

Sotheby's EST. 1744 Home



Affectionately known as the Prince of Chintz, Mario Buatta was one of the country's leading interior decorators. Born in Staten Island, his career launched in the 1960s and spanned over 60 years, including clients like Mariah Carey, Billy Joel and Malcolm Forbes. His easily identifiable rooms were marked by a definitively English country aesthetic, as well as his penchant for dressmaker details, lush colors, plump upholstery — and of course, floral chintz.

Nearly 1,000 pieces that Buatta collected in his homes will be on display at Sotheby's *Mario Buatta: Prince of Interiors* exhibit. Love the look? Channel his signature style with these fanciful, undeniably **Buatta-esque pieces from Sotheby's Home**.



This blog is modified from an article written by Olinda Adeane, which originally appeared on Sothebys.com on January 3, 2020.

Decorator Mario Buatta became renowned for his floral schemes and eye for antiques. As his eclectic collection comes to auction, Olinda Adeane looks back on his life and career.

In the winter of 1994, Susan Crewe, then editor of English *House & Garden*, sent me to New York. She wanted a story on anglophile decorator Mario Buatta, who had just completed an apartment for the television anchor Barbara Walters.

We met at an apartment on Park Avenue. I was immediately taken aback by his appearance: sparse strands of hair had been combed across his forehead, while one escaping tendril dangled down in a corkscrew curl, behind his right ear.

I tried hard not to stare, but a few minutes into our interview, Buatta suddenly gave the offending lock a sharp tug, and to my horror, the top of his head seemed to come clean away in his hand.

It was a surreal moment, and then, just as suddenly, there was *the* Mario Buatta, recognizable from his photographs, beaming and laughing and waving a hairpiece in the air. I realized, with heart-felt relief, that it was all a bizarre but harmless practical joke. Word had not reached me, across the pond, that the famous interior designer was a well-known prankster.



Buatta takes part in a *Manhattan, Inc.* magazine photoshoot, for the July 1986 cover story. Courtesy: The Estate of Mario Buatta

Thirty years later, I remembered that evening with a smile and a frisson when I read of Buatta's death aged 82, on 15 October 2018, in New York City.

Mario Buatta's memorial service was held at the Park Avenue Armory. It was arranged, by Hilary Ross, Anne Eisenhower and Emily Evans Eerdmans, to coincide with **The Winter Show**, a prestigious antiques event chaired by Buatta for many years. Guests invited from the confluent worlds of high society and *haute décor* gathered to exchange their favorite Mario stories. Buatta had been as much a part of the fabric of their lives as Lee Jofa's *Floral Bouquet*, his favorite chintz.

Tears were shed as 90-year-old cabaret star **Marilyn Maye** sang "Secret O' Life" by James Taylor:
"And since we're only here for a while / Might as well show some style..."

As they left, each guest was invited to take home a plastic cockroach as their *memento mori* of their jokester friend. It was the end of an era.



Nancy Reagan was among some of Buatta's most famous clients. Courtesy: Ronald Reagan Library

It all began in West Brighton, Staten Island, where Mario and his brother Joseph were raised in a modest English Tudor house built by their grandfather. The Buatta family descended from a long line of *stuccadores* (specialist plaster workers) who left Sicily in 1860. His father Felix, a violinist and bandleader, had played with famous crooner **Rudy Vallée**. Their mother Olive was obsessively tidy. They had a fondness for art deco that Buatta disliked. It was in total contrast to the sumptuous color and joyful clutter that informed his later career.

At the age of 11, he acquired an 18th-century lap desk on Third Avenue for the sum of \$12, to be paid for with 50-cent monthly installments. It was the beginning of a life-long collection.

He enrolled briefly at Cooper Union to study architecture, but decided instead to pursue his nascent passion for interiors; working at B. Altman and Company department store and then for the decorators **Rose Cumming** and **Dorothy Draper**. He opened his own design business in 1963, aged 28.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE COLLECTION



From left: Realist *Still Life Of Flowers* (19th Century), Louis XV Sans Traverse Commode (Late-18th Century), Louis XVI Bergère Gondole (Late-18th Century) and K et G Lunéville French Ceramic Cylindrical Vases (Circa 1920).