

The Virtual Flea Market: Collecting with a Click

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Collecting with a Click

THE GROWTH OF VINTAGE-DEALER "MALLS" ONLINE IS CHANGING THE WAY THE WORLD SHOPS FOR ESOTERIC DESIGN. BY CARA GREENBERG

Was it really less than a decade ago that antiquing was a wildly popular weekend activity? We'd get up at dawn to compete for bargains at bustling flea markets and drive countless miles in search of tag sales and estate auctions. It was fun, to be sure, but not very efficient. Now it seems almost quaint, as designers, dealers and a growing number of collectors exchange the car for the keyboard.

"In the past, people shopped randomly, and it took a substantial amount of time. Now you can shop the worldwide market in an hour," says Michael Bruno, who founded the behemoth website 1stDibs (1stDibs.com) in 2001 to market the wares of a handful of French dealers, modeling it on the multiple-listing services of the real-estate industry. As a former real-estate agent looking for a new venture, Bruno's genius was to put the fabled Paris flea markets online, with all the excitement of discovery intact. "Our goal was to bring the freshest goods to the Web as

fast as we could," he says. And so it remains: "A dealer can find a piece on Tuesday and it's online Wednesday."

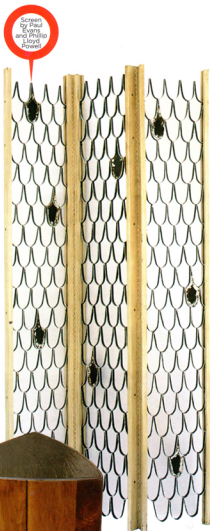
Expected to exceed \$400 million in sales for 2008, 1stDibs is by far the biggest player in the electronic antiques marketplace. The site now features 500 top dealers in 16 U.S. localities, Paris and London, who collectively list more than 1,200 new items each week—most in a midcentury modern idiom, though a group of highly vetted traditional antiques dealers from the Art and Antique Dealers League of America recently joined the group. The instantaneous nature of the site and of its several smaller emulators, including three-year-old Vintage & Modern (VandM.com) and recently launched Bond & Bowery (BondandBowery.com), makes them handy mirrors of the latest collecting trends. The keyword-driven search process has changed not just the how of collecting, but the what, because of its built-in propensity for easily searchable designer



Sergio Rodrigues Kala chair



Paul Lazlo lamp



Screen by Paul Evans and Phillip Lloyd Powell



Translucent side tables by Phillip Lloyd Powell



Brass and agate cocktail table by Ado Chale

names rather than broader styles or genres. "Sales are tied to names," says Bill Indursky, a partner in Vintage & Modern, where more than 60 quality dealers have set up shop. Once dealers call attention to the work of a forgotten maker like Line Vautrin (the French "poet of metal" who created whimsical gilded jewelry and mirrors in the 1940s and '50s) by offering it online, it is very easy to explore the universe of such items.

The most-clicked things at present, according to Bruno, are the imaginative, exquisitely crafted midcentury furnishings that were produced in limited numbers by designer-artisans and designer-decorators like Paul Evans, Phillip Lloyd Powell, Michael Coffey, Karl Springer, Billy Haines, Ado Chale, Charles Hollis Jones and others, which are detailed in a new book, *Modern Americana: Studio Furniture from High Craft to High Glam* (Rizzoli), by Todd Merrill and Julie Iovine. (Merrill was one of the first American dealers to join 1stDibs.) Highly original decorative work made in small factories and workshops has become more sought after than the mass-manufactured designs that Eames, Nelson and Saarinen did for Herman Miller and Knoll and that held sway for so long. It was 1stDibs and its vanguard coterie of dealers, including not only Merrill but Paul Donzella, Lost City Arts, Liz O'Brien, Reform and many more, who gave rapid exposure to this new collecting category as it emerged.

With designers and decorators now doing much of their legwork online, there's generally less foot traffic in antiques stores, hurting places like Hudson, New York, where the 65 antiques shops that line the imposing 19th-century main street had become the town's main draw. Thus, most antiques professionals, in Hudson and elsewhere, now have a Web presence—either as a member of a multiple-listing website or on their own—as well as a storefront. Merrill maintains his showroom in lower Manhattan, even though, he says, "way over 50 percent" of his business now comes from online sales, and he estimates that at least two-thirds of his sales begin with an online interaction. "The Internet is the most amazing shopping tool," he says. "It has changed our business completely. More than half our sales are overseas. That wouldn't have been possible before."

The global component can hardly be overstated. "I just sent a George Nelson console to Japan and six-foot-tall mirrored

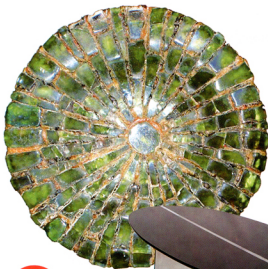
obelisks to Australia, and it all got there just fine," says Diana White, the owner of Needful Things in Sag Harbor, New York, and a flagship dealer on Vintage & Modern. "The Australians are mad for '60s modernist furniture, especially from the California studio movement," Indursky observes, "and China is buying back its own antiques."

Individual stores' websites are becoming increasingly elaborate. Espasso, which specializes in handcrafted furnishings made of exotic hardwoods from owner Carlos Junqueira's native Brazil, has a dramatic TriBeCa gallery and another in Los Angeles. A year ago, Espasso joined 1stDibs, where the names of Brazilian designers like Sergio Rodrigues, Jorge Zalszupin and Joaquim Tenreiro are on a long list of suggested search terms. "After 1stDibs, business got an unbelievable boost," Junqueira says. He beefed up his own website and hired a full-time employee to work exclusively on Internet sales. New clients may visit his showrooms first, Junqueira says, but once they've seen his setup and the quality of the material he sells, "they don't need to come in any longer—they just order through the site."

Fortunately, not all the adventure is gone. The element of surprise still exists. Even when trawling the websites, unexpected finds do surface, and the odds of a happy accident are much better than in the old days, when, as Indursky puts it, "people ran around looking high and low for the perfect chair." Although 1stDibs and its ilk focus on attracting members of the design trade, who may make dozens of purchases for every one made by the average consumer, the general public is increasingly using the sites and enjoying the benefits, not least of which is transparency. "It's very easy to see what's available and what prices are," Bruno points out. Against his site's clean white backdrop, "the eye can go very quickly, and designers can do great work, because they can access so many options."

However, there are signs that collecting is not going to be strictly sedentary from now on. Some upscale multi-dealer malls, like New York City's Center 44, which mimics the Internet marketplace but in brick and mortar, are doing well, and for exactly the same basic reason as the new websites. "Buyers can swoop in and see a lot of stuff quickly," says Indursky. "It's all about convenience." ❖

All the items on these pages have recently been offered for sale online.



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mirror



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Springer



Surfboard
table by
Maison
Jansen



Charles
Hollis
Jones
swivel
chair