
Fashion & Beauty / Insiders

Michael Bruno, founder of 1stdibs.com

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Text Kin Woo

A tagline like “the most beautiful things on earth” may seem like an impossible ideal, but with the online antiques marketplace, **1stdibs.com**– that seems just about right. Since its formation in 2001, the lavishly produced website hosts some of the finest in antiques, design, fine art and vintage fashions and jewellery from over 1000 of the most prestigious international dealers in the world. Often breathtakingly expensive, these envy-inducing luxury items nonetheless set the hearts racing and minds dreaming. Which were the exact emotions felt by **Michael Bruno**, the site’s founder when he arrived as a young American in Paris in 1999. “While living in Paris I received the best education,” he reminisces, “Paris is full of amazing shops that sell books on antiques and design that you will not find any place else. I bought hundreds of them over the years and read them from cover to cover.” While he got the inspiration for his website from the famed flea markets of Clignancourt, it was working as a real estate broker in San Francisco in the 90s that Bruno realized the untapped possibilities of the web. “I was selling real estate during the dot com boom and at the time, people buying houses were the ones taking the dot coms public. The web was natural and familiar to them and they all wanted to search for design online and it simply didn’t exist. That’s how the idea started.”

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Despite not speaking a word of French and meeting resistance from skeptical locals, Bruno managed to convince high-end dealers to sell their wares on his newly built website. Now more than a decade later, 1stdibs.com boasts over 2 million hits a month and has revolutionised the antiques trade, dragging a stuffy business into the 21st century. While Bruno was a recipient of the 2012 Sir John Soane’s Museum Foundation “Innovators” award for his efforts, he puts its reputation down to the dealers, many of whom he personally vets – “I visit as many dealers in person as possible before they become our customers. I’ve found that antique dealers are an adventurous bunch and for the most part they all hoped the venture would work so they jumped on board.”

The website added vintage fashions to the mix in 2009, curating enviably rare selections from the likes of pioneering designers like Pierre Cardin, Mila Schon

and Gres and capsule collections from Lacroix and Hermes. Their most recent coup was the unveiling of a rare trove of Elsa Schiaparelli's surrealist jewellery, pegged to the Met Museum's current exhibit "Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations". For all the decadence on display on his website, Mr Bruno's personal tastes run a little simpler: "My aesthetic is all about clean modern spaces with antiques and 20th century design living together." Then maybe giving a hint of what to expect for the future he adds, "But on the fashion side, I always love to see amazing Yves Saint Laurent pieces from the 1950s and 1960s."