

HOME FURNISHINGS

## Eclectic buying habits a positive sign for furniture market, says 1stdibs exec

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*1stdibs sells both vintage and contemporary furniture. Image credit: 1stdibs*

By SARAH JONES

As affluent consumers have become more comfortable investing in luxury online, early ecommerce adopter 1stdibs has found success translating the collecting experience to a virtual environment.

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Founded in 2001, 1stdibs has grown to count a registered audience of 2 million, who turn to its curated, editorial site for its selection of antiques, home furnishings, art and jewelry. Helping consumers navigate what can be an overwhelming hunt for vintage finds, 1stdibs serves up content via a weekly magazine and daily blog, providing inspiration and perspective on design topics.

"Luxury consumers don't have a problem shopping online but they continue to expect a high level of personal service," said Anthony Barzilay Freund, director of fine art at [1stdibs](#) and editor of chief of Introspective, New York.



*Istdibs' Anthony Barzilay Freund. Image courtesy of Istdibs*

In this Q&A, Mr. Freund discusses the trends he is seeing in the vintage furniture market, Istdibs' approach to selling and the idea of furniture as an investment.

Here is the dialogue:

For a long time, luxury retailers were wary of online selling, particularly for merchandise at higher price points. What have you observed about luxury consumers' comfort level with buying vintage furniture via ecommerce? There's been a huge shift in attitudes in the nearly two decades since Istdibs' founding, which has snowballed in the past few years as people become increasingly comfortable shopping online for everything including for expensive luxury goods.

On a daily basis we see double-digit purchases of items priced over \$10,000. Just last week we featured a \$200,000 chandelier that was purchased by a buyer in San Francisco from a seller in the U.K.

Whereas some shoppers might be hesitant to buy from a small gallery in a foreign country with whom they have no prior relationship, they are extremely comfortable shopping on sites such as Istdibs that have a longstanding reputation for quality and customer protection. Indeed, we don't just offer a sense of security, we actually guarantee all purchases over \$10,000.

What has Istdibs done to bring elements of the antique store browsing experience into its digital channels? One of the best parts about wandering through an antiques store or flea market, or fair is the sense that a serendipitous find awaits you around the next corner. By curating a broad spectrum of items in a variety of styles from dealers in 17 different countries, we've been able to amplify that sense of discovery.

If you're looking for light fixtures, for instance, we will show you many different varieties of fixtures, not just, say, mid-century, but art deco, rococo, 1980s and contemporary, too. And the makers of these fixtures could be American or Scandinavian or French.

Those juxtapositions are exciting for shoppers but they can also become overwhelming, which is why we've introduced tools that allow you to increasingly narrow down your selections, by style, period, price, etc., as you become more focused in your hunt. Let's face it, wading through an antiques store's finds can be mentally and physically exhausting. The Istdibs hunt is much more efficient and far easier on the feet!

How has Istdibs differentiated itself as a platform for vintage furniture? What separates it from its competitors in this space?

Quite simply, our incredible breadth. Nowhere else will you find such a variety of inventory. And because we are a curated marketplace, the quality of what we offer is unparalleled.

Plus, we're not just a site for vintage and antique furniture, although those categories are what we've long led the industry with. We also sell fine art, jewelry and vintage fashion from top international dealers. And we've recently introduced a contemporary furniture division, which features more than 250 makers, comprising both up-and-

coming talents and established brands. Along with fine art, contemporary is our fastest-growing vertical.

Finally, we offer a white-glove concierge shopping program that is remarkably successful in matching our high-net-worth buyers with rare and valuable antiques, art and design objects. In fact, our Private Client Services department regularly facilitates six-figure purchases, sometimes sourcing material that hasn't even yet made it onto the site.

Again, luxury consumers don't have a problem shopping online but they continue to expect a high level of personal service, which we're well positioned to provide.

How does Istdibs scout out and decide which vintage dealers to work with?

We're in the fortunate position to have incredible brand awareness and engagement levels from both online shoppers and our existing dealer community. And we've long set a high bar for those dealers applying to the site to become members.

So it's not difficult to recruit top galleries, who are looking to reach our 2 million site registrants, [which include] high-net-worth shoppers and nearly 40,000 qualified members of the interior design- and architectural trades, among them. What's more, we have an in-house staff of curators and vetting experts who ensure that the galleries that apply to join and the objects they sell once they come on board meet the highest standards of quality and authenticity.

What furniture designers and styles are resonating particularly well with the Istdibs customer at the moment?

Among the 20th-century makers who are perennially popular, I'd have to say Piero Fornasetti, Milo Baughman, Hans Wegner and Gio Ponti top our list. We continue to see strong interest in mid-century, art deco, industrial and Scandinavian design.

And such contemporary makers as lighting trailblazer Lindsey Adelman, British conceptualist Faye Toogood and those bad boys of Brazilian design, the Campana Brothers, are increasingly popular with our shoppers.



*Hans Wegner chair. Image courtesy of Istdibs*

A recent [report](#) from Barnebys has said that design can be a better investment than art. What is your take on the investment potential of vintage furniture?

Even when I was the editor of an art market magazine prior to joining Istdibs, I never advised people to make purchases based on investment potential. It's a rare work of art that makes the kind of dramatic returns that you read about in the papers.

That is doubly true for people buying costly furniture. First and foremost, you need to take into account the fact that you are living with and deriving pleasure from these beautiful objects on a daily basis. That's a value that's difficult to put a price tag on. And certainly not a by-product of investing in the S&P 100.

That said, furniture can be a very good investment if you are buying pieces that are hand-made or produced in small

quantities or the first of their kind; that are created by recognized visionaries who have pushed the envelope in terms of design and use of materials; and that have been and will continue to be cared for and well maintained. But any buyer's first thoughts should be: is it comfortable and will its presence in my home enhance my pleasure of that space over the years? Not: is it going to be worth x times more in a decade than it is now?

Going into the holiday season, what will Istdibs be doing to keep itself top-of-mind for consumers as a gifting destination?

We're in the midst of creating gift guides for everyone on a shopper's holiday list at range of price points. Whether they're into design, music, travel or pets, we'll be curating collections of themed objects that match a variety of interests.

From your perspective, what is the outlook for the vintage furniture market?

Vintage continues to demonstrate strong interest from our shoppers. But what we've increasingly seen is the broadening of taste, so that collectors today are less interested in only buying, say, mid-century modern furniture, and more inclined to fill their rooms with a little bit of mid-century, a few key antiques, a quirky found object and a killer one-of-a-kind contemporary piece.

The mix is what's most exciting now and that bodes well for the future of the furniture market, across all styles and eras.

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