

## DESIGN &amp; DECORATING

20 ODD QUESTIONS: MICHAEL BRUNO

## THE ART OF THE DEAL

Hide your credit card: Michael Bruno's online antiques marketplace, 1stdibs, is expanding into fine art

BY JACKIE COOPERMAN

IN 1999, Michael Bruno did the same thing as many aesthetically minded, adventurous young Americans before him: He packed up his belongings and headed for Paris.

"The dollar was so strong, I was buying things up like a drunken sailor," said Mr. Bruno, who had previously been working as a real estate broker in San Francisco. He had already renovated and decorated several of his own homes and had brokered multimillion-dollar property sales for San Francisco's young Internet moguls.

He began scouring the Clignancourt flea market and—despite his inability to speak French—persuaded high-end Parisian dealers to showcase their wares on 1stdibs.com, the trade-only website he'd just built.

Since its launch in 2000, the lushly produced site has grown to include nearly 1,000 leading dealers of antiques, modern furniture, estate jewelry and vintage fashion. And this month, the site is expanding to include fine art. Currently exhibiting the top fine art dealers in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago, the site will ultimately include galleries in 10 cities.

While his competitor artnet.com has a voluminous selection, Mr. Bruno likened his site to a small boutique. The 47-year-old elaborated, "When users go on artnet, they're in a research state of mind. When they come to 1stdibs, they're in a luxury shopping state of mind."

1stdibs.com uses a subscription-based model, charging dealers between \$500 and \$2,000 a month. Last month, Mr. Bruno said, 1stdibs.com counted 33 million page views, up from 12 million in October of 2009.

Each week, Mr. Bruno and his team of editors and photographers add about 2,200 new items, and the dealers showcased on 1stdibs sell about 1,500 items.

**Online, I buy** mostly furniture, lighting and objects and now art. I am a true junkie.

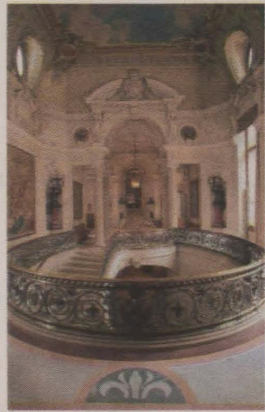
**Yes, I have shopped on Gilt.** Just yesterday I brought two Thom Brown suits to the tailor that I purchased last year but never had fitted. Neither of them is right and it's too late to return them. From now on, I am sticking to cashmere throws and polo shirts on Gilt, and buying my suits at Bergdorf Goodman.

**Browsing the Web can be** as fun and pleasurable as browsing a gallery. I wanted a faux bois cabinet for a front porch I'm renovating. I went on the site and looked at 30 options. It just opens up a whole new way to be able to make choices.

**I wanted to buy** "Fun," a three-dimensional wall-mounted word sculpture by New York artist Chris Caccamise, who is represented by Eleven Rivington Gallery. But by the time I contacted them—it was only on the site for a few days—it was already sold.

**I love** being at my country house, driving around in my 1963 convertible Mercedes, wearing my 1940s René Boivin cufflinks.

**My night table** is a 1940s Jansen round table with a black marble top and a gilt bronze base. On top, there is a vintage lamp and a pile of books that I intend to read along with a glass of 9.0ph balanced Kangen water.



"When we started with just furniture, the average price per item was about \$7,000. We added vintage fashion and jewelry and the average price went to about \$5,500," he said. "We anticipate the number going back up with this month's addition of fine arts." Though he cautions it's still early, Mr. Bruno predicts his shoppers will flock to photography, where prices range from \$2,000 to \$200,000.

Mr. Bruno credits Paris with teaching him about "amazing" objects, but he is thoroughly American in his approach to sales. It's a long way from his early beginnings, when to goose sales and get wary antiquarians to use his site, Mr. Bruno quietly became his own best customer and his apartment overflowed with French antiques.

"Living in Paris didn't influence my business decisions, because if it did, I'd still just be selling things from the Paris flea market," he said. "That was fun and carefree, but I wanted to do more." Wish fulfilled.

Below, Mr. Bruno answers some questions about art, the Internet and margaritas.



**When I'm traveling,** I always stay at the Four Seasons. They have the best trained staff on the planet. But I also hold a soft spot in my heart for the La Valencia Hotel in La Jolla. The manager always brings me a margarita with no salt, my favorite.

**The best decorative arts** museum is the Château de Chantilly in France—it's the world's largest one-bedroom home.

**My favorite Paris boîte** is Le Voltaire.

**The best galleries** in the world are on the left bank in Paris, particularly along the rue Bonaparte and rue de Seine.

**My favorite boutiques** and galleries: Brunello Cucinelli in New York City for cashmere, Galerie Yves Gastou in Paris for design and Regen Projects in Los Angeles for art.

**The worst thing** about shopping online is organizing the returns. Once I buy something, it's not going back.

**I've learned that the Internet** is always changing and there is always someone looking for a way to take over your territory, so you'd better be working on ways to take over someone else's.



From top: Michael Bruno; his living room in Sagaponack, N.Y.; Mr. Bruno in front of his 1963 Mercedes;