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EMILIA CLARKE  
RAISES HER GAME

# FIRST DIGS

Michael Bruno, founder of the online art and antiques emporium 1stdibs, has transformed his Tuxedo Park mansion into a stunning showcase for his one-of-a-kind objects.

BY KATHERINE ROSMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS HALARD



**BIG GAME**  
In the gallery, a pair of resin-formed tusks sit atop an early 19th-century French cabinet purchased from Roark Antiques, in front of a collection of antique Egyptian photographs. The wood floors throughout the house are original.

**M**ICHAEL BRUNO likes things to be where he likes them to be. This can be said of many people, but it's especially true of the 50-year-old founder of 1stdibs, the online marketplace for one-of-a-kind antiques, furniture, jewelry, vintage clothing and fine art. (To the point: Bruno thought the Paris flea market should be on the Internet, so he effectively put it there.)

In his newly renovated seven-bedroom home, the towels belong (folded in thirds) in the second-floor linen closet where Bruno added wood paneling to give the space the airy feel of an Alpine villa pantry. A collection of walking sticks (about 30 in total, many bought in Antwerp, Belgium, and nearly all with a special feature like a hidden pillbox or gun) rests in a stand in what has to be the world's least muddy mudroom. The felt-covered, velvet-embroidered 19th-century ottoman belongs an inch to the right of the contemporary Windsor Smith armchair in the sitting room—not next to the chair that was bought as a set with the ottoman from a dealer in Madrid. The dogs (Natasha and Boris, both cream-colored retrievers) belong in the kitchen and other tiled rooms. "If everything is where I want it and the way I want it, it lets me focus on other things," says Bruno, as he puts champagne on ice while he and his partner, the

former antique dealer Alexander Jakowec, await lunch guests.

The mansion, built in 1900 on nearly 14 acres, overlooks a lake in Tuxedo Park, New York, about an hour's drive and a million miles away from Manhattan. The first time they saw the house in 2012, Bruno and Jakowec were in the market for an apartment in New York City. But the couple had heard about the area from designer friends and decided to check out a listing that had caught their eye. "We came to Tuxedo Park on a gloomy, damp February day and it still looked gorgeous," Bruno says.

The house that captivated them online failed to impress, but they stayed to look at six other houses. They loved one—a turn-of-the-century Regency-style mansion built by architect Bruce Price, with help from John Russell Pope, who codesigned the Jefferson Memorial—and returned to see it three days later. "When we were driving back to the city, I said to Alexander, 'We need to be cool and think this through.'" Twenty minutes later, Bruno called the agent and made an offer (\$3.25 million) that was quickly accepted.

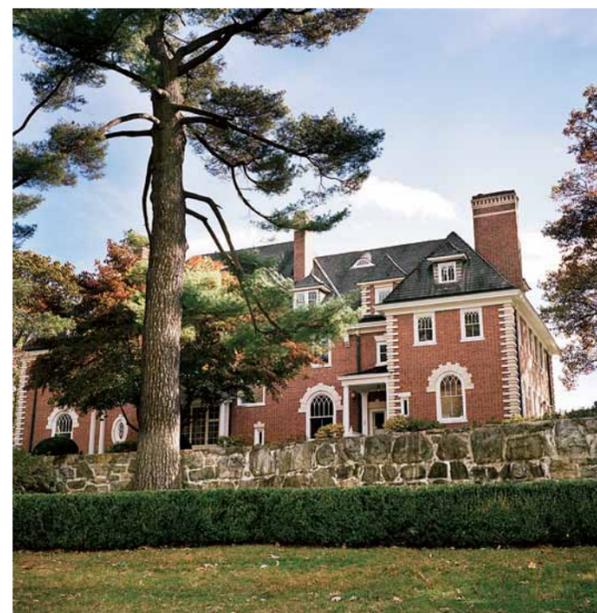
If you suddenly find yourself with a 14,000-square-foot home to furnish, it helps to know a few antique furniture and art dealers. Bruno and Jakowec know more than a few. Bruno launched 1stdibs—an online marketplace for dealers of high-end art and furniture

and rare antiques—in 2000. He had moved to Paris in 1999 and during a walk through the flea market realized the potential opportunities for French dealers if they could easily reach American buyers. "We learned early on that people were willing to buy online and have pieces shipped all over the world," Bruno says. In a broad sense, 1stdibs helped transform the rarified world of unusual art objects into an open marketplace. But perhaps more notably, Bruno says, "1stdibs is a place where collections are born."

This was the case for Bruno himself. Even after 1stdibs launched, he didn't think of himself as a collector. Once the company became well known in the design world, a reporter asked him what he collected. Unsure how to answer, he looked around his house and noted all the animal-inspired items. "I thought, Whoa, it's Noah's Ark in here!" he says. Now he believes that this is the most organic way for collections to be born. "You buy things you love and don't need," he says. "Natural collectors don't even think about it, they just collect."

The interiors of his new house have come together in the same vein: Bruno didn't have a vision when he bought it. He simply bought things he loved and used his eye to put them where they belonged. Upon moving into the house in the spring of 2012, his sole certainty was that he wanted to redo the kitchen and the first-floor library. For the kitchen, Bruno and Jakowec wanted a more contemporary space that would serve as the informal heart of the house. The library had beautiful woodwork, but a former owner had covered the tops of some of the arched windows with panels. "It was oppressive," says Bruno. He and Jakowec dismantled it in favor of light.

Completed last summer, the first floor is spare and airy—with a kitchen that is all-white subway tile and wainscoting. ("I don't like refrigerators that stick out," Bruno says, as he sips a malt-shop glass of just-blended kale juice.) Behind the kitchen is an anteroom where a



#### GRAND ENTRANCE

The chandelier above the main staircase is original to the home. The busts were found at the Paris flea market. Opposite, left: Bruno, seated on a chair by Windsor Smith and, right, the exterior of the mansion, which was built in 1900.





**WILD KINGDOM**  
In the gallery, the table at left is an edition of a late 20th-century design by Jean-Michel Frank. The view into the dining room reveals an oceanscape by Dutch artist Paul Kuhstoss. Opposite: A collection of animal dioramas found on 1stdibs by Bruno's partner, Alexander Jakowec.





**CONVERSATION PIECE**  
Bruno found the kitchen table in a warehouse in Antwerp. Opposite, left: In the summer master bedroom, the 19th-century Portuguese four-poster bed was purchased at Tod Donobedian Antiques in San Francisco and, right, in the coatroom, a faux ceramic bear's head mounted among shed antlers.



massive armoire Bruno found in Atlanta (sourced via 1stdibs, as was nearly everything in the house) sits opposite a long countertop and a deep marble sink.

After buying the mansion, Bruno and Jakowec bought the house next door, bringing their contiguous land to almost 20 acres. This is now their guesthouse, and its lawn is a croquet court. Bruno also bought a nearby dilapidated boathouse that he says will be fixed up this spring. "We are putting it back to its original design," says Bruno. "I'm more of a restorer. I'll only redo things if they weren't done well in the first place."

Across the way from the kitchen is Bruno's office, with a large wooden desk bought from a dealer in Bruges, Belgium. Near the fireplace is a 1940s leather coach found many years ago at a Paris flea market and a 1970s smoked mirror coffee table with bronze edging from a dealer in Amsterdam. "You can imagine what people did with a mirrored table in the '70s," he says wryly. "Since I've owned it, the most exciting thing that's been on it is handblown glass candlesticks."

To the right of the desk is a small armoire with a large nick visible on a front panel. Nicks happen, even to Bruno's things—especially to Bruno's things. He likes to reimagine his spaces constantly, moving items from room to room—or from house to house. He and Jakowec own four houses in all, including two in Southampton, New York. "I rent a U-Haul at least once a month," he says. All this decorative rethinking causes wear and tear, but the nicks are one of the many subtleties that make this otherwise imposing mansion feel comfortable and unfussy. (He has rearranged the house since I toured it. The office is now a den; his desk is now on the second-floor landing.)

As you work your way back toward the kitchen, you arrive at a gallery with high ceilings and large, arched windows. On one wall hangs Bruno's prized collection of nine turn-of-the-century photos taken of landmarks and monuments in Egypt. Mounted on the opposite wall are two plastic busts of camels, their necks outstretched. Bruno bought these from a dealer in Miami

and believes they were originally used as props in a theatrical production. "I like to hang them very high because they're not of noble material, as the French like to say," he adds.

The camels are some of the many animal trophies in the house. Bruno has chandeliers and wall hangings made of shed antlers, faux-carved animal skulls and a set of wildlife dioramas that Jakowec found on 1stdibs. "Back in the day in Tuxedo Park, they would have had real trophies, but I'm not into that," Bruno says.

A piece that Bruno says gets lots of attention from visitors is found in the kitchen: an oval wooden table on white legs. Standing counter height, it functions as a kitchen island, making it easy to stand around while in conversation and eating, Italian-style. The table itself often becomes a conversation piece. Bruno found it last year in Antwerp while roaming around a 20,000-square-foot warehouse with a flashlight, he says. "I saw one of the legs and I said, 'What is this? I'll take it!'"

"When I travel for work," he adds, "I like to shop. Our rooms are very collected, not decorated. A decorator looks at a space and then imagines what should be bought to go in it. I buy things I love and then I find a place to put them."

**B**RUNO WAS BORN into a collection: He is the fourth of six children. "Things would get ruined, so my parents had only a few good pieces—things that were very robust," he says. Raised in Larchmont, New York, a quaint town on the Long Island Sound, Bruno learned an appreciation for old houses. After attending San Diego State



University, he moved to San Francisco. During the first dot-com boom, he became a real estate agent and had many "IPO millionaires," as he calls them, for clients. He started to get the entrepreneurial bug. "I thought, I want in on this!" he says.

He decided to move to Paris to avoid the distractions of his real-estate career and to focus on ideas for a start-up. He'd bought the URL "1stdibs" a few years before, during the domain-name gold rush. Walking through the Clignancourt flea market in the 18th arrondissement, he came up with an idea to pair with it. Bruno had just begun to date Jakowec, whom he met when Bruno happened into his antique store in Sagaponack about a year prior. He asked Jakowec to join him in Paris. Initially, the business plan called for dealers to pay a fee to 1stdibs to list their items on the site. Final sales between buyers and sellers could be negotiated and settled off-line or through the site.

To create the marketplace and build inventory, he and Jakowec would visit dealers, make a pitch and photograph their goods, often on the spot. French dealers were initially skeptical, but once a few dealers got on board, word-of-mouth spread quickly. By 2003, Bruno and Jakowec had turned their attention stateside: first to the Hamptons, where both men were well connected in the art world, then to dealers in New York City, San Francisco, Miami, Houston, Los Angeles and so on. A watershed moment came in 2003 when the late *Vogue* photographer and antique dealer Roger



**GILT TRIP**

Left: Swivel chairs by Eero Saarinen surround the dining room table. The gilded grapevine was purchased in Paris. Opposite: In the kitchen, Bruno's retrievers, Boris, left, and Natasha, place paws on a 1970s table by Jules Wabbes, beneath a chandelier found on 1stdibs.

he says he had never heard of the brand. He and his wife had recently renovated an apartment. He called the designer they worked with to get his impression. "He said, 'Sixty percent of your apartment is from 1stdibs,'" Rosenblatt recalls. Two years into the job, Rosenblatt is expanding the scale of the company. The focus is on enlarging the site's inventory and the technology to enable its customers to search by any number of tags and keywords. In 2013, 1stdibs dealers sold nearly \$1 billion in goods, up 54 percent from \$650 million in 2012.

Now that Bruno has given the world a place to buy one-of-a-kind furniture, his latest venture is an app to manage it all. Called HousePadApp, it allows the user to map out the precise configuration of an entire house, with photos and notes that show staff exactly where a side table should sit and how beds should be made. For people who own multiple homes or for those overseeing renovations, the app connects homeowners, architects, designers, contractors and cleaners. "It's for people like me," Bruno says. "I like everything in its right place." The app will be available via iTunes in mid-March, Bruno says.

And of course he continues to create and re-create his living spaces. The second and third floors of his Tuxedo Park home have been kept deliberately spare—one large room

Prigent invited Bruno to his town house for a catch-up and then called half a dozen of the most important dealers in Manhattan to urge them to sign up. For more than a decade, Bruno oversaw every aspect of the company, which now also sells jewelry and vintage clothing. By 2011, 1stdibs had a network of 1,200 dealers who were selling 6,000 items a month, at an average price of \$5,000.

In 2011, Bruno started talking to investors. He wanted to buy out a partner, which would require cash, and also knew he needed help expanding the business. He accepted an investment of \$60 million

from Benchmark, a venture capital firm, and stepped aside to make way for a new chief executive—David Rosenblatt, former chief executive of DoubleClick, an Internet ad service that he sold to Google for north of \$3 billion—while remaining the largest single shareholder. Bruno now focuses on signing new dealers in international markets and in helping to promote the brand. "The biggest challenge for me has been to create the space people need to do their jobs without being micromanaged by me," he says.

When Rosenblatt was first approached by Benchmark about the prospect of running 1stdibs,

is nearly empty, apart from a portrait of Bruno painted by a 1stdibs employee propped on a desk; in front of it, a yoga mat unfurls on the painted white floor. One of the most inviting areas in the house is the second-floor landing, just off the main staircase: A white chaise longue and a solitary sheep stand quietly together, framed on either side by windows with views of the surrounding landscape.

Bruno and Jakowec's mansion may have many rooms, but it's been decorated to draw people out, into the common spaces. "We have many houses," Bruno acknowledges, "but this is home." ●

