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January 30, 2020, 11:00 A.M.

Q&A: Emily Eerdmans on the Mario Buatta Auction, Collecting and Deaccessioning

Emily Eerdmans is a design historian, author and gallery owner. She was Mario Buatta's biographer in "Mario Buatta: Fifty Years of American Interior Decoration" and the person who pulled together Buatta's 922 items for last week's Sotheby's auction that netted \$7.6 million. She went through his two houses and five storage units to unearth the treasures. Eerdmans received her master's degree in fine and decorative arts from Sotheby's Institute of Art in London and teaches connoisseurship and design history at the New York School of Interior Design. She is the author of a number of other books including *The World of Madeleine Castaing*.

Every week, Jura Koncius helps you in your quest to achieve domestic bliss. She and weekly guests, whether Martha Stewart, Marie Kondo, the Property Brothers or Amy Astley, editor-in-chief of *Architectural Digest*, answer your decorating, design and decluttering questions. Jura is always happy to whip out her paint chips, track down a hard-to-find piece of furniture or offer her seasoned advice on practical living and organizing. For more than 20 years, our Thursday Q&A has been an online conversation about the best way to make your home comfortable, stylish and fun. We invite you to submit questions and share your own great tips, ideas and gripes. No problem is too big or too small.

The Discussion

Jan 30, 2020

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Jura Koncius :

I've been speaking with Emily Evans Eerdmans a lot lately since I covered the auction of Mario Buatta's items at Sotheby's in New York. You can read about [the pre-sale buzz here](#) and [the blockbuster \\$7.6 million sales results here](#). Emily has learned a lot about organizing, decluttering and deaccessioning in this job of preparing Mario's estate of two residences and five storage units for the sale. Meanwhile, she is a design historian and lecturer and a well known design book author. So let's chat!

– January 30, 2020 10:48 AM

Emily Eerdmans :

Jura, It is such a pleasure to chat with you today. Working on Mario's estate has been a wild adventure and I am excited to share my experiences.

– January 30, 2020 10:45 AM

Method

What is your method for going through a room? How do you organize what is going to happen to each item when its overwhelming?

– January 30, 2020 10:41 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

That is an excellent question. We found it helpful to work on one room at a time, and then to focus on one category - such as clothing, books, paperwork, etc. Little by little you chip away at the mountain.

– January 30, 2020 10:48 AM

Storage units

I read you went through five storage units! Did you organize them right on site? Any tips for storage unit organization - it's not like doing it in a home.

– January 30, 2020 10:41 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

Many of the storage units were packed to the gills, with chairs stacked all the way up to the ceiling. We were fortunate that we could spill out into the hallway. We emptied out each unit into the hallway so we could take an inventory and assess if there was anything we could dispose of. We were dealing with such a large quantity of pieces, we had to be ruthless. Also metro shelving became our best friend. Many people have asked me where all of Mario's rolls of fabric are - sadly they did become one of our casualties due to condition and needing space.

– January 30, 2020 10:53 AM

Next

Emily - What will you do when the Buatta madness is over?

– January 30, 2020 10:40 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

I know! When I left Sotheby's after the auction was over at 11pm, I didn't feel elated, but more like "Is that all there is?" a la Peggy Lee. We do have Buattacon2 happening at Stair in March but it will soon be over. During the really tough months of this projects, I've often dreamed of floating around in a caftan in Tangiers, so maybe I will do that, but I also have a few book projects I am working on as well as my gallery that I need to wipe the cobwebs out of.

– January 30, 2020 10:56 AM

Buatta Auction

Emily, you did an amazing job in bringing Mr. Buatta's estate to Sotheby's. Did you have some personal favorites that you saw pass to new owners and what pieces are you most excited about in the upcoming auctions at Stair Galleries?

– January 30, 2020 10:06 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

Hello! Mario's Brighton Pavilion style bed was one of the most important pieces to him - it was his cocoon. I was so happy to receive a message from its new owner who clearly will cherish it as much as he did.

There are some fantastic things at Stair with provenances belonging to Geoffrey Bennison, Elsie de Wolfe, and more Michael Taylor.

– January 30, 2020 11:04 AM

Toys

My husband and I, as the board of trustees for our household, have decided to deaccession a number of annoying and/or ugly toys without even taking them out of the box. Can you recommend a toy drive that takes donations outside of the pre-Christmas season?

– January 30, 2020 9:07 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

It is funny that you ask about toys as Mario had bags and bags of gag gifts, such as jumbo sized "Granny pants". We donated anything still in original packaging

to a local charity shop, but if the packaging has a bar code on it (and you have the time and energy), you might be able to sell it on amazon or ebay. If you have many multiples of one item, it might be worth it.

– *January 30, 2020 11:07 AM*

Cyclamen plants

Someone last week asked how to keep cyclamen alive. I have a 10 year old one that has just bloomed. I set it in a bowl wider than the pot with rocks on the bottom and keep the rocks covered in water. I do not water the soil itself. I was told this by a friend who gave me one. I kept that one alive for more than 5 years until I moved out of the contry and could not take it with me.

– *January 29, 2020 11:41 PM*

JURA KONCIUS :

Well this is great news you can use. Thank you and congratulations on your green thumb!

– *January 30, 2020 11:09 AM*

Clothing

How do you deal with clothing when you deaccession - I notice Sotheby's took a few of his dressing gowns and ties. Do you think more would have sold?

– *January 30, 2020 10:40 AM*

EMILY EERDMANS :

Mario was known for being a super snappy dresser and he had an enormous wardrobe. We had to move quickly and overall the clothing was not the greatest asset, so thousands of items of clothing were donated to charity. Interestingly I dont thing the dressing gowns and Hermes ties made a crazy amount which actually makes me feel better about that choice!

– *January 30, 2020 11:09 AM*

So does that mean we should be putting our worn out/stained clothing in the donation bin? I thought the original rule was only donate things others can use/wear? Seems like the whole field of recycling is changing - which is a good thing but we as consumers need to be informed as how best to handle items we are deaccessioning. Good story today. We need that info on a regular basis to create change.

– January 30, 2020 8:14 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

We only donated items that were in good condition - perhaps wrinkled but certainly clean. We disposed of the other items. And good point about researching how to dispose of textiles.

– January 30, 2020 11:12 AM

Decluttering/deaccessioning

Certainly a huge job with Mr. Buatta's estate. Can you tell us how you went about it? Was it a daily 9 to 5 "job" or did you take breaks? Did you have help? Having gone through this process , does it make you tell older people to get your affairs in order so no one has to go through your stuff?

– January 30, 2020 8:18 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

It has been a 9 to 5 job with two assistants since mid March and we still have more to do! Mario did not want to think about what would happen to his things after his death AND he kept absolutely everything. As his biographer, it has been a fascinating journey and we found letters from his design mentor John Fowler which has given me a new understanding of Mario and his career. Someone who didn't know Mario's career would probably have thrown these away. And as his friend, I am grateful that I am finding whatever might be too personal. I only just heard about Swedish Death Cleaning which I think we should all do!

– January 30, 2020 11:17 AM

It seems more designers (such as Miles Redd, the new Sister Parish fabrics and tiles) are bringing back some of the maximalism that we saw in the 80s, but with a refinement, with a mix again of color and pattern. Of all Mr. Buatta's design features, what do you think this new generation will incorporate as "grandmillennial" seems to be a "thing"?

– January 30, 2020 11:13 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

What I *hope* they will incorporate is Mario's joyous use of color and pattern. Everyone walking through the Sotheby's exhibition, enveloped in his apricot and apple green spaces, had a smile on their face.

Also we are living in an instagram era where our surroundings are part of our personal style/ brand (ugh). I think the grandmillennials want to put their own imprint on their environment and not have it look like a hotel room, no matter how high style. That's what Mario was all about - layering in his client's own pieces with his decoration to make it theirs.

– January 30, 2020 11:22 AM

Condolences

I've read that you were close to Mario. I'm sorry for your loss. Were there times when going through his belongings was difficult for you and how did you manage that?

– January 30, 2020 11:18 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

Oh yes. Working through so many items was draining because you have to make constant decisions, but then there was an emotional layer on top of it. The day Sotheby's took down the wall of dog paintings from the living room was a tough one. I left the bows up until just days before the auction as it felt like he was no longer there. And the anniversary of his death was not pretty. Stair was there doing their pickup and I had to go in a corner to have an ugly cry for a moment. When he died, and I was with him all that day, I didn't have the chance to process the loss. It took a year later to have that moment.

– January 30, 2020 11:28 AM

Paint colors at Mario Buatta's Auction

Hi Emily Haleh's mural was stunning! I have enjoyed reading about her collaboration with Mario and of course the photos of all her work. I believe you mentioned one of the wall colors at the exhibition as Benjamin Moore golden delicious. Can you please tell us the name of the other wall colors?

– January 30, 2020 11:22 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

Yes! The dining room was painted BM Peach Jam which was very very close to his actual dining room color. The exhibition designer Rush Jenkins, who is wildly talented, first suggested using yellow for the opening galleries. But Mario was very clear about apricot being a better color for his blue and white porcelain as it "crisps" it. I can't remember the eggplant color they used, but it should have been more of a coca-cola brown.

– January 30, 2020 11:31 AM

(no need to post - just a personal comment in response to an answer)

(Not a question, but a comment - no need to post). THANK YOU for calling out the hotel room look! I see it so often and cannot understand why someone would want to live that way. I always was a huge fan of Mario Buatta and definitely see his imprint on my own decorating choices, albeit on a much smaller scale. In his honor, I went on eBay and bought a Herend cachepot for my dresser to hold a plant, and want to troll second hand stores for his book!

– January 30, 2020 11:27 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

Yes the hotel room look has been an epidemic for quite awhile. I suppose there is something serene about it in a zen way, but I like to be energized by my surroundings and couldn't possibly live without peridot and pink walls. Love that you bought a cachepot - bringing in plants and flowers into a room is very Mario!

– January 30, 2020 11:33 AM

Documentary

Do you foresee a documentary about Marios career and or the process of you went through prepping for the sale? I would watch!

– January 30, 2020 11:23 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

Actually Doug Keeve, who did the documentary Unzipped, has been working on a Mario doc for several years. He got wonderful footage of Mario working on the job, etc. Fingers crossed it comes together!

– January 30, 2020 11:35 AM

Cataloguing

How did you actually start cataloguing things? What advice would you give collectors starting to organize their own collections... where to start, what to prioritize, software programs?

– January 30, 2020 11:15 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

My first recommendation is don't do what Mario did! Seriously though this was a very unusual situation. Usually when Sotheby's takes on a collection, it has already been catalogued and appraised. The very minimum you should do is keep the purchase invoices, with a photo of the item, in a binder, organized by location, and then by category. Even better is to get a software program - we used filemaker pro - to enter in every item. Assign each piece an accession number.

– January 30, 2020 11:38 AM

Stuff

How do you control what you have in your home? Is your place super organized? How do you resist buying things when you are surrounded by beautiful furniture

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and accessories?

– *January 29, 2020 2:58 PM*

EMILY EERDMANS :

I actually am in danger of becoming a mini-Mario and over-collecting. There was so much I wanted to bid on in the auction but in the end I held back. One way I restrained myself was realizing that there is no place for anything to go in my apartment. I am at the point that if something comes in, then something else needs to go out.

– *January 30, 2020 11:43 AM*

Mario Buatta

Emily: How do you begin to deaccession a house full of stuff? How do you know what is valuable and what isn't if you are not a pro?

– *January 29, 2020 2:50 PM*

EMILY EERDMANS :

I am a certified appraiser so I do have a professional knowledge. However ceramics are not my specialty, so I brought in a specialist to help guide me as to what we should save and what we could donate. My advice is get rid of only what you are sure is junk, and then call an appraiser in to help guide you. It will pay for itself.

– *January 30, 2020 11:46 AM*

Hi Emily

What kind of things will we see in the Stair Galleries Buatta auction? How did you determine which items would go where?

– *January 29, 2020 12:07 PM*

EMILY EERDMANS :

The Sotheby's and Stair auctions have been very different processes. I saw the Sotheby's sale (and catalogue) as a document of Mario's taste and collecting. Hence I was super insistent on them taking particular things as they were part of Mario's story. From the beginning, I wanted the exhibition to recreate his living room - one of the most iconic rooms of the late 20th century - and show a context for the pieces.

With Stair, I am much more hands off. I have helped provide provenance but Colin Stair, the owner, has a terrific knack with showcasing personalities and he has a totally different concept than what we did at Sotheby's. I'm excited to see it!

The other thing is that there was such a volume of fabulous things - but you couldn't see it all, until a layer was taken away. So there are definitely items that Sotheby's would have taken in the Stair sale, but they just weren't as readily available.

– *January 30, 2020 11:50 AM*

So many designers posted on Instagram about the preview and sale. Do you think Mario would have been surprised at the desire of other designers wanting to have a bit of Buatta history?

– January 30, 2020 11:12 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

I do think Mario would have been surprised. I know he always wanted a blowout sale like this one but secretly feared no one would care. I knew it would be a big moment, but honestly did not predict how much love and excitement there would be for this.

– January 30, 2020 11:52 AM

Lesson learned

What did you learn from Mario that stays with you?

– January 30, 2020 11:50 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

He always wanted to make us laugh - don't take things so seriously! And he was a loyal friend who always reached out and let you know he was thinking of you. That meant so much to me and I try now to be a better friend but proactively calling and showing up for the people I care about.

– January 30, 2020 11:56 AM

Provenance

I followed the sale with great interest. Not just for this sale, but overall, how much of an item's value is attached to its ownership (past and present) rather than its craftsmanship, artistry, etc.? And what tips an object over to collectible status? At one time, everything Mario owned was brand new and I'm sure someone somewhere looked at Mom's Thayer Lettuceware and thought, "What am I going to do with this junk?" Also, did purchase anything for yourself?

– January 30, 2020 11:06 AM

EMILY EERDMANS :

There is an interesting article after the Bunny Mellon sale in which Mario is interviewed and he talks about how he didn't buy anything in the Jackie O sale - which was the biggest celebrity sale. He couldn't believe people would overpay for something just because a certain person owned. KNowing what Mario paid for everything, which was A LOT, the buyers aren't just getting the Mario name, but his eye which was incredible. Everything in the collection had a little twist, something a little special about it.

– January 30, 2020 11:58 AM

Emily Eerdmans :

Can we do this for five more hours? Thank you, Jura - I so enjoyed this.

– January 30, 2020 11:59 AM

Jura Koncius :

What a great insight into the Mario Buatta world of stuff and how you decluttered it. Thanks Emily. You offered some really insightful tips. Next week, it will be Rebecca West joining us to discuss her book "Happy Starts at Home." Bye for now.

– January 30, 2020 11:58 AM