

Palm Beach Daily News

'Prince of Chintz'



Mario Buatta's living room in his New York apartment is a good example of his updated English country house style. Nearly 1,000 objects from the late interior designer's personal collection will be auctioned Jan. 23-24 at Sotheby's in New York. [Photo courtesy of Scott Frances]

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Posted Jan 11, 2020 at 7:03 AM

The Jan. 23-24 sale of interior designer Mario Buatta's collection at Sotheby's in New York will feature nearly 1,000 objects.

What was it like to stroll into the late interior designer Mario Buatta's living room?

Let his good friend interior designer and Palm Beach Daily News columnist Carleton Varney describe it.

“I see big pictures of dogs, especially black and white spaniels, pedestals with Staffordshire dogs on them, a big sofa with flouncy skirts and rows of pictures with bows on top of them,” he said. “There’s a lot of blue and white. He wasn’t timid in the fabrics he picked. It was always about color — pineapple yellow walls with white trim and pedestals.”

Many such items will go on the block Jan. 23-24 when Buatta’s personal collection numbering nearly 1,000 items will be auctioned at Sotheby’s in New York.

Most of the goods come from Buatta’s Upper East Side apartment in New York and the William Mason House, his historic Gothic-style home in Thompson, Connecticut.

Why so many?

“Because Mario Buatta really was a passionate collector,” said Dennis Harrington, head of Sotheby’s English and European furniture department in New York.

Buatta died in October 2018.

The two-day auction will include antique furniture, ceramics and decorative objects with estimates ranging from \$500 to \$80,000. Most of the lots will be sold without reserve. A public exhibition will be held Thursday to Jan. 22 at Sotheby’s.

“What’s interesting is everything he had was similar to what he put in his clients’ houses,” Harrington said. “He practiced what he preached.”

Buatta was dubbed “The Prince of Chintz” because of his affinity for the colorful, patterned fabric.

He’s known for re-interpreting the English Country House style this side of the Atlantic, creating the impression of homes that had been furnished with items accumulated by families over many years.

The late Henry Ford II, Barbara Walters, the late Malcolm Forbes and Mariah Carey numbered among his clients. He collaborated with Mark Hampton in updating the decor of Blair House, the president’s guest quarters in Washington.

Buatta’s Palm Beach clients included Hilary and Wilbur Ross. He and architect Thomas Kirchhoff earned a 2010 Elizabeth L. and John H. Schuler Award from the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach for the Ross’ Windsong Too, a two-bedroom guest house.

Residents Dr. Ann Johnson and her husband, Charles, worked with Buatta to restore the 98-room Chateau Carolands in Hillsborough, California, which the couple later donated to the Carolands Foundation.

The most expensive objects in the sale are two paintings and a Chinese export black and gold lacquer bureau cabinet.

The circa 1730 cabinet, estimated at \$50,000 to \$80,000, is very rare.

In the same way Buatta loved chintz, he was drawn to furniture that had rich decorative patterns, Harrington said. He doubts there's ever been so many lacquer, Chinese export and penwork objects in a single sale.

A still life by Dutch 18th century painter Jan van Os is estimated at \$60,000 to \$80,000 and a 20th century Paris scene by Russian emigre artist Yury Annenkov is estimated at \$40,000 to \$60,000.

The sale also includes more than 50 dog paintings.

Equally abundant are the 24 dinner and dessert services, which include an assembled creamware botanical service from around 1800 and a modern Dodie Thayer lettuce ware service.

Among the more personal items on offer are a pair of Venetian etched glass mirrors from design legend Nancy Lancaster's iconic "Butter Yellow" room in London. "Mario was bowled over by that interior," Harrington said.

Buatta's brown and gold lacquer four-poster canopy bed from his New York apartment also is up for sale.

"He was famous for his bedrooms, and especially canopied beds," Harrington said. "He said that once you've slept in a canopied bed, nothing else would do."

Other personal items include cuff links, neckties, dressing gowns and a Louis Vuitton attache case Buatta carried when he posed for a Manhattan Inc. Magazine story wearing a chintz suit in Central Park.