

ART + AUCTION

THE INTERNATIONAL
FOR ART COLLECTORS
APRIL 2012 | ARTIN

THE DESIGN ISSUE

10

YOUNG DESIGNERS TO WATCH

Blue-Chip Modernism

Jean Pigozzi
LARGER THAN LIFE



Michael Bruno

1stdibs, the online luxury goods marketplace, was founded in 2001 by Michael Bruno, a Sotheby's real estate veteran who modeled the Web site on the digital listings pooled by realtors. Eleven years later, 1stdibs hosts 1,200 dealers from dozens of cities in Europe and North America. Bruno and Benjamin Genocchio discussed the site and related ventures, including the sponsorship of NYC20, a 20th-century design fair that debuts this month in Manhattan.

1stdibs initially showcased vendors from the Paris flea market. Today, hundreds of dealers are on a waiting list to join the site. What are your selection criteria?

We look for a number of things: Is the dealer a full-time professional in the business with a showroom? Does the dealer specialize in a certain area of collecting? Does he or she have recommendations from other dealers and interior designers? Do we believe our customers will be interested in the merchandise? We avoid dealers who are brand-new in the business unless they come with excellent recommendations and have merchandise of exceptional quality.

Can you describe the review process?

We have a specialist on staff for each area that is represented on the site. If they have questions, they may reach out to independent experts in the field. Many of the dealers we work with are the leading authorities in their areas, and we often turn to them for advice. I try to personally visit as many dealers as possible before we make a decision. That part of the job is fun—and dangerous, because I'm a compulsive shopper.

Along with antiques, design, and fashion, 1stdibs now offers fine art, estate and fine jewelry, and real estate. Why enter the fine art market when the number of specialized sites seems to grow daily?

It has been our goal from day one to curate a site with every major luxury category. We've been adding new categories for five years. Although many of our dealers have been selling fine art since we launched, we recently opened a new section that is focused on contemporary art. We've seen sites in other areas of collecting come and go over the past decade. I expect we'll see the same thing happen with many of the fine art sites.

How does 1stdibs accommodate the needs of fine art collectors?

Buyers in all categories operate in different ways, and the site is designed to accommodate that. Do you want to purchase an artwork online? Click a button. Ask the dealer a question? Send an e-mail or call the dealer directly. Better understand the artist's intentions? Read about the artist in our weekly magazine or in our gallery catalogues section. See the artwork in person?

Arrange a gallery tour from our exhibition schedule. For many buyers, 1stdibs is the starting and ending point in making a purchase. But we're perfectly happy if people simply use the site to plan a tour of the galleries they would like to visit.

In 2011 you opened a 1stdibs showroom in the New York Design Center. How does that support the online enterprise?

We are delighted with the 33,000-square-foot showroom. We have 60 dealers presenting everything from Tiffany lamps to Verner Panton chandeliers. This gives customers who have never bought online a chance to visit 1stdibs in person and become acquainted with the high caliber of the dealers represented on the site.

You are sponsoring NYC20, a new 20th-century design fair that launches this month at Lincoln Center with 40 exhibitors drawn exclusively from the ranks of 1stdibs dealers. How does the site benefit from this kind of exposure?

We already work with most of the major fairs, including TEFAF Maastricht and the Winter

Antiques Show. This encourages the customers of 1stdibs to meet the dealers and see the merchandise in person. NYC20 presents an interesting opportunity to partner with Rosemary Krieger of Dolphin Promotions, which produces several fairs around the country, to establish a new venue for 20th-century dealers in New York.

Do you have a profile of the typical visitor to 1stdibs?

With more than two million visits each month, we have many types of customers, including interior designers, architects, and both novice and serious collectors. We've never purchased mailing lists, so our customers come to the site through genuine interest.

What do you want your business to look like in 10 years?

Just like it does today, but with several more categories and in many more languages. ■■

