

Town & Country

LAST-MINUTE LUXURIES

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Interior designer Kelly Wearstler
in Bottega Veneta

tastemaker

Michael Bruno

This globe-trotting Web innovator keeps an exacting eye on the trends—while he celebrates the classics.

BY PENELOPE GREEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCESCO LAGNESE

I T'S THE STUFF of Horatio Alger: a nineteen-year-old reads a book at the beach and it changes his whole life. The boy was Michael Bruno, a business major at San Diego State University. The beach was in La Jolla, California, and the book was that classic of positive thinking, Napoleon Hill's *Think & Grow Rich*, which has been a best seller since its publication during the Depression.

"It taught me to set goals and turn a *thought* into a *thing*," says Bruno, now forty-six. The energetic and still-boyish president of 1stdibs.com, the wildly addictive antiques Web site, is credited with resuscitating the antique-furniture business and profoundly altering the way people shop for decorative arts.

It began as a kind of lark. In 1998, Bruno was living in San Francisco and riding the real-estate wave that flowed from Silicon Valley's first dot-com boom. Stylish and business savvy, he was selling vast mansions to the newly rich twentysomethings, staging them with high-end antiques and objects because, as he says, "clients were coming from one-bedroom apartments and had no furniture and no ideas about furniture." His thought was to create a Web site that would sell entire rooms to these buyers—give them, essentially, "first dibs on the room," as Bruno puts it. He registered the domain name that year but noodled a bit before settling on the right business model. "EBay was already in place, but I didn't think the auction model was the right one,"

Bruno says. "I wanted it to be the way it was in the real world."

Then he decided to move to Paris—another lark. "I'd always wanted to live there, and if I'd stayed in San Francisco, the temptation to keep selling real estate would have been too great," he says. In an oft-told tale, as Bruno wandered the aisles of the Clignancourt flea market, he had one of those "aha" moments and quickly figured out how to put the entire market online. "It seemed so easy, probably because I had no idea what I was doing," he says now. "I didn't even know how to speak French or send an e-mail."

Today 1stdibs has 500,000 regular subscribers and carries the wares of 1,000 dealers in the United States, Paris, London, Montreal and Toronto; for 2009, transactions—involving well over 50,000 items—reached roughly \$400 million, in Bruno's estimation (1stdibs charges its member dealers a small fee and also takes a commission on sales). The site now offers jewelry and vintage clothing in addition to furniture; next year fine arts will be included.

On a recent sunny morning, Bruno was recovering from a move the day before in which, he said, he'd hauled a store's worth of French antiques from Long Island to his new apartment, on East 62nd Street. He was happy to answer a few questions about his life, his business and his inspirations.



With his business, 1stdibs.com, growing quickly, Michael Bruno has just moved into larger, loft-style office quarters. Making the transition with him: his Ralph Lauren Home desk, his Jean-Michel Frank chair and much-loved works of art.

ARTFUL AND ELEGANT

FAVORITE CITY FOR ANTIQUING:

"Paris. I still love to make trips to the flea market. But the shops of the Left Bank have been so beautifully edited that the quality of things there is superb. You see things you will never see anywhere else."

SECOND FAVORITE: "New Orleans, for a whole combination of reasons. You can be there in a few hours from Los Angeles or New York and have the experience of being in another country. And the French Quarter is so romantic at night with the gas lamps. The antiques are mostly French Provincial."

URBAN HOTEL: "The Lowell, in New York City."

BEACH GETAWAY: "Kukui'o, on the Big Island, in Hawaii."

CULTURAL EXPERIENCE: "Anything at New York's Metropolitan Opera."

DANCE SONG: "'We Are Family,' by Sister Sledge."

ACTOR OR ACTRESS:

"Bette Davis. I like her range and her attitude, and *All About Eve* is one of my favorite movies. I don't have a favorite among today's actors."



BEST BUY: "My favorite object is a stone sculpture [above] I got for \$300 from a dealer in San Francisco. He called it a chicken-cow because it looks a little like a chicken and a little like a cow. Every time I see it, it makes me smile. The best buy I ever got was a seven-piece garden-chair set. The dealer didn't attribute it to anyone. Turned out it was by Jean-Michel Frank. I think I paid \$7,000. You could probably add a zero to that."

BUSINESS ADVICE: "Ignore what everyone else is doing, and blaze a trail. People laugh that when I was living in San Francisco and wanted to start a dot-com, I moved to Paris. I tend to do things in my own way."

TOP FIVE WEB SITES: "The first is nytimes.com. I might wake up at 5:00 A.M. and read the whole paper online. And then I'll buy the newspaper itself when I go out for coffee at Starbucks at six—I love the print version that much. The other four are expedia.com, giltgroup.com, artinfo.com and style.com. I'm not into blogs."

MOST INSPIRING BOOK:

"*Think & Grow Rich*, by Napoleon Hill. It's more of a business inspiration than a personal one, but whatever you create in your life becomes personal, I think. It allowed me to understand the process of the mind and use it in everything I do. The book also taught me to put a deadline on what you want. Otherwise, things don't get done."

DESKTOP OBJECT:

"A ceramic sculpture by my sister Sally. It's a globe with high-rises poking out, as if Manhattan were protruding from the planet."

WRITING TOOLS: "A Montblanc—and a carton of Bics."

ELECTRONIC GADGET: "My iPhone."

FAVORITE ROOM IN THE WORLD:

"My bedroom in Southampton, New York. I see the most amazing sunrises. I leave the curtains and blinds open so the sun can wake me up."

MUST-HAVE HOME ACCESSORY:

"The best bed linens you can afford. I have sheets from Prima Linea." primalineahome.com.

FAVORITE PERIOD FOR FURNITURE DESIGN:

"The 1940s."

ITEM THAT ADDS LUXURY TO A ROOM:

"Lighting, with dimmers on every fixture. I have mostly all lamps, except in the kitchen. But even there I have lamps on the counters."

GARDEN STYLE:

"I love the lushness of a tropical garden. I used to live in San Diego, where it's all about palms and traveler's-trees and birds-of-paradise."



WALLPAPER OR PAINT:

"Tobacco-brown paint. I think every house should have at least one dark room; I've had a brown room in every house I've owned. I've been using Benjamin Moore Brown Tar [above], but my new apartment came with perfect brown walls that I'm just touching up." benjaminmoore.com.

CHARITABLE CAUSE: "The Animal Rescue Fund of the Hamptons, in Wainscott, New York. That's where Sampson, my baby, came from. He was a St. Bernard; he died a few years ago, at thirteen." arhamptons.org.

BEST GIFT EVER RECEIVED:

"Sailing lessons from my sister Sally. Our mother was a sailor, and I'd always wanted to learn. Now, in the summer, I charter a boat and sail it every other weekend. I'm very comfortable on the water."

WORDS TO LIVE BY: "I'll be talking about a new project, and everyone is rolling their eyes, and I'll say, 'You'll see.' I'm famous for that."

PRIZED POSSESSION:

"Good health, something I never thought about until I hit forty."

GREATEST HOPE FOR THE FUTURE: "To stay curious. I think that's wildly important."

GUILTIEST PLEASURE: "My pleasures are guilt free!"



● **CITY TO VISIT:** "Rome." Shown here, the Trevi Fountain.



● **COUNTRYSIDE HOTEL:** "Wheatleigh, in the Berkshires."



● **WOMEN'S DESIGNER:** "Yves Saint Laurent [top], particularly his designs for Christian Dior in the late 1950s."



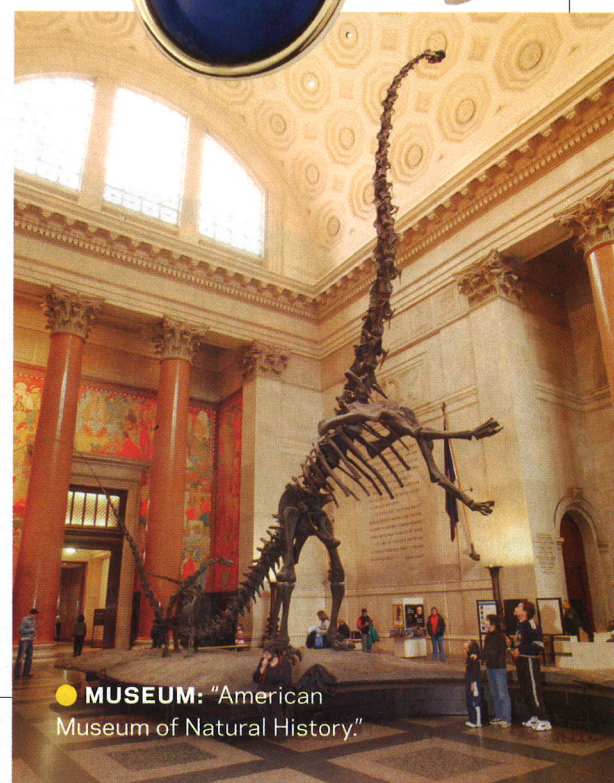
● **BEST LUXURY BRAND:** "Ralph Lauren. I think the beauty of Ralph Lauren is that the brand represents a lifestyle that most people will never be able to obtain but will continue to aspire to. That creates desire, which is the root of all luxury."



● **STYLE ICON:** "Jean-Michel Frank [above right, and his mica-veneered low table, ca. 1930], because I think he truly was the first figure to emerge from the Art Deco period with really clean modern design. If you made his things today, they would still look fresh and new."



● **TREASURED ACCESSORIES:** "My 1940s Vacheron Constantin watch, 1940s René Boivin cuff links and 1963 Mercedes convertible, an accessory I use all summer long."



● **MUSEUM:** "American Museum of Natural History."