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DOMAINS

The Death of Chintz

Mario Buatta, the king of the hoarders, gets unpacked.



Mario Buatta's biography in objects is on view and for sale at Sotheby's. More than 900 lots, delivered in 19 trucks, drew crowds of shoppers over the weekend. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



By **Penelope Green**

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When Mario Buatta died [in 2018](#), a few days shy of his 83rd

birthday, he left no will. Which is not to say that he didn't leave anything behind. "I am the original hoarder," [he would tell you](#).

He had a ferocious appetite for collecting that started when he was 11 and bought an 18th-century lap desk for \$12 on layaway and continued until just months before his death. (There are invoices to prove it.)

It was a habit that filled every square foot of his parlor-floor townhouse apartment on East 80th Street (famously off-limits until the end), three storage units in Harlem, two in Staten Island and [a Victorian gothic house](#) in Thompson, Conn.

An avatar of the English country style, and of 1980s excess, Mr. Buatta was perhaps the only decorator to achieve fame on the East Coast, West Coast and all points between, during a time when the wealthy found their footing with their decorators, not their art advisers.



At Sotheby's, a mural of Mr. Buatta's living room, and a cutout figure of the decorator. Vincent Tullio for The New York Times

The Prince of Chintz, as a television reporter named Mr. Buatta in 1984, designed interiors for a certain kind of American royalty — for Doubledays, Forbes and Newhouses, two presidents and Mariah Carey.

He had a rigorous eye and a sharp sense of color, and he was exacting about the spaces he decorated, dizzy with pattern and swagged in fabric and trim though they were. And yet Mr. Buatta lived, as his friend Christopher Mason put it, in “exotic disarray.”

Collecting is biography (objects can be proxies for all sorts of things), and Mr. Buatta’s particular story, and the bygone age he presided over with impish humor, went on view at [Sotheby’s](#) in New York City on Jan. 16. The 950 lots, delivered in 19 trucks, will be [auctioned off on Jan. 23 and Jan. 24](#).

Collecting is also a form of seeing, and Mr. Buatta had a hungry eye, along with a drive for perfection he said came from his father’s lack of approval.

Mr. Buatta would tell you that his father, a bandleader, could never figure out just what his son did for a living. And growing up in an all-white Art Deco house on Staten Island, with a neatnik mother who died when he was 23, Mr. Buatta developed an allergy to minimalism.

Dog Paintings and \$100,000 Palms

Perhaps in compensation, he stockpiled 19th-century dog paintings (“my ancestors,” he liked to joke), lacquered furniture, Delft china,

obelisks, porcelain vegetables, botanical prints and Regency furniture. Also architectural fragments, like a George III fireplace surround with matching columns carved into swoopy palm fronds that lived propped up in his bedroom, a cluttered nest with glazed purple walls, ceiling-high bookcases and a Chinese four poster bed with a canopy like an Ottoman dome.

“Are you insane?” Patricia Altschul remembered saying to him as he pursued the palms at an auction in London. She was stunned at the price he paid (over \$100,000), and that he wanted them for himself, not a client. “It will make me happy,” he told her.



Mr. Buatta's yellow living room on East 80th Street was inspired by the London apartment of Nancy Lancaster, the Virginia-born decorator. It was famously off-limits after this late-1990s photograph was taken. Scott Frances/OTTO

Ms. Altschul, a star of the reality series [“Southern Charm,”](#) was a client and shopping partner of Mr. Buatta's for more three decades. He once let her have it for a soap dish she introduced into one of the pristine spaces he had made for her.

“He told me, ‘We haven’t worked this hard to make this beautiful showplace for you to have an ugly soap dish to ruin it all,’” she said. “It wasn’t anything hideous. I mean, I’ve got pretty good taste, but it offended him and he immediately threw it away.”

At his home, though, everything stayed.

Beyond antiques, his appetites extended to decorating and design books, which he stacked in hip-high zigzags, gag props (enormous pairs of underpants and black wigs), Turnbull & Asser shirts (why launder when you can buy more?) and newspaper and magazine clippings about himself.

Like Andy Warhol, another ravenous collector, Mr. Buatta saved everything: decades-old taxi receipts, theater programs, letters and invoices, as well as a fully decorated Christmas tree (fake) surrounded by beautifully wrapped presents, all of which was napped in dust, since Mr. Buatta’s prohibition against visitors extended to housekeepers.

“Dust is a protective coating” Mr. Buatta was fond of saying. “I like it in big balls.”

His Overstuffed ‘Protective Cocoon’

In his last years, Emily Evans Eerdmans, a design historian who was Mr. Buatta’s co-author on his 2013 monograph (Mr. Buatta called it the Buattapedia), and others urged him to winnow, and tried to help him do so.

The Christmas tree got the heave-ho, as did the palm fronds

because he was tripping over them, but little else. As he told Ms. Eerdmans, ““You have Andrew’” — referring to Ms. Eerdmans’s husband — ““I have my things.’”

Of his stuff, she said: “It was his lover and his family. It was a protective cocoon.”



Mr. Buatta bought this 18th-century cabinet in the 1970s and used it to show off antique porcelain. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Yet shopping for Mr. Buatta was more than just “filling the Grand Canyon of the soul,” said Todd Romano, his friend and former assistant. It was both sport and distraction. The bidding and the badinage was “his own form of daytime cabaret,” said Angus Wilkie, an antiques dealer.



At Sotheby's, shoppers will find glazed chintz and many, many representations of dogs ... Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



... and needlepoint pillows with arch sayings on them. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Margaret Kennedy, a former editor of *House Beautiful*, said: “Mario gave his clients the dream. It is the decorator’s job to create a beautiful world, a fantasy, but for him it got out of control.”

Mr. Buatta’s heir is his brother, Joseph, but it has been Ms. Eerdmans’s role to sift through the acreage of stuff that Mr. Buatta left behind, a job that began last March and is continuing, with 12-hour days and a lot of Advil Cold & Sinus.

She has given 615 ties to Housing Works. The envelope stuffed with clippings of his work and addressed to his father (but never sent) she hopes will be donated, along with 80 boxes of his papers, to an organization yet to be determined.

The Connecticut house, in a state of atmospheric decay that veered toward collapse, took six weeks to clear out. Ms. Eerdmans described rooms devoted solely to lamps, pillows, tables and 300

rolls of fabric. Mr. Buatta had enraged some of his neighbors there, having neglected the place for years, because of ill health and overwork. He was notoriously hard on assistants and mostly operated by himself, particularly as he got older.



Mr. Buatta's living room, with its armies of dog paintings ("my ancestors," he liked to joke) and blue satin bows, has been reproduced at Sotheby's Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Collecting is a form of seeing, and Mr. Buatta had a hungry eye. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Ms. Eerdmans has been hired by the estate to undertake what has been a grubby, exhausting and emotional ordeal that she nonetheless described as a labor of love, and an honor.

She knew what Mr. Buatta wanted: a bonanza auction, a new flurry of press. And she knew how to do it, much as she and others knew how to take care of him in those final years, wheeling him to doctor's appointments and fending off his cantankerous explosions and menu demands, like Italian pastries from his favorite bakery chosen over the phone from texted photos.

It is no joke getting old, particularly for stubborn, vivacious personalities like Mr. Buatta, and he chafed against its indignities. He and Ms. Eerdmans had not spoken in three months when a friend called in July of 2018 and said, as she remembered, ““Mario isn't answering his phone, can you go over there and see if he's O.K.?””

Despite the exhortations of friends, Mr. Buatta was not eager to focus on the aftermath of his death, which made for an unusual arrangement with Sotheby's.

“I've never done a sale of this magnitude,” said Dennis Harrington, the head of the Sotheby's English and European furniture department in New York, describing how most collectors inventory their possessions during their lifetimes — and have less stuff. “Everything was exactly his taste, and exactly what he loved.”

A Beautiful Yellow Room

Beyond those nostalgic for Mr. Buatta's bygone world, and the many who are missing the man himself, what is the market these days for porcelain asparagus spears, Chinese side tables and tufted chintz slipper chairs?

When "antiques" has become such a dirty word that the Winter Antiques Show, once a glittering social event of which Mr. Buatta was the chairman for more than a decade, has been rebranded as the [Winter Show](#), who will buy the "Louie-hooey chairs," as Mr. Buatta liked to say of that former living-room staple? (The estimates in the sale, which has the nickname Harold, for the plastic cockroaches he was fond of deploying, range from \$500 to \$50,000, and the auction is estimated to bring in more than \$1.9 million.)



Mr. Buatta stockpiled porcelain flowers and vegetables ... Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



... and Lettuce ware by Dodie Thayer. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Working in Ms. Eerdmans's wake, Mr. Harrington and his colleagues culled about half of what they found. "Like every collector, Mario was obsessive, and his obsession was that he could never stop acquiring things," Mr. Harrington said.

"He also had a horror vacui of a plain surface," he added, noting that he had never seen so many painted and decorated objects. Or needlepoint pillows with arch sayings on them.

Mr. Buatta was mischievous, and he liked to poke fun at the affectations of the world he inhabited, but he was serious about his work and relentless in his pursuit of perfection there.

Like the character in the John Cheever novel "Bullet Park," Mr. Buatta had as his emotional touchstone a beautiful yellow room, in his case found in the London apartment of Nancy Lancaster, the Virginia-born decorator who helped foment the English country house style. That "buttah yellah," as rendered in her Southern accent, was what inspired his own living room, its yellow walls sliced with fat blue satin bows and armies of dog paintings.

That room has been recreated at Sotheby's, right down to those bows. An early black-and-white photo of Mr. Buatta, looking movie star glamorous, has been blown up to fill a wall, along with the show's title: "Mario Buatta, Prince of Interiors."

Other rooms designed to match those in his apartment were among the gallery spaces. In the bedroom area, the walls had been painted deep purple, and there was Mr. Buatta's beloved canopy bed and his bookshelves, filled with (a small fraction) of his books.

“A Life in Decoration,” by [Keith Irvine](#), the New York-based English decorator who was one of Mr. Buatta’s first employers, had been inscribed by its author.

“Still in business, dear?” Mr. Irvine had written wickedly.