

Absolute Buatta

JANUARY 22, 2019



The total lunar eclipse as seen on January 22, 12:30 AM. Photo: JH

SOCIAL DIARY • BY: DAVID PATRICK COLUMBIA

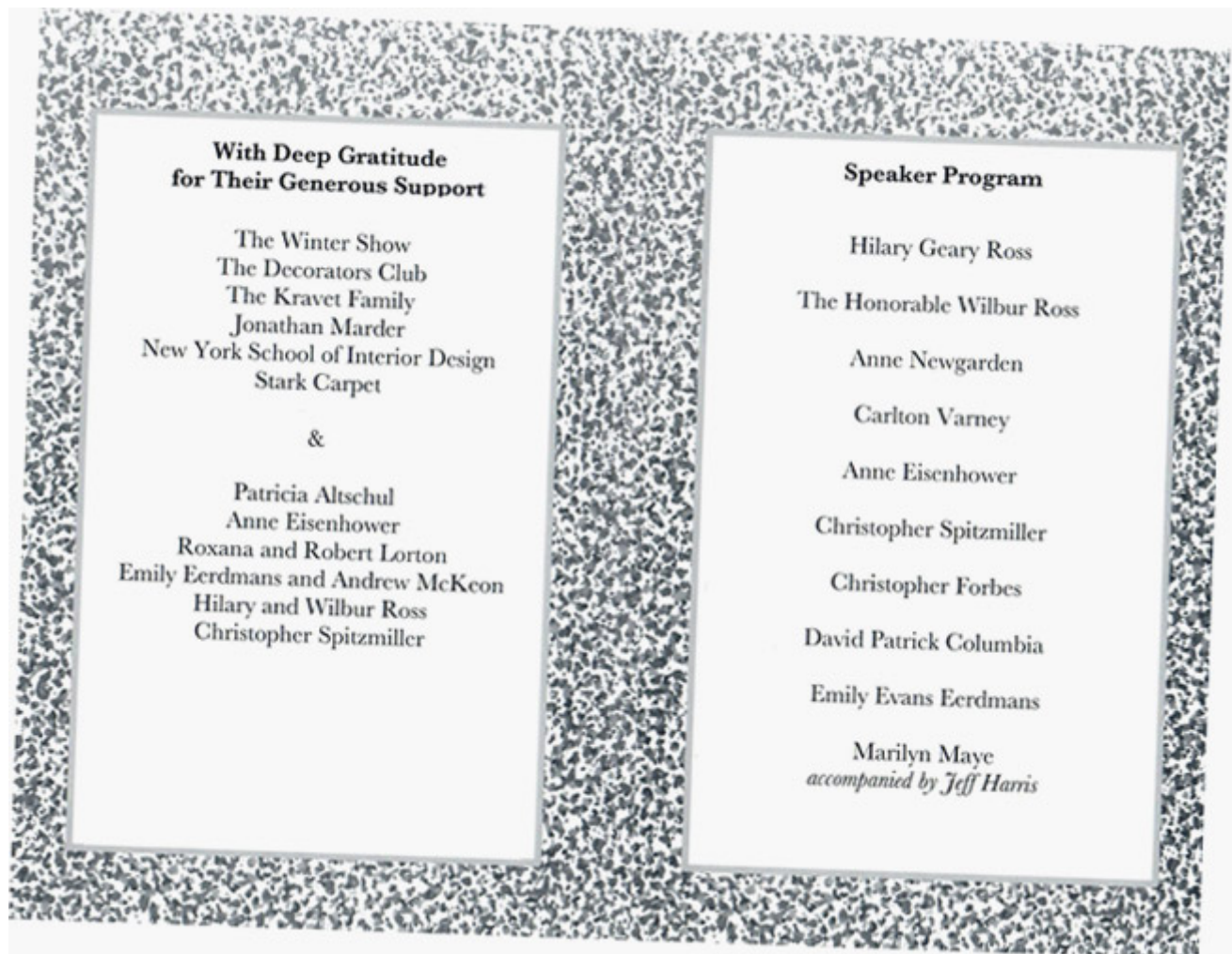
It was very cold in New York with the temperature in evening at 10 degrees and a RealFeel of -17. It's the kind of cold you just want to get out of, and nothing feels better than a warm room after that.

In late afternoon I went down to the Park Avenue Armory for a memorial for **Mario Buatta** who died here in New York this past October 15th, six days before his 83rd birthday. The memorial was held at the Armory where the annual Winter Show is

in residence (closing Sunday, 1/27). The location and timing was appropriate, for Mario had been the chair of that event – which benefits the East Side House Settlement – for several years in the 1990s.

The memorial was organized by **Pat Altschul, Anne Eisenhower, Roxana and Robert Lorton, Emily Eerdmans and Andrew McKeon, Hilary and Wilbur Ross, and Christopher Spitzmiller**. They were helped by The Winter Show, the Decorator's Club, the **Kravet Family, Jonathan Marder**, New York School of Interior Design and Stark Carpet. It was called for 5:30 with speeches at 6.

It was the time of day and temperature that would make one want to skip the whole thing. The thought crossed my mind. But JH had mentioned that he heard I was one of the speakers. Hilary Ross had originally called to invite me, but last December (I had forgotten) Anne Eisenhower had asked me if I would speak, and I must have said yes. I never wrote the date down in the book and I gladly forgot about it. However, it didn't forget about me.



When I got there, Anne Eisenhower directed me to my seat in the front row. The seats each had a paper with the Speaker printed on it. I asked Anne if I were a speaker. Yes. Ok ... now what? I'd known Mario for many years but I didn't know much more about him. I knew he was a very amusing fellow. He was also a naturally friendly person, able to communicate with anyone, and often with his double wit. You got that almost immediately after entering conversation with him. His jokes and tricks were always nearby although they came about even during serious moments and conversations. So the amusing part was integrated into the serious part.

He was, as they say, good for a laugh (I'm laughing as I write that). However, he was intensely serious about his work as an interior designer. Intensely is the operative word on all counts with him. It also defines the man's self. He was an artist, but also a comedian, and they weren't separate in his presence, and the laughs never overtook the quality of the work, which was super.

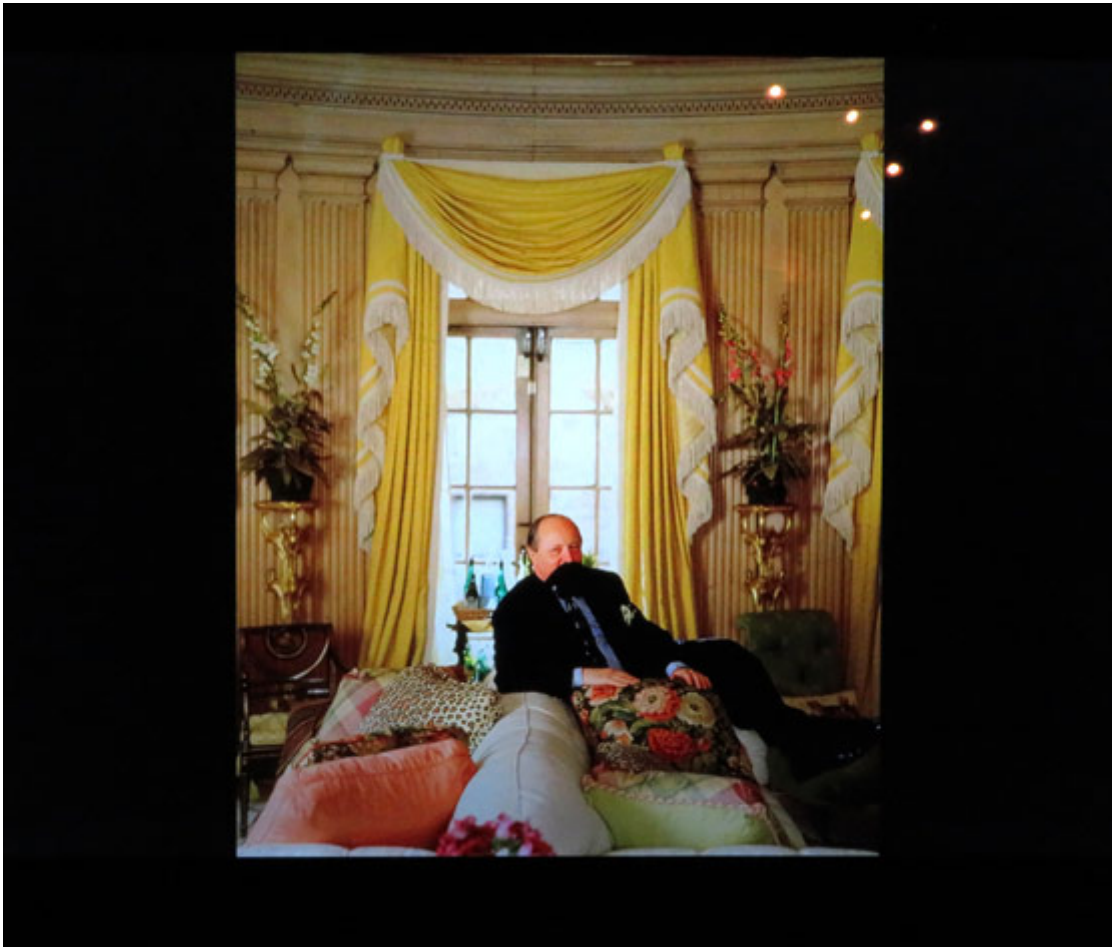


The room at the Park Avenue Armory was packed — seated and SRO with overflow in the adjacent room.

Kip Forbes recalled a time when Mario was in London and at a reception on the Forbes yacht “Highlander” where an Englishman having heard of the “Prince of Chintz” asked him, “Where is Chintz?” Mario replied: “In the English Channel.”

Then the man asked: “Why are you a prince?” And Mario replied: “Because I was too young to be king.” All of this was said with a smile, no doubt.

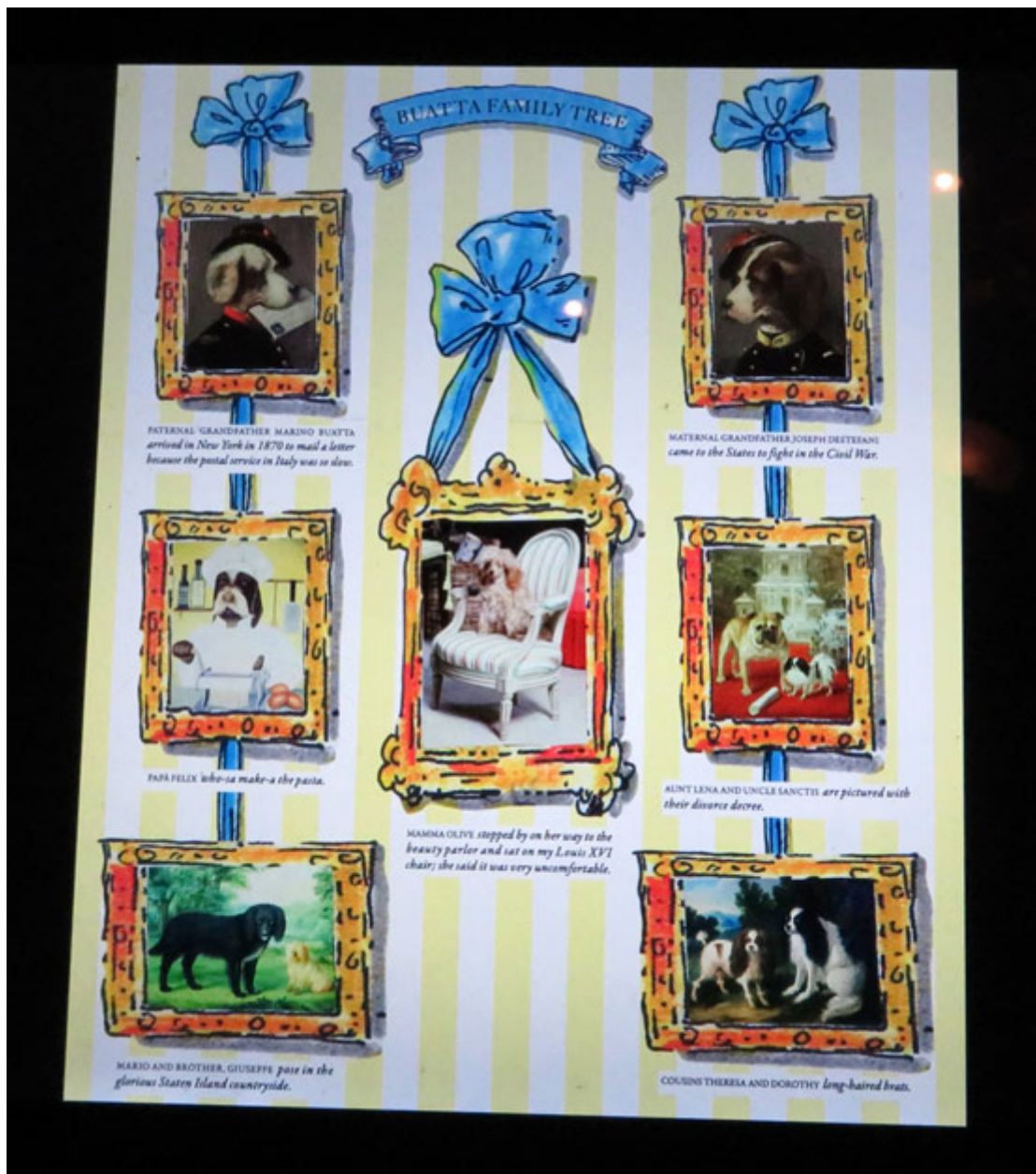
The room at the Park Avenue Armory was packed — seated and SRO with overflow in the adjacent room. There must have been more than 200 there. I was surprised that it was so well attended because of the cold. And yesterday was a holiday/stay at home day for a lot of New Yorkers. But it made sense because Mario was not only famous in his field (as the “Prince of Chintz” — a name coined by New York Times reporter **Chauncey Howell** in 1984), but he was a man of the community and he wasn’t shy – many people knew him.



The program listed nine speakers: **Hilary Geary Ross, The Hon. Wilbur Ross, Anne Newgarden, Carlton Varney, Anne Eisenhower, Christopher Spitzmiller, Christopher Forbes**, myself, and **Emily Evans Eerdmans**. And in closing **Marilyn Maye**, who was accompanied by **Jeff Harris**.

It opened with a video of much younger Mario giving two Englishwomen — one of them was British interior designer **Jane Churchill** — a tour of the public rooms of his apartment. Classic, and beautiful, as well as Mario’s sudden offhand quips

about various pieces, colors and paintings. It was shot for British television and Mario is looking impeccably tailored and relaxed.



The came a video of **Carlton Varney** who recalled his long friendship with Mario and his love for color and antiques and porcelains. Hilary Ross recalled working with him and how the humor was always in the conversations. Mario had a rubber cockroach he named "Harold" which was often on a string. It was his pet and it was always in his pocket if it weren't on someone's dinner plate at a smart dinner party, or on someone's chair or foot or table. The initial reaction was always shock and/or revulsion until the person suddenly realized it was a joke. Many people in the room yesterday afternoon knew about Harold the cockroach, and where it seemed to show up out of nowhere.

Anne Newgarden, a cousin of Mario's who grew up around his family in the same neighborhood on Staten Island, gave us a little history of his family. His father was a violinist and in the 1930s he moved the family to Los Angeles where he father worked along with the musicians accompanying **Rudy Vallee** in films.



When the family returned to the east Mr. Buatta opened a music store. Mario, who had a natural predilection even as a kid for re-arranging things, often worked in his father's store. When Mr. Buatta stepped out for some lunch, the son would go into his talent and re-arrange something so that when the father returned, he couldn't find what he was looking for. It wasn't a joke; it was a natural aptitude.

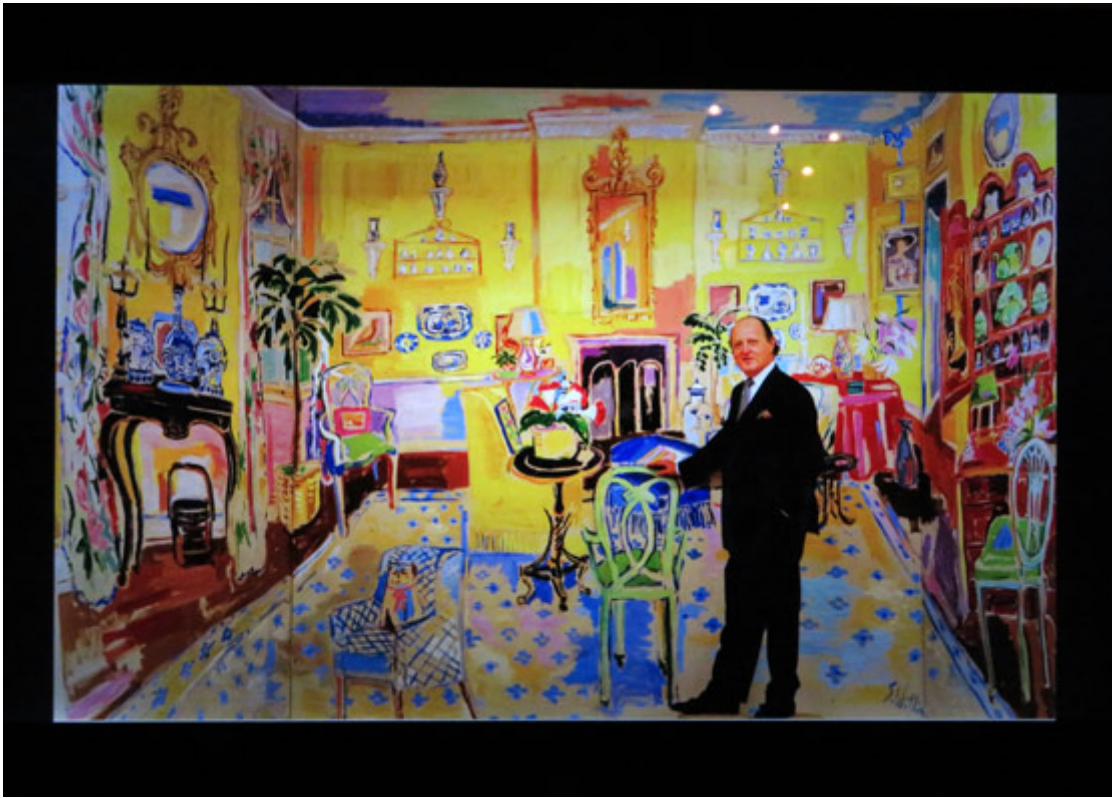
Mario's aunt, his mother's sister, Ms. Newgarden recalled, loved fashion and style, and his mother was forever rearranging her furniture, repainting a room in the family house and "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."



Wilbur Ross recalled the time Mario was doing the interiors of his and Hilary's apartment in New York. When Wilbur was told it was just about done, he went over to have a look. He put the key in the door, opened it, and there in front of him was the livingroom painted a shocking pink!

Wilbur was furious and immediately called Mario to tell him that he hated it. Mario replied casually that he'd "get used to it and eventually love it." Wilbur was never going to love it, and repeated his disagreement. Finally Mario told him that it was just the primer color and the final color would be covering it when it was dry.

Sitting in the front row listening to people's recollections and memories of life with Mario, I knew I'd have little to say along those lines except for one memory. When it came my turn, I decided to give the guests my few memories. I told them I was wearing a blue cashmere scarf he'd given me many years ago, probably as a Christmas gift when I was new with the NYSD. He'd mentioned the colors (green, navy) of the scarves I wore, and sent me a color he liked. Whenever I saw him (in winter) and wasn't wearing that scarf he'd always ask me if I still had it. Yes.



Then there was the time I was covering at Kips Bay Showhouse where Mario had a room. I stopped by admiring the green velvet of the sofa with “that’s a great green Mario.” He told me why this particular velvet was so good (quality). I told him I should get some to re-cover my sofa which was in deep need. He said he had some left over and if I’d like I could have it. How nice, I thought (whatta deal!) The bolt arrived the next day, and all these years later, I have a beautiful green sofa.

I recounted a black tie dinner of the Royal Oak Society at which he was honored. I knew he’d have something funny to say, but I’d never seen a “performance.” So when he was introduced, he walked up to the podium looking sharp in his black tie, but carrying a large, ancient-like scroll of paper with a handle on each side. At the podium, without a word, he set the scroll down on the surface, and then matter-of-factly — pushed off with a bang! — landing and rolling across the ballroom floor. It was so stupid, it was funny (I’m laughing again).



Mario with his acceptance speech in the form of a twelve-foot scroll.

When the scroll stopped rolling, Mario, speaking in a thick, broken English Pisan Italian accent, told the guests that he came from a long line of artists, and his “Uncle Luigi” even worked with **Michelangelo** on the Sistine Chapel ... but, he added: “Luigi had such a fear of heights that he could only paint the baseboard.” The whole room cracked up. You had to be there but it was a treasure.

Other than that, I told the guests, I knew him only through years of observing him socially. He had a pleasant personality, even with his joking but the humor was as brilliant in conception as his design work. After that performance at the Royal Oak, I could see the man was as serious as any comedian doing stand up in Las Vegas.



He was a solitary man who was difficult to work for because he liked doing it all on his own. That was the artist. As a young man he developed the habit of a hoarder. He kept everything, including the masses of fabrics he worked with, as if unable to part with the smallest matter. I have another friend like that, a contemporary of Mario, I told the audience, and he has the most brilliant mind about his choices. Mario, to me, had that same rare and stunning consciousness. And he could always leave 'em laughing. Which was, of course, a kind of beauty in itself.



ABSOLUT BUATTA.
