

The New York Times

## Dibs on That: Antiques Without The Antiquing

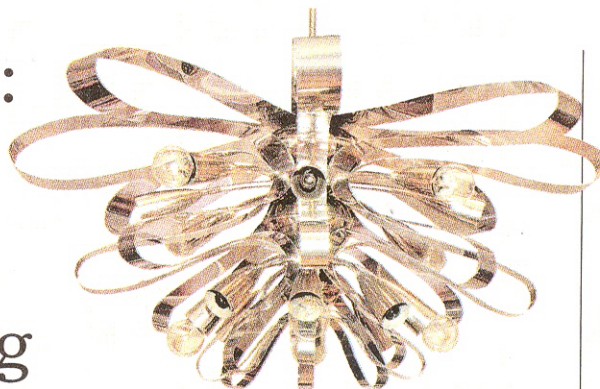
By KATE MURPHY

**E**VERY Wednesday, seconds before 11 a.m. Eastern time, furniture fans are stationed at their computers, poised to point and click. It's the countdown to the weekly posting of new items at Istdibs.com, an online decorative arts marketplace with dealers from the United States and Paris.

The site, with as many as 30,000 visits a day, up from 7,500 two years ago, according to its founder, has become a favorite among professional interior designers and, in the last year, do-it-yourself decorators.

◆ It is not only a primary resource for locating and acquiring new pieces but also a way to discern the latest design trends.

◆ "It's mind-boggling, the gorgeous things you can find in minutes," said Deborah Doe, who furnished her



15,000-square-foot home in Osterville, Mass., on Cape Cod, almost entirely with items she bought at Istdibs.com.

"I have a passion for decorating and wanted to do my house myself," she said. But with two small children, she didn't have time to go antiquing, especially when she needed furniture to fill more than 40 rooms, not to mention 400 light fixtures. She appreciated the access the site gave her, "without having to hop a flight to Paris or having to pay a designer," she said. "I'd just sit down at my computer when the kids were asleep and then wait for the trucks."

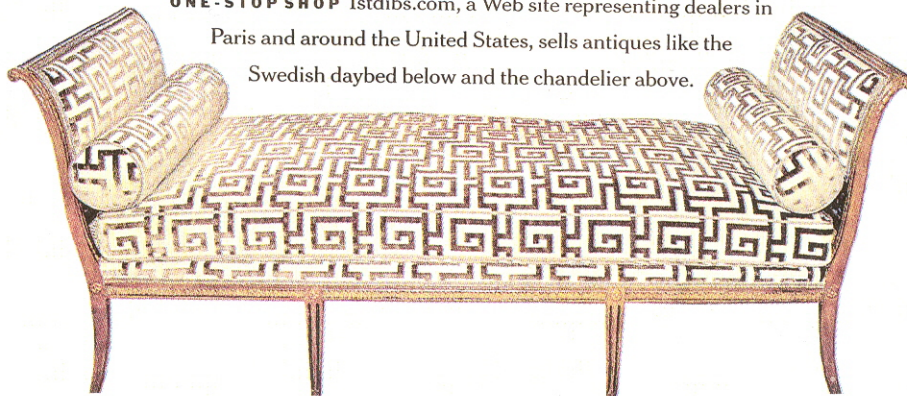
Ms. Doe bid on pieces through the site, paying Istdibs.com a 20 percent commission to submit her asking price, haggle with vendors and arrange deliv-

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◆ **ONE-STOP SHOP** Istdibs.com, a Web site representing dealers in

Paris and around the United States, sells antiques like the

Swedish daybed below and the chandelier above.



# Dibs on That: Antiques Without the Antiquing



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times



Judith Hilton for The New York Times



**INSIDE DEALS** Every Wednesday, professional designers and do-it-yourself decorators alike peruse the new items posted on Istdibs.com. Among the pieces recently listed for sale are a red chandelier designed to look like



coral from Gustavo Oliveri (\$3,900), top; two 1937 armchairs

from Paris (\$5,900 the pair); and a 20th-century English pond yacht from Hamptons Antique Galleries (\$1,200). "It's addictive," said Jaime Derringer, who says she finds "design inspiration" on the site.



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ery. But it's also possible to negotiate price and shipping with dealers directly, since their contact information is visible even to those who don't register with the site.

"Istdibs.com" has dragged what was a stuffy old business into the 21st century," said Howard Settle, a co-owner of Antique & Art Exchange, an antiques dealer in San Francisco. Items from his store have been featured on the site since 2004, generating 30 percent of his sales, or more than \$50,000 each month.

"We developed our own Web site but only our own clients looked at it," Mr. Settle said. "We weren't pulling in anyone new." With Istdibs.com, he said he draws customers from as far away as Europe and the United Arab Emirates.

While do-it-yourselfers like Ms. Doe are shopping the site more frequently, Istdibs.com was originally intended for professional interior designers and at first showcased antiques only from Paris flea markets. It now represents 390 dealers in 12 cities in the United States.

Carl D'Aquino of D'Aquino Monaco, an interior design firm in New York, is one of many designers who said they can't imagine doing their jobs without Istdibs. "It's foolish not to use it," he said. Though he loves to shop and prefers seeing items before he buys, he said the site saves time and shoe leather by allowing him to search this country, and Paris, too, for something as specific as, say, an 18th-century French bombe marquetry commode no wider than 2.3 feet.

While he likes the immediacy and vast selection, Mr. D'Aquino said, "I'm conflicted about it" because "there are few hidden sources anymore."

Revealing hidden sources is the point, said Michael Bruno, the founder and chief executive of Istdibs.com. He started the site in 2001 after moving to Paris following a lucrative run with Sotheby's real estate division in San Francisco during the dot-com boom.

"I thought I'd take a few years off," Mr. Bruno said. But after a few months of shopping in the local flea markets for things to furnish his Paris apartment, he hit on his next business opportunity. "I was blown away by the amazing things that were available," he said, and "all the designers from the United States who came every two or three weeks to shop."

He decided to save them the trou-

**A 'stuffy old business' has been dragged into the 21st century.**

ble. He hired an interpreter and a photographer and began weekly Internet postings of flea market items which, for a 20 percent commission, he would purchase on behalf of site users.

In 2003, he expanded to include pieces from vendors in the United States. He also changed his business model to a subscription-based service, in which dealers pay a monthly fee plus additional fees per item posted. Although Istdibs.com declined to disclose its rates, dealers report that fees range from \$400 to \$700 per month, plus \$10-\$20 per posted item.

"Even if it was just advertising for me it would be worth it because of how many people look at the site," said Ann Koerner, an antiques dealer in New Orleans.

Although there is an acknowledged slump in the antiques business, dealers on Istdibs.com said they aren't feeling the effects. "It's the older dealers who haven't embraced it who are complaining that they are barely surviving," said Heather DiPetrillo of Heather & Company in San Francisco.

Her store has been on the site for three years, and in that time her business has grown from a crowded 800-square-foot shop in a strip mall



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

**OPEN SECRET** Michael Bruno, left, created Istdibs.com to connect designers with dealers like Heather DiPetrillo, far left. Homeowners like Deborah Doe, above, are also using the site.

online," she said.

But Courtney Hill, an interior designer in Houston, said her clients don't care how she gets items as long as she gets what they want. "They are excited that I'm not just focusing locally but searching absolutely everywhere for just the right thing," she said.

And, of course, there are a growing number of people shopping Istdibs.com for themselves. "My designer actually turned me on to it," said Ana Goizueta, who began prowling the site two years ago after remodeling her home in Darien, Conn. "I have gotten some incredible, distinctive pieces," she said, including a travertine, glass and brass coffee table signed by the midcentury designer Willy Rizzo.

Instead of making bids online like Ms. Doe in Cape Cod, she contacts dealers directly. "I bargain hard and usually get a 30 percent discount" off the asking price, said Ms. Goizueta, who was a Wall Street banker before leaving work to care for her three children. "You can get some terrific deals, especially on things in Paris."

She said it has worked to her advantage that she hasn't been in a hurry. "If you are willing to wait, the perfect thing is likely to come up within six months because of the rotation of product," she said.

Because Istdibs.com caters to the design trade, many people consult the site just to stay abreast of what's hot. "It's addictive," said Jaime Derringer in Mount Laurel, N.J. A project manager for a pharmaceutical company, she said she peruses Istdibs.com regularly for "design inspiration."

Lately, she has noticed several items adorned with or made of coral. She was so taken with a chandelier that was designed to look like coral that she posted a link to it on her blog, design-milk.com. The chandelier was beyond her budget, so she bought some coral at a seashell shop as a decorative accent instead. Of Istdibs.com, she said, "It's not really for people in my income bracket, but it gives you great ideas."

to an expansive 9,000-square-foot showroom in a design center. "I would definitely not be thriving" without the site, Ms. DiPetrillo said.

To maintain the quality and consistency of the site's look, Istdibs sends photographers to dealers' shops monthly to shoot high-resolution digital images of each new item. The site also has photo editing operations in Paris and Mumbai, India.

The site now lists more than 700 pieces from the 18th to 20th centuries, sold by dealers in Paris; New York City, the Hamptons and Hudson, N.Y.; Stamford, Conn.; San Francisco and Los Angeles; New Orleans; Miami and Palm Beach, Fla.; Chicago; and Atlanta. Dealers in Houston, Dallas, Boston and Philadelphia will be added by the end of this year. Prices range from less than \$1,000 to more than \$200,000.

Inclusion of dealers on the site is by invitation, and Mr. Bruno said 500 dealers are on the waiting list.

He vets each dealer. "I go to their shop unannounced and make a decision based on inventory but also the owner," he said. "If they don't have good customer service, like they are icy and I wouldn't want to deal with them, then they aren't right for the site."

Indeed, Istdibs.com owes much of its success to the reputation of its featured dealers. "All the stores that are on Istdibs are known, established and credible, so you have confidence in the quality," said Laura Carrigan, an interior designer with Scott Sanders L.L.C. in New York. She uses the site to search her area for items she needs and then inspects things she wants to buy in person. "My clients aren't quite there yet to have me buy