



More and more savvy shoppers are finding wonderful—and wacky—things online

Photograph by ADAM FRIEDBERG

**T**rolling the Internet in the wee hours certainly isn't just for geeky teenagers who can't find a date on Friday night. Legions of the stylish and well connected have been logging on for a while in search of fashion, furniture, art and just about anything else that strikes their fancy. So much so that these days, that little glowing computer in the living room is one of the hottest shopping destinations around. Online stores provide guilt-free playgrounds for conspicuous consumers—there's a lot to be said for sitting in the privacy of your own home or office, spending as much as you want. While the ubiquitous juggernaut Ebay.com still reigns in terms of size, fame and transactions, a few other Web sites—Net-A-Porter.com and Yoox.com among them—have cropped up, promising absolute authenticity and sometimes a fantastic lower price. And any fashion-loving girl can appreciate that.

Launched in 2000 by former fashion editor Natalie Massenet, Net-A-Porter operates like a traditional retailer and offers a temptingly wide range of current-season merch, including such quick sellers as Chloé, Marc Jacobs and Bottega Veneta, as well as newer, buzz-worthy names like Thakoon and Jovovich-Hawk. Living in London in the late Nineties, Massenet noticed

that online sites for Gap and J. Crew didn't ship overseas, and she saw an opportunity. "At the time, Internet shopping had negative connotations," she says. "Discounted goods; low frills; you put your money in one end and don't know what you're going to get; lackluster packaging. It was a secondary shopping experience." She made sure Net-A-Porter was easier and more luxurious than walking into the swankiest of swanky boutiques. In addition to its immediate personal shopper-like updates and sleek black-bag packaging, the site now offers same-day deliveries in New York, a service already offered in London.

These days, Massenet maintains, women juggle busy work and social schedules, and logging on to shop saves time. "We're great multitaskers: buying a Chloé tunic while having a conference call with the board or planning a cocktail party," she notes. A busy mother of two, Massenet says she does 99 percent of her shopping online, including for groceries. "You're receiving luxury service from your grocer. You can shop when you want, for what you want and have it delivered right to your kitchen. It's painless and quite indulgent."

Also launched in 2000, Yoox.com is an Italy-based site founded by Federico Marchetti, a former mergers and acquisitions banker



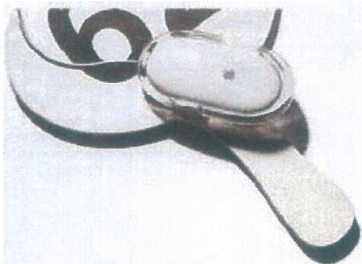
Yvonne Force Villareal's New York apartment is full of Ebay finds.

- 1 Eight-piece Pierre Cardin sectional, complete with tag
- 2 A Milo Baughman dining set, including 12 chairs and credenza
- 3 Two 1940s Tiffany crystal candelabras
- 4 1970s Sergio Valenti flight suit
- 5 Gucci loafer

"Cloistered nuns placed an order for seven pairs of Miu Miu mules," says Yoox's Marchetti.



## Sites to See



who, like Massenet, saw the Internet as a golden ticket for high-end retailing. Yoox offers both current and past season looks from major houses, as well as difficult-to-find-online names like Dries Van Noten and Balenciaga, and the company recently announced that it would be powering the virtual flagships for luxury brands, the first being Marni. Proud businessman that he is, Marchetti boasts that his site has moved one million items so far this year and welcomes two million visitors a month, and he's quick to note Yoox's far-reaching retail strength. "Cloistered nuns placed an order for seven pairs of Miu Miu mules," he says.

In fact, there are major orders being placed daily from around the globe. Massenet maintains that the average order on Net-A-Porter is \$800 and that once, a customer spent \$40,000 in one fell swoop. On Yoox, some frequent shoppers have spent up to \$50,000 a year, according to Marchetti. Melissa Payner, CEO of the designer discount site Bluefly, recalls how one customer recently dropped \$25,000 at once. "She bought a wardrobe, basically," says Payner, who believes shopping online relieves any guilt someone might experience over a very large purchase. "Sometimes it's not really comfortable for women to walk into a high-end store and buy five bags for \$2,000 each. It's a little awkward. But nothing stops you when you're sitting at home alone and no one is watching." And at these sites, authenticity is never an issue, since they get their goods straight from the designer sources.

Even better, when these sites run sales, they're deeply discounted, and the lure of a good deal attracts all types. Public relations executive Cindy Leggett-Flynn frequents Yoox to check up on new stock. "I tend to do a big shop every four to six weeks," she says. Last fall she bought an Andrew Gn skirt, Etro pumps, MaxMara trousers and a Costume National top, all on discount for a total of less than \$2,000.

Sometimes she'll send links to friends—but grudgingly. "There's a part of me that doesn't want to share it. It's nice to have access to all these lovely designers and keep it to yourself," Leggett-Flynn admits. "Does that make me selfish?"

Not at all, and she certainly has secretive company. When a Calvin Klein rep first told Olivia Chantecaille about how she redecorated her apartment with furnishings from Istdibs.com, the two conspired to keep it between themselves. But word on Istdibs has been out for some time. The site, founded by Michael Bruno in 1998, lists antique furnishings from dealers around the globe, at fair prices, and has garnered a following among those who have numerous homes to furnish. "I'm crazy about Istdibs, because it covers all parts of the globe," says Chantecaille, who bought a set of simple crystal lamps to complement the gray, black and white palette of her living room.

"The women who use Istdibs are using it because they want to find the best resources in the least amount of time," says Bruno. A furniture aficionado who wanted to make antiques buying easier, Bruno claims that his own very first purchase online was the domain name for Istdibs.com. Since then, he estimates that he's spent hundreds of

thousands of dollars for himself on his site, but that he knows "people who'll spend that in three months."

Other than his Istdibs finds, Bruno rarely shops online. He did, however, find his dream car on Ebay—a 1963 Mercedes-Benz 220 SE in diplomat gray, for \$24,000. "I bought it sight unseen. I figured that if I was expecting all these people to come to our Web site on trust, I had better take a shot at it."

Meanwhile, Yoox's Marchetti sold his Mercedes on Ebay, and he's not alone among those looking to lighten their loads via that site. Jamie Foxx famously sold his yellow Bentley online for \$150,000, and his Las Vegas home for a cool million. With anonymity ensured behind a screen name, many a celeb is logging on to see what's in store. Kelly Lynch won Stella McCartney H&M togs there, while Scarlett Johansson, who isn't necessarily a fan of Ebay, successfully bid on what she thought were Balenciaga pants for the too-good-to-be-true price of \$11.50. "When they came, they were Schmalenciaga," she says of the duds.

Ebay, now 11 years old, is the most recognizable online shop, and fashion lovers who can easily suss real from fake latched on to the site a long time ago, though not always in search of clothes. Anna Sui joined Ebay five years ago when she was looking for a Joan Walsh Anglund doll; she ended up buying 50 of them. "They were \$1 or \$2, so I got carried away," she says. "You're able to find things that you have no idea otherwise how to get." Like her recent win, a rare copy of the film version of Dylan Thomas's *Under Millewood*, starring Elizabeth Taylor. Otherwise, Sui prowls for goods from her fashion idols Ossie Clark and Zandra Rhodes. "Ebay's kind of a dream come true for someone like me, who loves to do all the research and then actually find and own it."

Meanwhile, art-world doyenne Yvonne Force Villareal has a mid-20th-century-furniture habit. "I'm sofa obsessed," she says. For \$2,500, an eight-piece Pierre Cardin sectional, in its original mushroom velour, is now her family's favorite TV-watching perch. Villareal enjoys the proverbial thrill of the hunt. "In the last few minutes, watching all the bidding on the Cardin, I was as nervous as if bidding on a major painting at Sotheby's," she says. Her Ebay loot is a good example of the treasures one can uncover if savvy enough to know what to look for—Forties Tiffany candelabras; Gucci loafers; a Sergio Valenti flight suit; and a Milo Baughman dining table with 12 chairs and a credenza for a stunning \$4,000, including shipping.

Other shoppers can sometimes turn a profit off their cheap Ebay finds. A few years ago, vintage queen Tiffany Dubin won a 19th-century toilet seat with a bench and bowl. "I thought it would make a great champagne bucket and bought it for \$200." She then promptly sold it for \$500 at her now-closed store, Lair. Conversely, Josia Lamberto-Egan bought vintage T-shirts and jeans at local Orange County, California, thrift stores and resold them on Ebay under the pirate moniker Captain McThrifty. This was in 2001, before he and pals Jeff Halmos, John Whitedge and Sam Shipley launched the CFDA-winning line Trovata, and Ebay was Lamberto-Egan's main source of income. He says he moved thousands of items by the time he hung up his Captain's hat a year later. Of course, the hazards of being a professional Ebay-er meant that he didn't get out that often and spent his days "sitting around in my underwear, eating Cheerios and typing stuff up."

But for many busy people, that is precisely the appeal of shopping online, whether for the latest from the runways or the next antique doll in a collection. "I think that it really comes back to the indulgence of not having to move," says Net-A-Porter's Massenet. "Of being able to relax, and having it come to you."

—NANDINI D'SOUZA