

BOOKS

Mario Buatta: Fifty Years of American Interior Decoration

The first-ever compilation of interior design legend Mario Buatta's work surveys 50 years of his singular exuberance

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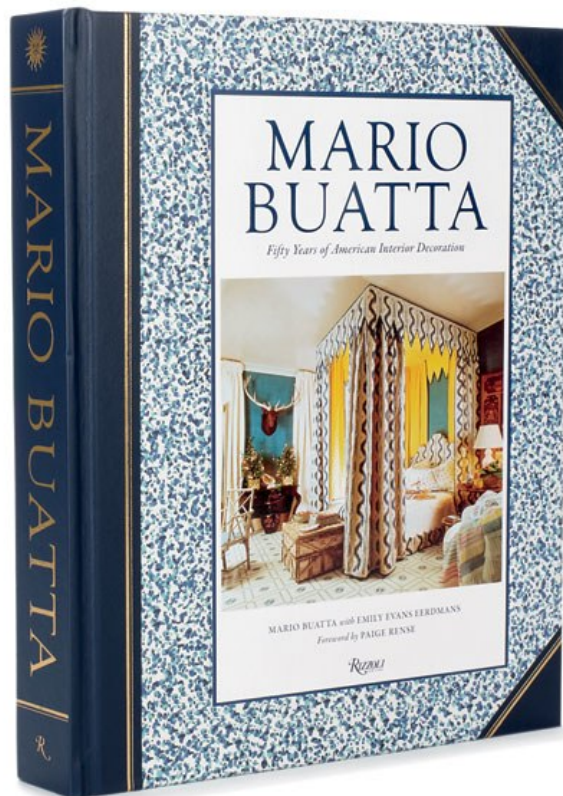
Interior designer Mario Buatta, circa 1976, seated in one of his Anglophile interiors.

These days it is commonplace for design whipper-snappers to roll out books celebrating their latest interiors. But Mario Buatta, a premier American decorating talent who has been working since the late

1950s, has patiently waited until now to take the publishing plunge. “I wasn’t looking for more business,” the septuagenarian Prince of Chintz explains, “and I really wanted to do a complete volume and to make it personal, with pictures and stories of people I have worked with.”

A hefty 432-page album with a glowing foreword by Architectural Digest’s editor emeritus, Paige Rense Noland, and spirited text by Emily Evans Eerdmans, *Mario Buatta: Fifty Years of American Interior Decoration* (Rizzoli) traces its hero’s jubilant adaptation of English country-house style to an unlikely source: his Italian-American childhood on New York’s Staten Island, where he grew up as the elder son of society bandleader Phil Burton, né Felix Buatta. In a hilarious introductory essay, the designer recalls that

he abhorred the sleek Art Deco interiors of his parents’ house and drove his mother, Olive, to distraction by bringing home dusty antiques. Luckily his stylish aunt Mary Mauro—an Auntie Mame type—encouraged him to forge a path that led him to Cooper Union in Manhattan and the Parsons School of Design’s European program.



Buatta launched his firm in 1963 and over the years has attracted an impressive and startlingly loyal roster of moguls, society stalwarts, and celebrities, from Barbara Walters to Henry Ford II to Mariah Carey, whose glamorous New York triplex was **AD**’s November 2001 cover story as well as a one-hour special episode of *MTV Cribs*. (“What decorator wouldn’t kill for coverage like that?” an admirer said in 2006.) One current project, a sprawling lakeside mansion in Palm Beach, Florida, is his eighth commission from philanthropists Ann and Charles B. Johnson.

This profusion of work belies the fact that the perfectionistic Buatta is famously difficult to please and, business-wise, is a one-man show. (One reason, he ruefully acknowledges, is his inability to keep assistants around for very long.) But upon seeing the first bound book in July, he was thrilled with the results—and, more important, with how well his rooms have aged. “I hate to pat myself on the back,” the designer says, “but

strangely enough, a lot of the work I did years ago still looks contemporary today.”

Buatta’s opulent Anglophilia has evolved, as the book’s 300-plus illustrations demonstrate, but the basics remain splendidly intact: an ebullient but subtly calibrated palette, highly glazed walls, exquisitely tailored curtains, overstuffed upholstery, and sometimes jaw-dropping pattern combinations. The effect is supremely welcoming and resolutely antimodern. “He sticks to his guns,” Albert Hadley, the late dean of American style, once observed. “Mario is not fashionable. He doesn’t play that game. He has a great eye, great humor, and great knowledge.”

Richard Keith Langham, another contemporary classicist known for Anglo-inflected style, marvels at Buatta’s staying power: “Mario’s work is a benchmark by which other American ‘English country’ rooms are measured. His kaleidoscopic color sense and luxe curtains put any couturier to shame.” Designer Alexa Hampton praises Buatta’s genius—“It’s wonderful to see how his joyfulness comes out in his rooms”—and seems undaunted by his propensity for practical jokes.

In any social situation, the designer is likely to produce Harold, a pet cockroach, often to the horror of dinner companions, though they breathe a sigh of relief when it turns out that Harold is made of plastic. When longtime client Patricia Altschul attended a banquet at Buckingham Palace with Buatta, her irrepressible escort sent the battery-operated pest scampering across a table and then professed to be shocked by royalty's lax house-keeping standards. No one laughed more loudly than the Duchess of Cornwall, Prince Charles's wife, whom the designer has known since the late '60s, when she was post-deb Camilla Shand and answering phones at Colefax and Fowler, the august London decorating firm whose aristocratic oeuvre has greatly influenced Buatta's own. Hostesses should be forewarned: The tastemaker's latest toy is a motorized tarantula.

Jesting aside, clients attest that Buatta's lush colors and deep-dish sofas brighten the dullest days. Christopher Forbes, a scion of the Forbes publishing empire, recalls: "The only thing my late father, Malcolm S. Forbes, found more uplifting than riding in his hot-air balloons was walking into a room designed by Mario." Walters perhaps sums up her old friend's magic best, saying simply, "He makes a house a home."



"Buatta's clean-cut take on classical French decor at Carolands, Ann and Charles B. Johnson's 1916 Bay Area mansion.