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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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DESIGN & DECORATING

A Hip Contender To the Antiques Throne

Taking on an industry Goliath, upstart site the HighBoy wants to make vintage furniture accessible to the smartphone set

BY RUTH GRAHAM

WHEN IT COMES TO buying high-end antiques online, the porcelain elephant in the room is Istdibs: Founded in 2001 by former real-estate agent Michael Bruno, it dominates the world of online antiques sales, and has branched out into fine jewelry, vintage fashion and even real estate. The site draws 2 million unique visitors a month and sold \$1 billion worth of goods last year. About 70% of its massive inventory consists of furniture.

Any new entrant into the game of selling decorative arts and furniture online has a tough opponent to face. Say hello to TheHighBoy.com, which soft-launched on Feb. 1. The site's ambitious mission: To refurbish the antiques industry, making it more accessible to potential new consumers, and easier for dealers to reach them.

The HighBoy brings together established dealers who offer a wide variety of curated goods, from an apple-shaped tea caddy (\$675) to an exquisite 18th-century grandfather clock (\$21,750), along with fine art. The site's look is clean and stylish, more like a fashion site than a museum homepage; its founders drew inspiration from the straight-from-the-runway fashion hub Moda Operandi and the art-sharing forum ArtStack. Photography is consistently attractive and detailed, a failing of some similar sites. And the layout is intuitive to maneuver, allowing searches by style, period, origin and the like. Prices—including shipping costs—are visible to anyone who sets up an account, which is free.

The market for selling antiques online is as crowded as a stall at the Paris Flea Market. InCollect.com, helmed by Antiques & Fine Art magazine founder John Smiroldo, launched almost simultaneously with the HighBoy, and other young sites, including Lofty.com and Loveantiques.com, are all jostling for a piece of the action. Meanwhile, several

older antiques sites have folded or merged in recent years, casualties of Istdibs' dominance and the reluctance of some shoppers to buy expensive one-of-a-kind wares online.

"I've seen so many sites come and go," Istdibs' Mr. Bruno said. "I keep waiting for them to succeed, but so far no one has." He called the HighBoy "charming," but quickly noted the site's relatively small number of items for sale. "It's all about habits: Where do people turn first?" he said. "By the time they're done searching our website, they've probably found what they're looking for."

The HighBoys' founders are Olga Granda-Scott, who comes from a family of antiques dealers in Florida, and her husband, Douglas Scott, a former strategic consultant. The Miami-based couple knows they have their work cut out for them. At the moment, the HighBoy has about 1,200 items, compared with Istdibs' 300,000; 55 dealers to Istdibs' 1,800; and 4 employees to Istdibs' 150. They have made efforts to signal their seriousness by co-sponsoring a prominent Miami antiques show, an indication to the traditional antiques world that they are insiders. And they're investing in weekly editorial content, something Istdibs is also admired for. Mr. Scott said launching the HighBoy required "a multiple six-figure investment."

Perhaps most important to their ideal new collector, they have also put a lot of thought into their site's voice. The tone is authoritative yet just a bit breezy, with a reference to Gustavian-style furniture as the "boho chic cousin" of Louis XVI: "same great bone structure, but a lot less fuss." Mr. Scott likes to joke that he's "the Mick Jagger of the design industry," and he means it: He wants the HighBoy to be seen as "a little raggedy, but sexy and fun and appeals to a broad audience." Indeed, the site's Instagram page playfully boasts that it's "kind of a big deal." When asked what sets his site apart from Istdibs, he said, "We're so

much cooler!" But if the HighBoy feels young and hip, Mr. Scott still estimates most items will fall into the \$3,000 to \$7,000 range: closer to VIP tickets to a contemporary Stones concert than the freewheeling '60s scene.

The HighBoy's tagline is "Antiques simplified." But injecting simplicity (not to mention edginess) into this business won't be easy. The prices are high, and trust and insider knowledge are indispensable. So the HighBoy team has embraced many aspects of the old-fashioned antiques world. Unlike some other sites, for example, only

established dealers are approved to sell on the HighBoy; you won't find random items here from people who have raided Grandma's attic. Dealers sign an annual contract with the site, which offers photography services to make sure items are displayed at their best. Every item is vetted by a committee before it is posted.

Compared with the buyer-beware ethos of catchall sites like eBay, such vigilance is significant. But antiques insiders still have major concerns about online shopping. Catherine Sweeney Singer, longtime director of

New York's prominent Winter Antiques Show, believes that websites cannot manage the kind of exhaustive vetting that the top antiques fairs do. In a rarefied business like this, nothing will replace person-to-person contact: "It comes down to the level of expertise," she said, "and how much of that can be learned just by reading something on the Internet versus sitting down with a dealer or visiting a gallery."

The HighBoy is young, but you could say its odds of success get better every day: In the world of antiques, after all, value comes with age.



Illustration by Ch. Birmingham for The Wall Street Journal

Antiqustagram These

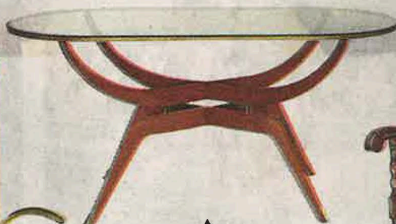
Ranging from medieval to midcentury modern, HighBoy's offerings may be old, but the site has a modern look and friendly voice targeted at younger consumers. All items available on TheHighBoy.com.



French Louis XV-Style Kingwood Marquetry Bombe Commode, \$5,500



Scandinavian Ystad Brass Candle Holders, \$695



Midcentury Oval Coffee Table in the Manner of Gio Ponti, \$1,800



French Louis XIV-Style Needlepoint Armchair, \$1,495



English 18th-Century George III Grandfather's Clock, \$21,750