the buyers feel confident and bring us such exceptional results. Stair has a talent for highlighting the personality of a single-owner collection. For marketing Mario's collection, the approach was as thoughtful as ever. Mario was famously known for loving dogs (or at least dog painting) and so Stair organized a special dog party to benefit a Cavaliers rescue group. Mario would have been absolutely delighted.

### **Through this whole process, did you discover anything new about Mario?**

**EEE:** I guess I didn't quite realize quite what an insatiable collector he was! He must have bought something every day of his life. It was interesting to see that if he was attracted to something, such as Irish mirrors, he would own dozens of them, not just one or two. I couldn't believe how much penwork he had – you don't come across penwork furniture all that often and that must be because he owned it all. He was serious about his collecting. In going through his papers, you can see that he followed the market and took note of what similar items sold for. To be honest, this process was exhausting. Every day hundreds of decisions had to be made, and, as his biographer, I wanted to make sure we didn't get rid of anything that might be valuable to understanding him. We found trash bags full of phone bills, taxi receipts, and shopping invoices from the 1960s and 1970s – he did not throw out a thing. We went through each piece of paper, carefully considering it. And you never knew where you might find a treasure – in the dishwasher, we discovered a few pieces of porcelain he bought at Christie's still in bubble-wrapping.

### **What's next?**

**EEE:** More Mario! I am working on a new book about Mario for Spring 2022. It was exciting to discover his archives so there is much more to say and show. I am particularly interested in the early years of his career working for Elisabeth Draper and Keith Irvine, and of course his important relationship with John Fowler. How did this young man from Staten Island, who never finished college, become the most famous decorator in America? There will also be a drill down into his style: which colors he used, how he finished his curtains, etc. There is more property in the warehouse, if you can believe it, which will be dealt with once we return to our normal lives.