

Antique retreat

When Istdibs founder Michael Bruno bought this house in the Hamptons, he enlisted the help of interior designer Windsor Smith to help him create a Twenties-style interior packed with period pieces



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OPPOSITE In the hallway, a vintage sofa, re-covered in linen, is teamed with a shagreen and bronze table from J F Chen in Los Angeles. THIS PAGE The hull of an old sculling boat hanging from the sitting-room ceiling emphasises the height of the room



'Whenever I've done a house in the past, I've simply painted all the walls white and the floors black for a gallery-like effect. This is a truly designed house, down to the linens. It's taken the comfort to a new level'



THIS PAGE The sitting-room doorway (above) is flanked by a pair of gilded-metal and grey-leather bookshelves designed by Windsor Smith. Michael Bruno added shingles to the façade (far left) and rearranged the windows to give the house a more traditional look. Inside, among the more idiosyncratic pieces is an oak cabinet filled with fish caught in the Twenties (left). **OPPOSITE** In the kitchen, a Twenties industrial pendant light hangs above a table found by Michael at a Paris flea market





Michael Bruno is perhaps the last person you'd imagine owning a holiday home built in the Eighties. As the founder of 1stdibs, the Net-A-Porter of the antiques world, his look is definitely more period than postmodern. But his house in the Hamptons, Long Island – the fourth he has owned there – had qualities he couldn't ignore.

'I've always loved old things and always lived in old houses,' says Michael, 'but this house overlooks 40 acres of meadow with nothing else in sight. As far as I'm concerned, a view trumps everything.'

As someone who started his professional life as an estate agent and has, for the past 20 years or so, always had a 'project', Michael was unfazed by the non-vintage restrictions of his purchase. His first step was to change virtually everything: 'I wanted it to look like a typical beach house of the Twenties.'

To set the clock back 60 years, he worked from the outside in, softening the stark exterior with characteristic New England shingle and re-orchestrating the fenestration along more traditional lines. The new mahogany frames, however, were not painted the customary white, but stained a striking chocolate. 'Near the ocean, paint just peels off,' he says pragmatically.

Indoors, to clarify an awkward layout and introduce a historic mood, he eliminated walls, levelled ceilings and applied plenty of seaside wainscoting. The new arrangements created a series of airy rooms that flow easily into one another and out into the surrounding landscape.

On the raised ground floor, a large kitchen and sitting room are united by an expansive central hallway, which provides a spinal vista from the pillared front porch to the endless greenery at the rear. 'I wanted the house to be open and relaxed: Twenties meets Tribeca loft,' says Michael.

Though he has years of experience when it comes to getting the best out of architects and builders, here, for the first time, he decided to work alongside an interior designer, and found that his old friend Windsor Smith added considerably to the mix. 'I already had most of the things I needed to furnish the house, but she was great at understanding what was missing,' he says. Despite living hectic lives on opposite sides of the continent, designer and client were able to collaborate online through the 'Room in a Box' service offered by the California-based decorator. In this clever departure, clients email pictures of their furniture, along with room dimensions, and these are used to draw up layouts, including colour and fabric schemes.

'Whenever I've done a house in the past, I've simply painted all the walls white and the floors black to create a gallery-like effect,' says Michael. 'This is a truly designed house, down to the right window coverings, upholstery and even linens. It's taken the comfort to a new level.'

THIS PAGE The eclectic mix of furniture and accessories in the main bedroom includes a pair of Hans Wegner armchairs by the window, and a pair of Seventies Formica table lamps, which sit on Ikea nesting tables on either side of the bed. A large empty picture frame echoes the shape of the bed frame



Michael's website, 1stdibs, is branded as selling 'the most beautiful things on Earth', and his affection for the antique and the vintage began while he was still in his twenties. 'I started buying at local auctions when I had my first "adult" apartment,' he says. It wasn't, however, until he'd carved out a successful career in San Francisco real estate that he decided others might benefit from his expertise. 'At the end of the Nineties, I was selling houses to all these kids who'd made a fortune in the dot-com boom,' he continues. 'They wanted things to furnish their homes and I thought there must be a way to look for these in the same way as property, searching by price and location.'

To give himself thinking time, he gave up his job and went to live in Paris, where he was 'blown over' by the Marché aux Puces. He decided to create something similar online, and hired a translator and a young computer whizz. Then came the hard part: convincing the dealers to get involved.

'They weren't at all interested,' he recalls. 'For six months, I bought all the stock myself so that I'd have something to photograph.' Finally, he managed to assure even the most obstinate dealers that the surest way to reach American decorators was to feature in his new venture.

The site launched in 2001 and was soon posting 100 new items a week. Today, it has a global reach and incorporates jewellery, property, art and fashion. Michael himself, however, remains passionate about furniture. 'I buy from the heart,' he says.

In his Hamptons home, his eclectic collection takes in a broad spectrum ranging from mid-century classics to more idiosyncratic decorative pieces. 'Each piece evokes the past and allows my imagination to wander,' he says. But Michael is someone who values function as much as form, and when Windsor suggested installing an old sculling boat on the drawing-room ceiling, his immediate reaction was: 'Are you crazy?' She got her way, however, and he now understands why. 'When you enter the room, it helps you to appreciate the height of the ceiling without looking up.'

Windsor helped to arrange existing pieces, and filled some of the gaps with her own-design furniture. The house is now a seamless mix of old and new, but Michael still feels that antiques have the edge when it comes to design. 'Everyone is looking for the unique – and they want it right away,' he says. 'I was thinking of buying a modern sofa, but found out it would take eight to 12 weeks to arrive. Then I rang a local dealer, who had a wonderful pair of Forties settees. When I asked her when she could deliver, she said, "Tomorrow." Period perfection at pizza-delivery speed: who could ask for more? □

1stdibs: www.1stdibs.com | Windsor Smith: www.windsorsmithhome.com

THIS PAGE In the garden (left), a bank of lavender fringes the pool. The spare room (right) is furnished with a nineteenth-century French daybed, a Napoleon III armchair and a tallboy that Michael found in Amsterdam and repainted. The shell urn and pedestal seen through the door dates from the Thirties