

# idfx

INSPIRATION FOR INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

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## Jaime Hayon

The Spanish designer heads up  
this year's highlights from Milan



### **FINEST FINDS**

Online marketplace 1stdibs  
starts a sourcing revolution

### **FLOORING FOCUS**

Step to it: the latest products,  
projects and trends underfoot

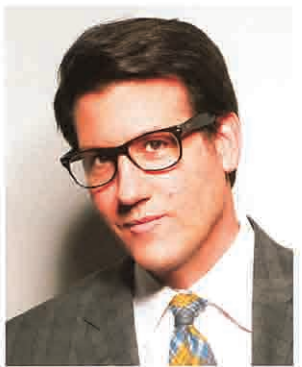
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# First place

A virtual marketplace for the world's best art and antiques dealers, 1stdibs has reinvented the way that designers source products. Michael Bruno is its globe-trotting founder

Words REBECCA HOH



**RETAIL REVOLUTIONARY**  
Above: Michael Bruno, who founded 1stdibs in 2001

**DOUBLE THE DESIGN**  
Left: A pair of chairs by US designer Milo Baughman, sold by Chicago's Converse

We caught 1stdibs founder Michael Bruno in between a business trip to the UK and a jaunt to the Maastricht Art Fair, for which his company is a sponsor of organisers The European Fine Art Foundation. But you can't help but feel that we have also caught him between the current phase of his company - the world's largest online marketplace for luxury art and antiques, vintage design and fashion - and the beginning of a whole new era.

The site features the collections of more than 1,200 hand-picked dealers, and has just launched the Benelux region of the site, where the most important dealers from the Netherlands and Belgium will feature alongside the existing US, Canadian, UK, French and Mexican seller regions. German, Austrian and Italian sections are set to launch this month.

The current expansion is in part due to Bruno's acceptance of an investment from venture capitalists Benchmark Capital, led by online marketplace expert Matt Cohler (the seventh employee of Facebook and a founding team member at LinkedIn). 1stdibs is also boasting a new CEO, David Rosenblatt, an innovator in online advertising with a portfolio

that includes time as the CEO of Doubleclick, where he engineered its \$3.1bn sale to Google. Impressive stuff, but it would be wrong to think that any of this could make a huge difference without 1stdibs being such a darn good idea.

New Yorker Bruno founded 1stdibs in 2001 from his Paris apartment, with not much more than a clipboard, a translator, a web programmer and photographer. He had originally headed to the west coast to study business at San Diego University, before moving to San Francisco to develop a successful career in real estate during the mid-1980s, which is where he discovered and nurtured a passion for restoring property. 'I just love houses,' he describes very earnestly, 'and old houses in particular.'

Bruno's real estate career culminated in the renovation and hugely profitable sale of a Pacific Heights mansion in 1998. It being the middle of the dot.com boom, he looked to new media for his next venture, going forward with an idea to set up an art and antiques sourcing site for interior designers and specifiers, where the trade could get an initial look at dealers' pieces at any time, wherever they were. He

registered the 1stdibs.com domain name, moved to Paris and set off to the Marché aux Puces' eclectic 'flea markets', with his translator, photographer and programmer in tow. At the time, 1940s French furniture was enjoying popularity with American audiences and the shop window Bruno had opened up for US interior designers and architects, alongside the strength of the dollar, meant that in no time at all 1stdibs became the go-to website for any design professional who came across it.

The site's statistics bear witness to its rise since then. 1stdibs has more than 2,000 pieces added to it per week internationally; in February 2012 new items totalled 10,300, and of these, 7,400 had been sold within three weeks. In 2011 the site turned over £315m in sales. Bruno has expanded his business concept, developing the hugely popular Fine Homes section, launched at the end of 2011, which showcases luxury property around the world. So what happened in that decade to encourage this degree of success?

'Many things have come together to make 1stdibs so useful and therefore successful,' says Bruno. 'With the internet and the way we live







#### FIND IT HERE

Left: The site lives up to its slogan as home to 'the most beautiful things on earth'

AMERICAN ABSTRACT  
Above: Art by Charles Green Shaw, from Spanierman



MID-CENTURY CLASSIC  
Above: Offered by LA's Galerie XX, a 1940s René Herbst chandelier

LACQUERED LIGHT  
Below: Dragonette, also from LA, showcases Chinoiserie lamps



our lives, people's attention spans have gotten shorter; they no longer want to go to several different shops over a month to find an object for a home, only to then have to wait eight weeks before they can receive it.

"There is no denying there has been a real resurgence in crafted pieces, collectables, and nostalgic, classic items - vintage is on trend," he continues. "People love contemporary design but eclectic is the key, so they want to mix in antiques. You can see this looking at any interior design magazine."

So, 1stdibs has put a luxury wrapper around the world of antiquing, showing people the value and desirability of objects that might otherwise be hidden away in warehouses and attics - or at the very least, be in a showroom hundreds or thousands of miles away. But Bruno has also put the whole experience of shopping into a 21st-century context, making the process easy and coherent and in line with a large part of our 'regular' shopping and sourcing experiences.

For designers, 1stdibs has simplified and streamlined the difficult task of sourcing exactly the right piece for a project. Bruno tells

the tale how 'one interior designer, Windsor Smith, called me to say "thank you for my beach house" - 1stdibs had indirectly made them enough money to buy their holiday home, because of increased speed and quality they could apply to projects. She said, for her, we manufacture time.'

And dealers love it too, Bruno adds. 'With footfall in their retail spaces so dramatically down, they are realising they also have to reach out.' However, 1stdibs still makes it a requirement that each of the dealers, which pay a fee to be on the site, has a physical presence where buyers can go and view a product before making a final decision. There is a high calibre to all of the featured products, from sculptures to furniture, lighting, jewellery, photography and fashion, which range in price from a \$500 1950s vase to a \$500,000 rococo console.

Bruno's stringent quality controls are certainly working. In April 1stdibs was bestowed with a Soane Foundation Honour in New York; the award is given to present-day leaders in the fields of architecture and design, and is run by a US charitable foundation that supports the work of London's Soane Museum.

1stdibs is also starting to move out of the virtual world and into the real world, holding its first fair in April at New York's Lincoln Center. Entitled NYC20, the event saw 40 dealers showing the best of mid-century art and design, a period that is one of Bruno's favourite eras (the site is a regular stop-off for the set designers of hugely popular American series *Mad Men*, famed for its authentic and show-stealing representation of a trend-aware 1960s Madison Avenue advertising agency). "There has been a definite love for the clean and sharp edges of mid-century Scandinavian-style design for a while," Bruno says, "and we felt it was great time to have the fair. But I'm sure that soon, we'll see rounder shapes and more decorative pieces come back into favour. If *Mad Men* led us to mid-century style, *Downton Abbey* will lead us to Arts & Crafts and deco!"

Bruno is a clearly a man that loves to keep a finger on the pulse of current trends, but, as he leaves to catch his flight, it's clear that his influence is goes well beyond that of being a mere tastemaker. Whatever's in fashion, he's changed the specifying industry forever. [1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com)