

HOME FURNISHINGS

## Design is a better investment than art: Barnebys

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*Paimio armchair model 41 by Alvar Aalto. Image courtesy of Barnebys*

By SARAH JONES

According to research from art and antiques search platform Barnebys, interest in design pieces at auction has grown in the post-recession period, boosted by the added accessibility courtesy of ecommerce.

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In 2016, TEFAF valued the market for design items at auction in the United States and Europe at \$343.6 million, part of the total \$16.9 billion total global public auction market for goods that includes art and jewelry. Fifteen popular designers have seen their turnover grow a collective 330 percent from 2009 to 2016, with some pieces achieving six-figure sale prices that rival fine art.

"Today anyone can get their hands on iconic design furniture for a very modest price, while international collectors continue to pay millions for furniture and design objects of the highest quality," said Pontus Silfverstolpe, co-founder and head of content at [Barnebys](#).

"The increased access and transparency which has been facilitated by online auctions has opened up the industry to a broader and younger audience," he said. "Increased awareness among consumers and a growing interest in interior design have lead to a greater appreciation for well-designed, high-quality furniture which tell a story and add personality to an interior.

"Today great craftsmanship is increasingly expensive and hard to come by. Buying design at auction and in galleries often offers a good value in terms of quality, style and uniqueness."

Barnebys' report is based on 31 million realized prices from pieces listed on its site, which includes lots from auction houses such as Sotheby's, Christie's and Phillips, along with antique dealers.

Home base

As consumers value uniqueness, many are turning to auctions to outfit their homes with items that are rare, one-of-a-kind or limited-edition.

The overall auction market is seeing interest from new buyers thanks to increasing access, expanding the consumer base for vintage design beyond established wealthy clientele. Hand-in-hand with a wider art collecting audience,

these buyers are looking to complement their art with antiques.

While prices are largely contingent on factors such as the quality or condition of an item or rarity, the way in which sellers market and present these pieces can also play a part in the reception from buyers.

One way to differentiate is through verification, since pieces that are the first of their kind are in high demand. Artwork is by its nature one-of-a-kind, but furniture is typically reproduced, making museum-quality prototypes more valuable.



*Bibliothèque Maison du Mexique by Charlotte Perriand, 1953, sold at Sotheby's for \$314,557. Image courtesy of Barnebys*

Reflecting the growing interest in design, auction houses and dealers are also putting together exhibitions or sales dedicated to a time period or designer, opening up opportunities for storytelling and education to create more context for furniture.

For instance, in 2016, international auction house Sotheby's helped design destination Wyeth celebrate its 20th anniversary.

Wyeth opened a new space in New York's Tribeca neighborhood, while Sotheby's held an auction of more than 200 pieces of Wyeth furniture and design objects. The collaboration with Wyeth helped Sotheby's appeal to burgeoning and aspirational collectors ([see story](#)).

Also, Christie's held an auction dedicated to lifestyle brand Lalique in May, showcasing its decorative crystal pieces.

The online auction market has been growing, with Sotheby's ecommerce buyers spending 20 percent more in 2016 than they had the previous year, while Christie's saw a 112 percent bump in online spend during the year.

This globalized auction market has lessened the impact that a sale's location has on its results, making the geography less of an obstacle to interested buyers. However, furniture presents a challenge for collectors spread around the world, as shipping costs for bulky or heavy pieces can deter them from purchasing.



*Sofa by Finn Juhl, circa 1951. Image courtesy of Barnebys*

"Buying/purchasing behavior changes as people become more used to shopping online," Mr. Silfverstolpe said. "Especially as the auction process is becoming more and more similar to retail.

"The narrow sector of the industry is still the shipping," he said. "The market need to find a solution of the shipping and logistics for art, design and antiques.

"It may not necessarily be the fastest transport. More importantly, the convenient delivery is on schedule and is associated with a reasonable price tag. If you buy a chair for \$ 50,000 you normally don't have a problem to add another 3-5 percent for the shipping, but if you buy a sofa for \$ 1,500 and the shipping cost is \$2,500, there is a natural resistance."

#### Star search

Looking at the most searched-for designs on its platform, Barnebys named the top designers in its key markets.

In Denmark, Arne Jacobsen, Finn Juhl and Hans J. Wegner are seeing high interest, while Swedish designers Josef Frank, Axel-Einar Hjorth and Mrta Ms-Fjetterstrm are particularly popular. Meanwhile, Alvar Aalto, Eero Saarinen and Paavo Tynell are Finland's top picks.

While Scandinavia is a key contributor to the design market, its top pieces typically go to international buyers from locations such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France who are more able to compete and pay top dollar.

Popular designers in France include Jean Royre, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand, while Harry Bertoia, Vladimir Kagan and Isamu Noguchi are notable United States labels currently.

"The designers reviewed in the Barnebys Online Auction Report showed 330 percent growth in accumulated turnover between 2009 and 2016 amounting to a total market value of 38,3 million euro at auction last year," Mr. Silfverstolpe said.

"Interior and furniture design are slowly becoming items of fine art," he said. "In fact, design has, in a lot of cases been a better investment than, for example, art during the same period.

"Strong interest, increased online access and transparency have led to a massive growth of the design market. Once reserved for the wealthy people, it is now accessible to anyone, becoming a part of one's identity and personality."

While the popularity of a particular designer may wane, a new label will always be there to take its place. Knowledgeable dealers themselves can be a driving force in cluing auction houses into hot designers and educating them.

Other categories aside from art have seen strong interest in the auction market.

Although one of the newest categories offered by the 250-year-old auction house, Christie's rare and vintage handbag department has become one of its most profitable.

The handbag department at Christie's boasts the youngest buyers, the most female clients at 55 percent and the highest spend, totaling approximately \$20 million for 2016 sales. Rare and vintage handbags have emerged as a financial and emotional investment for consumers around the world, with high-ticket bids being placed from clients based in the Middle East and Asia ([see story](#)).

"France is one of the strongest markets for design in the world, and a strong further growth is expected for the French designers as demand rises among Asian buyers," Mr. Silfverstolpe said. "Already 1 percent of Perriand's market value is from high-end Hong Kong sales.

"Barnebys' Design Report show the importance of curating and educating the buyers to increase interest and buyers, specially when it comes to find new stars on the secondhand scene of design."

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