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A CROSS BETWEEN EBAY AND NET-A-PORTER, 1STDIBS IS THE HOTTEST ANTIQUES MARKET ON THE INTERNET. MORAG BRUCE MEETS THE MAN BEHIND THE SITE

You need a special something for that space in the living room. You're not sure what that something is, but, ideally, it should be the most beautiful thing on earth. A tall order? Michael Bruno thinks not. "The Most Beautiful Things on Earth" is the tag line of 1stdibs.com, the luxury antique, vintage jewellery and couture, fine art and estate website this dapper American founded in 2001. It's a visual marketplace of one-off, hard-to-find items from 1,700 of the world's most prestigious dealers — think eBay meets Net-a-porter for antiques. Search for one piece, find 3,000 added each week; hesitate at your peril, millions of others are also searching. Hours slip by, and your dream basket tips six figures.

Shopping for antiques never used to be like this. Most buying was done locally, or perhaps when travelling. Choice was limited and logistics were a snag. Antiques on 1stdibs have 21st-century thinking behind them. The site has smart search functions, uniform images, easy delivery and inspiring editorial content. If antiques were once relic-like, to be admired from afar, 1stdibs says they're to be lived with, used and celebrated. They are glamorous, desirable and available.

Bruno's story is in keeping with this marriage of high-tech meets history. "I was selling real estate in San Francisco, witnessing the first dotcom boom," he says. "I knew I wanted to be involved, so bought the 1stdibs domain name in 1998 as a down payment on a career change." With this in mind, his next step might seem confusing. "I moved to Paris, where the big online news was still Minitel," he says. Back in California, he had chosen the name to evoke a sense of "one-chance only", and that idea crystallised almost immediately in the French capital. "After a week a friend took me to the flea markets. I walked in and said, 'I'm going to put the Marché aux Puces online.' We knew many buyers were from abroad, so they couldn't come every week, unlike me. Every Wednesday we'd have 100 new items photographed and uploaded to the first version of 1stdibs."

The business moved to New York in 2003, and while the global recession has led many retailers to reduce their inventories, 1stdibs has expanded. Last year, with the site clocking up 60m page views a month, its dealers reported more than £406m in sales, with nearly 9,000 items sold every month. You might lose out on a piece to Marc Jacobs, Jennifer Aniston, Carmen Busquets or Roksanda Ilincic. They're all happily clicking "purchase", exchanging large sums for pieces they haven't seen in real life, because they trust 1stdibs. Not just anyone can sell pieces through the site; dealers are vetted by the 1stdibs team before being added. From their point of view, they have 1stdibs as a powerful marketing arm; it means small, niche sellers can operate on the same level as the big players.

Its "isn't this just fabulous?" feel is not surprising, because Bruno lives and breathes antiques. "Delivery trucks arrive at my house all the time. I am blown away on a daily basis," he says. "I grew up surrounded by old things in an old house, so 'new' never felt like home to me." The site is about falling hard for an item's looks, romance and mood. "In antiques you can see a story. Give me a story and I'm sold. I wouldn't know how to be a dedicated collector of specific eras or designers. Mixing everything up feels natural. I've got Knoll Tulip chairs with zebra-print upholstery around my campaign-style dining table. If you love it all, it will work. I think each thing is beautiful in its own right and that's all that matters to me." ♦



DELIVERY TRUCKS ARRIVE AT MY HOUSE ALL THE TIME. IN ANTIQUES YOU CAN SEE A STORY. GIVE ME A STORY AND I'M SOLD

DESIRE



CATCH OF THE DAY
Michael Bruno shows
off one of his more
eccentric pieces



Look past the big names of midcentury Scandinavian design and snap up a pair of 1960s chandeliers by Hans Agne Jakobsson. A rare flamboyant moment in Sweden's design past. \$5,580 each



An original 48-star American flag from 1930 and a great pop art-style piece when framed. \$997

Designed in 1898 by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Argyle chair is one of Britain's most exciting turn-of-the-century design statements. \$1,660 for a pair



The Victoire car mascot, by René Lalique, speaks of freedom and glamour today, just as it did in 1928. \$25,089



Beat big fans Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie to this 1970s Cloud sofa designed by Vladimir Kagan, whose free-flowing aesthetic cut a swathe through 20th-century American design. \$4,496