

Does Sotheby's Marvelous Mario Buatta Sale Foretell The Return Of Antiques?

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"These paintings are my ancestors. Seriously, I love dogs," the ever jocular Buatta, left, said. The top selling dog portrait, right, was Frances C. Fairman's "The Boxer Rebellion," \$50,000 (\$10/15,000). The 1902 oil symbolizes the Boxer Protocol, a peace treaty signed by Great Britain and France in 1901. The Regency mirror above the painting fetched \$25,000 (\$4/6,000); the pair of George III giltwood wall lights, \$3,750; the delft tobacco jars, \$3,750; and the George III giltwood oval-back armchairs, \$5,625.

NEW YORK CITY – "To flourish, pretty people and pretty things need to be seen." Thus Thatcher Freund begins his 1993 book on collecting, *Objects of Desire*, opening with a vivid description of then Winter Show chairman Mario Buatta (1935-2018) and the social world he inhabited, from the luxe interiors of New York, Palm Beach and Beverly Hills to glittering opening nights at the Park Avenue Armory.

Buatta's sense of life as a stage and his own role on it – part mercurial artist, part courtier, part brand ambassador – underlie the stunning success of Sotheby's January 23-24 auction of the late decorator's personal collection, which garnered nearly \$7.6 million on 922 lots sold. The sale's triumph is a credit to Sotheby's masterful presentation, orchestrated by specialist in charge Dennis Harrington and design historian Emily Evans Eerdmans, Buatta's friend and biographer. Representing the estate, Eerdmans, intent on honoring a man whose contributions to design are in her view not yet fully recognized, lobbied hard for the blockbuster sale, complete with its two-volume, library-worthy catalog and sweeping exhibition.

Its contents drawn from Buatta's residences in New York and Connecticut, plus five storage units, the sale acknowledged the designer's devoted and far-flung following. "People forget how famous Mario was, the most famous designer in America in the 1980s and 1990s. While he wasn't the first interior designer to license products, he did it in a big, successful way. He once told me he made a million dollars on his sheets," Eerdmans recalls.

A great popularizer of the English country house style, which swept the United States during the excess-is-best Reagan years, Buatta had recently decorated an apartment for newswoman Barbara Walters when in 1984 the media dubbed him the "Prince of Chintz," a moniker he cheerfully embraced and did much to promote.

He "designed interiors for a certain kind of American royalty – for Doubledays, Forbes and Newhouses, two presidents and Mariah Carey," wrote *The New York Times*. "Mario could charm anyone, from Malcolm Forbes to young society women," says New York designer Ralph Harvard, who worked for Buatta in the 1980s.



The sale's top lot, at \$212,500 (\$40/60,000) was the oil on canvas "Deux Maisons" by Yuri Pavlovich Annenkov (1889-1974), a Russian painter whose portraits have fetched as much as \$6.2 million publicly. The work originally belonged to Philadelphian Maurice J. Speiser and later fashion designer Norman Norell. The chairs are from a set of four in the manner of Ince and Mayhew, \$2,500. The table is from a George II-style pair, \$11,875 (\$2/3,000).

This is not to understate Buatta's talent. "He had a great eye for beauty and a terrific sense of color. Mario could pick up beautiful things – maybe you didn't look at them too closely – but they were fantastic objects. People wanted them," says Harvard, unsurprised by the sale's robust results. Comfort, exemplified by the cushiest of sofas and well-placed lighting, added to the interiors' appeal.

"Pattern upon pattern, pillow upon pillow" is how one leading dealer recently described the Buatta look. The decorator's freely given style advice, collected in the catalog, offers further insight: "Color is a mood setter. It can make you feel great. But people have a fear of color. They're afraid of what their friends will say or not say. White is glum and beige is boring. I'm Italian." Three perfect colors, the decorator insisted, were "lemon-yellow, leaf-green and Prussian-blue."

Apricot, evoking the walls of Buatta's parlor-floor Neo-Georgian apartment on East 80th Street, and the famous "buttah yella" of English decorator Nancy Lancaster, of whom Buatta was a disciple, had star turns in the enticing rooms Sotheby's created in partnership with Rush Jenkins of WRJ Interior Design. In all, 4,000 visitors toured the galleries. Eerdmans' insistence on installing a monumentally scaled backdrop that Buatta had fashioned for a San Francisco designer showhouse provided "the Instagram moment" of a sale shared online in an almost cult-like fashion.

Eight auctioneers presided over the 22-hour sale, which drew more than 1,200 bidders, many of them online. The top lot, at \$212,500, was the uncharacteristically understated "Deux Maisons," a Parisian street scene by Russian painter Yuri Pavlovich Annenkov.

The best performing categories were lacquered and japanned furniture and ceramics. Buatta owned 20 ceramic services, plus garnitures, jardinières and other accent pieces. Eerdmans says, "The ceramics were a revelation to me. I hadn't realized what a porcelain junkie he was. The quality was probably the highest of any category."

Buatta often said that heirlooms made a room. "Everything I've ever bought has always reminded me of something I've already seen, someplace, sometime," noted the decorator, who lived long enough to regret what he saw as dwindling interest in "brown furniture and old silver," things, he said, "give a room warmth."

Does the marvelous Mario Buatta sale portend an end to minimalist conformity in interior design? "There is a hardcore group of people in their 20s and low 30s who are loving all this stuff. I see it on Instagram all the time. The Buatta preview was packed. I have a feeling that this is a turning point, that it's really slamming home. I wouldn't call what's emerging the English country look, but people are hungry for beautiful, colorful objects," says Harvard.

Sotheby's sale of Buatta property was only the beginning. Stair Galleries of Hudson, N.Y., is offering 1,500 lots from the decorator's estate in two sales split between March and April. Virginia dealer Kinsey Marable & Co. has meanwhile acquired Buatta's library and will be offering highlights for sale.

Prices as reported by the auction house include buyer's premium.

Sotheby's New York is at 1334 York Avenue. For further information, www.sothebys.com or 212-606-7000.



Buatta's circa 1730 Chinese export lacquered bureau cabinet sold for \$162,500 (\$50/80,000), making it the sale's most expensive piece of furniture. The interiors of the cabinet doors were probably once mirrored and the hardware is replaced. The pair of Chinese-style glazed earthenware pagodas made \$6,000.



The sale was brilliantly orchestrated by Buatta biographer and design historian Emily Eerdmans and specialist in charge Dennis Harrington.



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"Pattern on pattern, pillow on pillow," is how one contemporary designer described the Buatta look. The pillows shown here were part of two lots sold for \$10,000 and \$3,250. The George III-style painted garden bench is from a pair, \$13,750 (\$4/6,000). Right, the George III giltwood mirror reached \$6,000; the circa 1820 Staffordshire pearlware portrait bust of Caroline of Brunswick, \$13,750. The small painted bench is one of pair that made \$6,000.



Sotheby's recreated the 1984 Kips Bay Show House bedroom that made Buatta famous and earned him the sobriquet "the Prince of Chintz." Three pairs of curtains sold for just over low estimate, \$6,875. The pair of George II mahogany hall chairs realized \$8,750 (\$1,2/1,800); the Gothick style mahogany torcheres, \$4,375 (\$6/900).



Sotheby's impeccable staging plumped the sale's \$7.6 million bottom line. An opening vignette shows the young society decorator. Right is a Tuscan Neoclassical giltwood mirror, \$17,500 (\$4/6,000). The pair of seven-tier earthenware pagodas flanking the mirror went for \$4,750 (\$5/700).