

hospitality design

november 2013 hospitalitydesign.com



creating connectivity

guest editors: avroko

HDexpo
hospitality design event

michael bruno

Photo of Michael Bruno by Deena Feinberg; product images courtesy of 1stdibs



1. Among the rare finds at 1stdibs: one of a pair of marble chimney fireplaces.

2. A 1940s gilded bronze floor lamp with a chiseled palm-leaf pattern.

ACCIDENTAL CURATOR

Bringing unique art and antiques to the masses

What started as a real estate agent's passion for amassing authentic Parisian market finds in 2001 has morphed into 1stdibs, an online marketplace uniting more than 1,500 antiques, vintage furniture, and design, fine art, estate jewelry, and couture dealers from around the globe, what AvroKO calls "connectivity in its purist form—programmatically. It makes finding these rare and beautiful pieces easy as pie, linking all of us." Here, 1stdibs' visionary New York-based founder, chairman, and chief creative officer, Michael Bruno, talks curating, choice, and one-of-a-kind products with AvroKO's Kristina O'Neal.

I know you began in luxury real estate...How did you get the idea to start 1stdibs?

I was living in San Francisco. A lot of my clients were young kids in the internet business and they were all buying houses and wanted to know where to find stuff for these houses, and wasn't there anywhere online? They didn't believe that nothing existed for this. I'm surprised none of

them decided to do it themselves. I guess they were all too busy doing other businesses.

I realized that if we created something similar to an MLS type system—which is what you use in the real estate business for finding houses—for the design business, for professional designers to find products they could show and sell to their clients, it would be natural. It worked well because we're well known to the designers in the community, so it wasn't like shopping from a new brand or developing new trust. For them to pick it up and use it made it easy, and then they began to explore dealers they didn't know. At first a lot of designers used it for the dealers they did know, and then they quickly said, 'Well, I care about a chandelier. That's all I care about. Where am I going to get the chandelier?' Once they realized 1stdibs was a trusted place, it became easy and comfortable for them to take the leap of faith and start buying all around the world.

This is fascinating, as the concept for this issue is connectivity. You have built the ultimate connected curation or MLS for furniture, as you call it. Do you think of it as a curation?

There is a major curation element to it, because historically we've turned down more dealers as potential customers than we take. Sometimes we don't say no; we just tell them we'll let them

know later. Then we keep watching their website to see if we like their inventory. We also only take dealers who we think are going to be successful. But now we have so many customers around the world, it's hard to decide. It used to be that if I didn't like it I wouldn't take them, but it can't be about my personal taste anymore. It comes down to is it a good value? Is it quality? Are they honest in their description? How much knowledge do they have? Are they a decorative dealer or a collectable dealer?

That process—the curatorial process—protects your purchasers as well?

Yes, so we kind of hand-select dealers who we feel have the right aesthetic. But we have found that sometimes the things people want are not the things we would expect them to want, so you never really know.

You're probably the most successful model of this type in the online world. What are you doing that wasn't done prior? What's the secret sauce for what you do?



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3. The Vistosi "Pulcini" bird by Alessandro Pianoni is comprised of hand-blown blue and green glass.

4. A pair of Jean-Michel Frank-designed console tables crafted from wrought iron and parchment wood.

5. Irinee Rochard's Art Deco sculpture of white metal elephants mounted on an onyx base.

I think the real secret sauce is choice. We give those people who are designing one-of-a-kind objects that have in-stock inventory the chance to reach a much larger audience. If you're a designer or a consumer and you're looking for a chandelier and suddenly you can look at dealers from all over the world and have this great collection of ready, available stock, that to me is what makes it work—that people now have a much broader choice than they had before, so they can create better projects. And they can also find stuff that's ready now versus a lot of new things you have to order and wait and wait and wait for. The fact that we fit right into the middle of great selection and available stock is such a winning combination.

Yes, that makes perfect sense. And everybody's in a rush. They always want what they want when they want it.

I needed some dining chairs and I went on and found six that I loved from Right Auction that are probably perfect. I haven't pulled the trigger yet—I just found those yesterday—but I buy stuff constantly.

Do you think the model you have created has affected the design world? Are you actually affecting, not necessarily the process of how people design, but actual design?

I think so, because if someone is working on a project and they're limited to their local selection, then suddenly we say, 'Hey, you know, here's...' An example of this is I was looking for a round center table for my house in Tuxedo, New York. And I kind of had a predetermined idea of what it was going to look like in my head. It was going to be dark wood, robust but not too much carving. So then I went on and I searched 'round tables'

by price, high to low. I decided to look at all of them just to discover what I might like differently than I had expected. The table I bought is completely different in look and design than what I originally had in mind. I ended up with something that actually made the room have this whole different feeling than it would have had otherwise. So I think that we affect the process and the outcome—how you find it and also what you might actually end up selecting. It creates a new collaboration.

It's the happy accident...the moment one says, 'It's better than what I could have imagined.' And you have pushed to global markets now. What kind of challenges have you been faced with there?

Our first goal whenever we introduce a new product in a foreign country is to get interest from people who are within proximity to that market. So for example, we started in Paris, moved to the States, and then London was our next stop. I'm going to Scandinavia in a week and that's our next market, but our first new markets after London and France were Spain, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, and we thought, well, the London business is sort of like New York where there are a lot of people who like design, and it's not that far. They don't have the same tax issues, they don't have the same transportation, so we open those markets wanting to leverage the fact that those dealers will now do business in the UK and have some local business. Then we try to

get press within the markets in Europe so that those dealers will have business close to home. Of course designers and other people in the U.S. will shop from them, but we don't rely on that. We try to build into the market local business.

I was in Belgium recently and one of the dealers said he was surprised that a design firm he'd been trying to work with for years who'd never shopped at their store found something on 1stdibs, contacted them, and bought it. So he says, 'I just can't believe I'm reaching people in my hometown who I couldn't reach before.' There are many different ways to access clients and to create these buying opportunities, so that's what's worked out nicely.

It's global, with an emphasis on regional connections. I like that.

Yes, we try to build that into the mix when we're adding a new market. Are they relying on exporting everything to America? If that's all the dealers want, well then, that's not a good business plan because we're not developing a global market. We're just developing a global supply with a local market.

Yes, the further you reach, the better the access and choices for local markets as well. Which brings us to what's next for you guys? What are you thinking about in terms of either extending reach or developing new products?

We're a focused company and we do things methodically, step by step. Before we do anything wildly new we're going to finish working on the things we're already doing, which would be building out the European market—buyers and sellers. We have a lot of work to do on both fronts. We have within mainland Europe and the UK about five hundred dealers, and in the U.S. we have approximately three times that. That market should be brought up to par at some point, and over a couple of years it will. As we grow the supply we'll grow the demand. It kind of happens automatically in a way, but we don't sit back to wait. We're proactive in our marketing efforts, with events and advertising. For an online company, we're one of the few that believes in print advertising. **hd**