

Mario Buatta Auction Shatters Estimates for Chintz

The Sotheby's sale fetched \$7.6 million, including \$60,000 for some lettuce-shaped porcelain.



Mario Buatta's beloved red secretary was a star of the auction of his belongings last week, selling for \$52,500 to a Los Angeles collector. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



By **Penelope Green**

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After 22 hours of bidding on 922 lots, the [auction of the late decorator Mario Buatta's](#) belongings — a giddy assortment of dog paintings, porcelain fruits and vegetables, needlepoint pillows, gilded door knockers, Chinese jardinières and a thousand other pieces delivered in 19 trucks — fetched \$7.6 million, more than two and a half times its estimate.

The last item was a festive water color sketch of Mr. Buatta in bed, in a typical swirl of fabric, newspapers, magazines and books, along with two rotary phones, made by Konstantin Kakanias for The New York Times in 1988. Within minutes, the cost of the illustration, which had an estimate of \$2,000 to \$3,000, rose to \$11,250.

While the highest purchase was \$212,500 for a spare and lovely Russian painting of two houses (an atypical object for the very maximalist Mr. Buatta), perhaps the most startling to observers was the sale of 107 pieces of porcelain lettuce ware. It went for \$60,000. (A chipped tureen shaped like a bunch of asparagus that went for \$17,500 raised some eyebrows, too.) Final sale prices include a buyer's premium of 25 percent.

"You would think everybody who wanted a Dodie Thayer head of lettuce would have one by now," said Stephen Drucker, a former editor of House Beautiful and Town & Country.

The [two-day sale](#) attracted more than 1,200 people, though most of the lots were sold online or by phone. "It was blood sport," said [Christopher Spitzmiller](#), the lamp designer, who spent all day Thursday at Sotheby's, one of the few who showed up in person to bid. He was joined by old friends and clients like Hilary Geary Ross and Blaine Trump.

"It was like being with Mario again," Ms. Trump said later. "So much for minimalism."

Ms. Ross, who collects Dodie Thayer Lettuce ware, as Mr. Buatta did, said by text that she was not the purchaser of the 107 piece set.

“I am still scratching my head over how much he secretly had. When he saw my stash of Dodie, he called *me* a hoarder.”

Mr. Buatta, a voracious shopper who liked to describe himself as “the original hoarder,” was also known for his collection of dog paintings (there were more than 50 in the sale). Mr. Spitzmiller bought a spaniel portrait for \$12,500, a happy outcome, he said, though he went over his top by a few thousand dollars and in the bidding process watched his heart rate reach 116 beats per minute on his Apple watch. “I did expect Mario to appear like a zombie and bid against us all.”



A 107-piece set of Dodie Thayer lettuce ware went for \$60,000. Many porcelain bunnies found good homes, too. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Anne Newgarden, a cousin of Mr. Buatta’s, was in the sparsely attended room both days. “Mario is dancing somewhere,” she said.

The aggressive bidding and intense interest caught many observers by surprise. “I think if we were back in the 80s or early 90s, nobody would bat an eye at these prices,” said [Todd Romano](#), a former assistant to Mr. Buatta who is now a designer in San Antonio, Tex. He was bidding by phone both days and bought two dog paintings, among other things. When a tiered black-and-gold table chest that Mr. Buatta had bought at Brooke Astor’s estate sale went for \$52,500, he was taken aback.

“It’s basically just a large box,” Mr. Romano said. “The enthusiasm for pretty cannot be understated. In these times, people are so happy to be amused. We’ve forgotten what pretty looks like.”

“I’m completely shattered,” said Dennis Harrington, the head of Sotheby’s English and European furniture department in New York. “I’m absolutely gobsmacked that people from all over the globe stayed up all day and all night to bid. And I’m amazed at how many buyers were private individuals. Clearly there’s a lot of people fed up with monochromatic interiors, with all this emphasis on hotel-like environments, and newly excited by Mario’s maximalist style.”

Mr. Harrington added that he didn’t think the prices were particularly inflated. “The estimates were very low, meant to be tempting, and we expected a bit of Mario bounce,” he said. “But I know of several disappointed decorators who were generally unsuccessful. They have been used to getting what they want, and it was like, ‘Where are all these people coming from?’”

Mr. Harrington was not the only one who thought the auction

might signal a pendulum shift in interior design. “This sort of moment could change the direction of decorating after 20 years of relentless modernism,” said Mr. Drucker, the former editor.



More than 4,000 people visited Mr. Buatta's belongings in a week-long, pre-sale exhibit at Sotheby's in New York. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Andrea Kavanagh, 42, was bidding from her home in Palm Beach, and won herself a dog painting. Her design blog, [the Glam Pad](#), champions the sort of highly-festooned interiors favored by Mr. Buatta. “For years the design magazines have been pushing modern, minimalistic style and the latest trends du jour,” she said. “Those of us who love traditional, classic style have felt unheard, but I feel like Instagram is changing that by bringing ‘old souls’ together from across the globe.”

She noted how the term “grandmillennial,” [a neologism coined by Emma Bazilian](#), a features editor at House Beautiful, was gaining traction among Ms. Kavanagh and her like-minded peers.

Kirill Istomin, 43, a Russian designer with offices in Moscow and New York, bought eight dog paintings and two gilded wall brackets for a new client, a 29-year-old European woman who had found him [on Instagram](#). Mr. Istomin, an exuberant colorist like Mr. Buatta, hoped to recreate much of Mr. Buatta's living room wall in his new client's home.

In Los Angeles, Luzanne Otte, 39, a philanthropist and friend of Patricia Altschul, a reality show star and longtime client of Mr. Buatta's, was bidding steadily both days, having been goaded by Ms. Altschul. "Pat is so offended by my grisaille aesthetic and my beige wardrobe," Ms. Otte said. "She's been trying to punctuate my life with color. I'm in a transition period, trying to find my grown up look."

She had already purchased a set of dessert plates when she found herself in a furious bidding war Thursday for Mr. Buatta's red secretary, winning it, finally, for \$52,500, even though she had given herself a top of \$25,000. "I'm a volleyball player," she said. "I'm very competitive."

By Friday, she had also bought a porcelain box in the shape of a sunflower; five blue and white Delft vases; an 18th century Dutch butter tub with a snail-shaped knob; three Staffordshire pieces shaped like cottages; a gilded, neo-Gothic overmantel mirror; a black and white Regency cabinet; and five hand-painted silk pillows for \$16,250.

"My transition to neo-traditionalist is now complete," she said.



These were among 11 needlepoint pillows of animals that sold for \$17,500. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

By 11 p.m. Friday, the auction room was empty, except for Emily Evans Eerdmans, the fine arts historian who has been hired by Mr. Buatta's estate to clean out his apartment and many storage facilities. After the final lot sold, Ms. Eerdmans and the auction house's specialists stood up and began to clap. Assembling the more than 1,000 objects in this sale had taken nearly ten months, and the group was both elated and exhausted. They gathered for a class photo, calling out a chorus of "Chintz!" instead of "Cheese!"

In the taxi going home, Ms. Eerdmans' phone pinged with a text from Ms. Otte, the Los Angeles collector. It turned out that it was Ms. Otte who had bought the water color portrait, and though they only met once, she planned to give it as a present to Ms. Eerdmans.

"It's only fitting," Ms. Otte wrote, "that the final piece goes to his best friend."

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