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HOME & GARDEN

Mario Buatta: The Beauty of a Bad Pun

By PENELOPE GREEN SEPT. 4, 2013



For more than a half-century, Mario Buatta has designed lush habitats for American royalty, like this Midtown penthouse pied-à-terre for Hilary Geary Ross and Wilbur L. Ross Jr.

Trevor Tondro for The New York Times

One muggy afternoon last week, Mario Buatta was sitting in the living room of a Midtown penthouse of his design, slightly overheated by his pinstripe suit and the late August sun. When a photographer loomed, he brandished a cane topped with a silver hound.

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“I hope you’re not getting a crush on me,” Mr. Buatta said, still impish at 77. “My suit has enough wrinkles.”

Hilary Geary Ross, the society editor for *Quest* magazine and the wife of the billionaire Wilbur L. Ross Jr., whose pied-à-terre it was, grinned at her decorator.

“Everybody is hitting on you today,” she said.

Ms. Ross had lent her apartment on the occasion of Mr. Buatta’s first book, “Mario Buatta: Fifty Years of American Interior Decoration,” a seven-pounder written with Emily Evans Eerdmans, a design historian, and out next month from Rizzoli.

“I wanted to call it ‘It’s About Time’ or ‘The Buattapedia,’” he said. “It’s my one and lonely, the child I will never have. And it’s given me a hernia.”

Mr. Buatta is perhaps the only decorator people outside of the Palm Beach-Upper East Side-Southampton axis could actually name: the longtime purveyor of English country style, otherwise known as the Prince of Chintz, who was once memorialized in a suit of that fabric on the cover of *Manhattan Inc.*, and as a floral lampshade by Absolut Vodka. But he is nonetheless late to publishing.

As if to make up for lost time, he has put everything into this book: more than 400 pages of the lush and lovely interiors, the tented dining rooms and silk-swagged bedrooms, the penthouses, carriage houses and show houses, barns, triplexes and yachts, from Fifth Avenue to the Philippines.

There is even a 98-room chateau in California (Mr. Buatta said he’s currently working on a 40-room house in Palm Beach for the same client), and more pages punctuated by more Buattabilia: personal photos (there’s Peggy Lee with the chimp he brought to one of her shows, and Wendy Wasserstein at his 60th birthday party), newspaper clippings, thank-you notes and New Yorker cartoons, including one by Richard Cline depicting three wan cocktail party guests. “This is John,” reads the caption. “The Mario Buatta of Westport.”

That afternoon, the decorator was receiving visitors in Ms. Ross’s penthouse because his own apartment and office on East 80th Street is famously off limits.

“I am the original hoarder,” he said, referring to a collecting habit that began when he was 11 and bought an 18th-century lap desk for \$12 on layaway. You can see a tidied-up version of the apartment, circa 1998, in the book. On the walls of his pale pistachio-green living room, an army of dog paintings (“my ancestors!” he says) hang over fat blue taffeta sashes.

His friends filled in the blanks. The designer Michael Zabriskie, a former assistant who is now director of the decorating firm Scott Salvator Inc., recently recalled a “Seussian scene” of blue-and-white china from Bardith stacked to the ceiling, swatches spilling from shelves and Diet Coke cans crowding out bags of Pepperidge Farm Ginger Man cookies on the desk.

Mr. Zabriskie, followed by Mr. Salvator, worked for Mr. Buatta during the frenzy that was the 1980s, and the two remembered the backbeat of Mr. Buatta’s exercise regimen at the time

(three jumping jacks in the bathtub) while clients like Barbara Walters called from a pay phone on the corner because the doorbell was broken.

Christopher Mason, a writer, performer and occasional contributor to *The New York Times* who is a close friend, may have been the apartment's most recent visitor. What is it like these days? Mr. Mason paused a moment before replying, "It is certainly astonishing to consider that the man who creates such carefully crafted interiors lives in such exotic disarray."

As Mr. Buatta is fond of saying: "Dust is a protective coating for fine furniture. I like it in big balls."

Ms. Ross told him, "I'll get you a Roomba, Mario."

He shot back: "One for you, too, because you are so messy."

Ms. Ross was wearing a cream-colored suit. Her living room windows wore iridescent, silvery-green silk taffeta curtains slung from gilded crescent moons. The apple-green walls were layered with significant modern masters; a sky-blue linen rolled-arm sofa sported salmon-pink silk taffeta pillows perfectly bisected with the decorator's chop. Above, a silver-leafed, barrel-vaulted ceiling soared from faux-marble moldings. Looking up into it, you felt dizzy.

Like many great talents, Mr. Buatta is a man with father issues and a joke for every occasion. The son of a bandleader and a homemaker who died when he was 23, he was born on Staten Island, and he has always happily skewered, with terrible puns, the pretensions of the world he has come to decorate.

Ms. Ross suggested that he was the mayor of the Upper East Side, and he mused, "If I had a sex problem, I could be mayor."

Possessed of a keen sense of color and proportion, Mr. Buatta has created interiors for much of American royalty, with names like Ford, Forbes and Doubleday, as well as two presidents and Mariah Carey. Most of them are repeat clients.

"He works with people who have 6 houses with 29 rooms," said Joan Kron, the longtime social critic and contributing editor at large for *Allure*, who is also a longtime friend. "Maybe 10 years later he'll remember to send the bill. He's lucky he has substantial clients and they haven't gone bankrupt."

Mr. Buatta has made seven interiors for the Rosses, including a few when they were married to other people.

Did you make the match? a reporter asked.

"No," he said. "Because I don't smoke." Kindly, hypochondriacal and preternaturally morbid, Mr. Buatta worries about germs, theft and death, in no particular order. He'll tell you he has nearly expired 100 times, and when he was young and working in the gift shop at Bonwit Teller, he fell down subway stairs and broke his nose. He has had a burst appendix and a heart attack.

But a few years ago, it was no joke when he contracted a staph infection and spent two months in the hospital, followed by a third month in a nursing home on an antibiotic drip.

Ms. Kron, the Times reporter Enid Nemy and the fashion designer Cathy Hardwick took his lunch and dinner orders, including biscotti from a bakery on Bleecker Street and takeout from Mr. Chow. Mr. Mason was on breakfast duty because he lived nearby.

“I felt like this terrible enabler, bringing him red velvet cake every day,” Mr. Mason said. “We’d have to hide it from the nurse. But I’ve always been devoted to him, and bringing him breakfast every day was a small measure, considering his kindness to me in the early days.”

The two have been friends since the mid-1980s, when Mr. Mason, who is now the host of “Behind Mansion Walls” on the Investigation Discovery channel, was lampooning society, and Mr. Buatta, with his cabaret act. Mr. Buatta, Mr. Mason said, gave him his start by hiring him to perform at a New York Public Library benefit.

It was a time when, Ms. Kron said: “Things had to be approved. Social mobility meant you had to establish yourself with your taste, instead of your family name. And so then the decorators were the gatekeepers to that kind of status. The decorator would not only do your house, he’d have dinner for you and introduce you to his other clients, and so to society.”

Today, the art adviser who shepherds you to Art Basel may be just as important as the decorator. Mrs. Hedge Fund would rather have you believe she put together her own interiors, and many new billionaires are less than eager to see their names, and their multimillion-dollar possessions, in print.

Also, as Mr. Mason pointed out: “There isn’t the same razzmatazz and desperation to having your name linked with the social glory of your decorator. Back in the day, you’d go to Mortimer’s, as it was then, and see all the great social lionesses and the trophy wives vying for position at the various tables. In front was Nancy Reagan and Betsy Bloomingdale and Pat Buckley.

“Of course, it wasn’t even vaguely the center of the universe, but it felt like it, that there was sort of a direct line from 75th and Lex to the White House. And very much a part of that world in a way that had never been true in any previous decade, decorators had gone from entering the back door in the great apartments to being feted absolutely and embraced as they walked right through the front door to a black-tie dinner. Mario was a part of that small nucleus of design superstars.”

This reporter asked Mr. Buatta how he got to know his clients.

“I used to sleep with them,” he said, poker faced. “Seriously, I feel very privileged that I have done all I was able to do, particularly with a father who pooh-poohed everything I wanted to do.”

Mr. Buatta recounted the story of his father’s third honeymoon on a cruise, and how a furniture manufacturer, on hearing his last name, exclaimed, “Are you related to that famous Mario?”

“My father couldn’t believe it,” he said. “He could never figure out exactly what it was that I did.”

In his book, Mr. Buatta writes of being published for the first time in 1969, when House & Garden chose a bedroom he had done for a Greenwich, Conn., show house. It was pink and yellow, brimming with glazed chintz.

When the editors invited him to the Condé Nast offices to see the layout, the 34-year-old decorator found himself on the elevator with Diana Vreeland, who was the editor of Vogue at the time.

“Who are you?” Mrs. Vreeland asked him. And Mr. Buatta replied, “Nobody special.”

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