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WEB MASTER

INTERNET TASTEMAKER MICHAEL BRUNO SEARCHES EUROPE FOR HIGH-STYLE TREASURES—AND MORE THAN A FEW HAVE FOUND A HOME IN HIS TIDY FLAT ON PARIS'S RUE JACOB



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WHEN MICHAEL BRUNO moved from San Francisco to Paris a few years back, he had, he says, "barely a stick of furniture." So like any other smart-shopper American living abroad, Bruno headed to the city's flea markets, particularly Clignancourt's *Marché aux Puces*, to outfit his apartment. The real-estate broker (he sold luxury properties for Sotheby's in the 1990s) turned entrepreneur saw how quickly \$6,000 and \$7,000 pieces were snatched up, and he began to think that it would be great if decorators in the U.S. could keep an eye on the market in Paris without actually being there. To his surprise, a shopping spree soon became a business plan.

In June of last year, Bruno launched *1stdibs.com*, a Website that sells high-end European antiques and vintage items to Americans (and anyone else who signs on). The site lets design lovers browse hundreds of images of decorative-arts pieces—from 1930s floor lamps to 18th-century commodes—that they can then bid on. Working out of an 18th-century three-bedroom flat on historic rue Jacob, Bruno and eight employees regularly contact about 400 dealers in France, Belgium, and England, searching for intriguing and varied inventory.

Each Wednesday, *1stdibs.com* posts about 150 new images on the site for more than 5,000 customers (around 4,000 of whom are decorators) to peruse. It gives designers as well as collectors the



Facing page: A mohair sofa and chair by Ralph Lauren Home in the sitting room; the small 1950s side table is by Jansen. The plaster relief is from the 1940s. This page, from top: In the living room, *Les Fruits*, a 1981 ink-on-paper work by Françoise Gilot, hangs above a 1940s Jansen marble-topped stone table; the gilt-wood grapevine is 19th-century Italian. An antique silver chest and a 1940s Baguès chandelier give the kitchen an elegant air. See Resources.



chance to “shop in Paris without ever leaving home,” he says. (The company acts as a go-between for the customer—helping to negotiate prices, processing payments, and organizing shipping.) While there’s a lot of interest in trendy furniture and accessories from the 1940s, the bulk of 1stdibs.com’s inventory spans the 19th and 20th centuries, in particular cocktail tables, chairs, and side tables, plus scores of lamps, sconces, and chandeliers, with prices ranging from \$500 to \$50,000. “Probably more than anything,” Bruno says, “we sell lighting.”

For his home, which is in the thick of the art-and-antiques district of Saint-Germain, just a few blocks from the Seine, Bruno brought some basic pieces from the U.S.—a brown mohair sofa and club chair, a desk, and a leather four-poster, all by Ralph Lauren Home. “Ralph Lauren works well with antiques,” he says, “because his designs are inspired by the past and today.” The apartment is a blend of then and now, too. There is polished oak parquet in the entry and dining room (which serves as the 1stdibs.com home office) and sisal throughout the living room, master bedroom, and study. Originally used as a device to level off the floors, which had become uneven over the years, the sisal gives a distinctly modern feel to the 300-year-old flat. As Bruno’s friend New York-based decorator Steven Gambrel says, “the bones were in place.”

From there, Bruno began to fill his new home with old finds. During one weekend shopping at the Pucés market, he purchased a 1940s sapphire-





blue polished-satin sofa and chairs and Raymond Feuille's *After the Party*, a curious blue-toned contemporary painting depicting two men, one with the head of a buck, for the living room. "It quickly established a blue theme for the room," says Gambrel. Bruno's Website became a source for furniture, too. Every week Bruno buys items that no one has bid on, a strategy made easier by the fact that his decor doesn't follow a particular scheme. "When you see something you want," he explains, "you don't care if it has a place. You make it fit."

As a result, the look throughout is quite eclectic. In the kitchen, next to a glistening Smeg stainless-steel range is a 19th-century French silver chest, and dan-

gling high above both is a bronze Baguès chandelier from the 1940s. In the living room, a 19th-century Italian gilt-wood grapevine stands eight feet tall beside the blue sofa. Nods to antiquity lace the rooms—busts atop a table and a mantel, a 1940s plaster relief of a chariot race, and leaning against a wall, an odd little 19th-century painting of Romans, some of whom have chiseled stone heads. His motivation to buy it? "I thought the colors were amazing," he says.

Yet the driving force behind the design as a whole is Bruno's fascination with turnover, whether it's real estate or antiques being bought or sold. While this new realm is "a hobby and a passion," he says, "I'm still a broker. I'll always be a broker, I guess." ■

A reproduction of a 1940s lamp and a Ralph Lauren Home trestle desk in Bruno's study. The charcoal drawings are 19th-century Italian. Facing page: In the master bedroom, a leather four-poster by Ralph Lauren Home is dressed in Egyptian-cotton sheets and a Fortuny-cotton bed cover; the 1950s Italian suede chest is from Flair in Florence. See Resources.

