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POSTSCRIPT

Remembering the Marvelous, Maddening Mario Buatta

Under all that colorful chintz there were some serious dust bunnies, but also a lot of laughs.



Mario Buatta designed eight houses for Ann and Charles Johnson, including a grand apartment at the Sherry Netherland in Manhattan. Tim Chaffee/The New York Times

By Christopher Mason

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When Mario Buatta drew his last breath at 9:12 p.m. on Oct. 15 at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, the celebrated interior designer,

82, known for his exuberantly colorful work, riotous persona and matching sobriquet, the Prince of Chintz, seemed at peace.

At his side were his family and two stalwart friends: Emily Evans Eerdmans, with whom he wrote “Mario Buatta: Fifty Years of American Decoration” (Rizzoli, 2013), and Anne Eisenhower, the decorator and a granddaughter of America’s 34th president.

“He was wearing his favorite color, blue,” Ms. Eerdmans said. Moments before, the two women had played recordings of cabaret music he loved, including a favorite romantic ballad, “Baby I’m a Fool,” sung by Melody Gardot.

A generous host, Mr. Buatta loved taking friends to cabaret, theater and comedy shows. When Peggy Lee performed in New York, he would attend every performance, sometimes for 40 days in a row. Other favorites were the comedian [Joan Rivers](#) and Marilyn Maye. “He put a lot of fun into everyone’s lives,” said Joan Kron, a writer.

A leading proponent of the so-called American English country house style, Mr. Buatta was at one point the country’s most famous decorator. His clientele included Barbara Walters, Nelson Doubleday, Malcolm Forbes, Henry Ford II, Billy Joel and Mariah Carey, and his “Buatta-ful” interiors adorned the covers of *Architectural Digest*, *House & Garden*, and *House Beautiful*.

For Ann and Charles Johnson, he designed eight houses, including a grand apartment at the Sherry-Netherland in Manhattan and Carolands, a 98-room Beaux-Arts chateau in Hillsborough, Calif., built by an heiress to the Pullman railway coach fortune.

“Mario decorated it beautifully,” Ms. Johnson said. “Many people

didn't know he was also a very good period decorator.”

As a close friend of his for 30 years, I can attest that he could be delightful and exasperating in equal measure. He was often hilariously funny, loyal, kindhearted and impulsively generous. On the flip side, his jokey patois and fiery temper tantrums left some wondering whether he was inflamed with rage or just pulling your leg. Or possibly both.

“Decorating can be quite psychological and intense,” Ms. Eerdmans said. “Mario had a gift for keeping it light.” She admitted, though, that he could be a “curmudgeon,” if a loyal one.

When the decorator was in top form, few could resist his madcap charm. “Mario was wonderfully eccentric,” said Patricia Altschul, a longtime client whose antebellum mansion in Charleston, S.C., designed by Mr. Buatta, is featured on the TV series “Southern Charm.”

“I invited him to fancy parties, and he would show up wearing a fake wig and eyeglasses 50 times too big,” Ms. Altschul said. “He looked like a giant grasshopper.”

When they attended a black-tie reception at Buckingham Palace Mr. Buatta, an incorrigible prankster (who often faked foreign accents and different identities on phone calls), brought his “companion,” Harold, a motorized rubber cockroach, and sent him scampering over a grand commode. This elicited roars of laughter from Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall.

“He was a frustrated performer at heart,” Ms. Altschul said. “My son Whitney called him ‘The Dame Edna of decorators.’”



Take a peek at the design genius of Mario Buatta, who styled this room for Ann and Charles Johnson. Tim Chaffee/The New York Times

Loved High Drama

“Mario loved to have fun,” Ms. Altschul said, “but he would also get cranky and scream.” Shop assistants and workmen were frequent targets of his blistering fulminations.

“He was a holy terror,” Ms. Altschul said.

Temo Callahan, a designer and a longtime friend, met Mr. Buatta while working at Clarence House, the fabric showroom. “Mario was a delightful, charming, wonderful person,” Mr. Callahan said. “But he was a paradox. If you had a sense of humor, you got along with Mario. If you were a silly shop person, he would grind you into bits.”

“He’d be screaming and winking at the same time,” Mr. Callahan said. “A lot of people didn’t understand that. He was very difficult but lots of fun. Mario loved high drama. You have to remember it was drama, not meanness.”

Mario joked about his own paranoia about assistants, fearing that they would steal his ideas and trade secrets. (“Mario accused everyone of stealing,” Ms. Kron said.) Some who worked for him in the 1980s remember him fondly. Others do not.

“Mark Hampton had 20 assistants,” Mr. Callahan said, referring to another famous decorator, with whom Mr. Buatta collaborated in the 1980s on a design of Blair House, the president’s guesthouse across from the White House. “Mario had yellow legal pad pages of his to-dos, folded into quadrants,” Mr. Callahan said. Panic ensued every time he thought he’d dropped them.

In more recent years, Mr. Buatta was a proud Trump supporter, much to the dismay of his many liberal Democrat friends. Convincing him otherwise was an unrewarding battle, said Louis Bofferding, an antiques dealer and Obama supporter.

“The first time Mario got mad at me, he came into my shop and asked the prices,” Mr. Bofferding recalled. He said, ‘How can you ask these prices when you’re a socialist?’”

“I had to laugh,” Mr. Bofferding said.

More troublingly to some, the design genius who wrought exquisite interiors for his clients preferred to live in exotic disarray. “I am the original hoarder,” he told *The New York Times* in 2013, referring to his passionate — perhaps borderline pathological — collecting habits.

Friends, clients and journalists entreated him for invitations to his grand parlor-floor apartment in the East 80s in Manhattan, but it was strictly off-limits.

“I asked for 30 years to see his apartment,” Ms. Altschul said. “He never let me in.”

Exotic Disarray

Mario was extraordinarily kind to me when I began writing and performing satirical songs in the late '80s that cheekily skewered some of the wealthy Park Avenue parvenus who happened to be his clients. I tried to repay his kindness by visiting him in the hospitals and nursing homes where he spent most of his time during the last three years of his life, refusing exercise.

I also had the dubious privilege of helping him to tidy up his increasingly untidy apartment. In recent years, it was piled high with grand English furniture interspersed with tarpaulins up to the ceiling, Groucho Marx mustaches, huge gilded palm tree lamps and makeshift towers of books and magazines that threatened to collapse at any minute.

The windows of his parlor floor apartment were magnificent in scale but ominously opaque. He explained that it was merely three decades of dust and soot. (The floor-through apartment was crepuscular even on a sunny summer's day.) He refused to hire a maid, convinced that anyone who entered his lair was bound to steal something of incalculable value.

His vast office on the ground floor was also piled to the ceiling with fabric swatches, multiple generations of Harolds, catalogs, coffee table books and thousands of CDs of Lee and other of his favorite cabaret singers.

He loathed billing. An avowed Luddite, he stabbed out invoices with one finger on a rickety typewriter using pastel-colored carbon-copy paper. I convinced him to buy a computer in the mid-1990s and soon regretted it when he inundated me with calls asking how to operate it. (Locating the delete key remained a challenge.) Inevitably the infernal “machine” was cast aside and became entombed in dust.

When he died, Mario was about three years behind on his billing. He implored me to do it for him and was furious when I politely declined the honor.

“He always said, ‘I’ll get around to it,’” Ms. Kron said.

Correction: Oct. 22, 2018

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a cabaret singer whose music was played for Mario Buatta in the moments before he died. She is Melody Gardot, not Melodie Gurdot.

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