



Clockwise from top left: Deanne Steinberg jewellery box, £5,400. Melinda Gloss coat, £2,900. House of Warris Ruby Love brooch. Girard-Perregaux Shadow watch, about £30,000. Pierre Hardy boots, £1,645.

curiosity value

Enlisting a kaleidoscope of original creative talent, Browns' Cabinet de Curiosités solves the seasonal gift dilemma in one highly imaginative stroke, says Lucia van der Post.

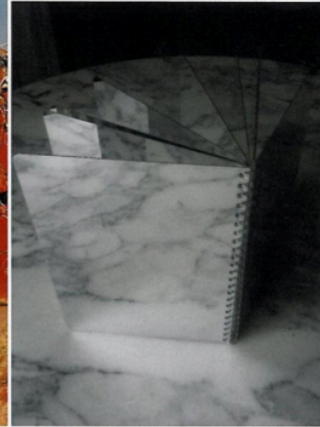
Simon Burstein, CEO of Browns, arguably London's most stylish fashion store, is quite upfront about its latest venture, the Cabinet de Curiosités, which is going to add extra pizzazz to the store until December 23. "It's presents for those who've got everything," he says. Thomas Eiber, erstwhile journalist, brand adviser, general all-round renaissance man and the person who has pulled it all together, puts it a very different way: "I wanted to bring together a collection of

things that bring meaning to people's lives. I saw this exhibition as a way of making people look at things more carefully. So much in this world is banal and is the same wherever you go. What I wanted to do here is to uncover things with soul."
The truth of the matter, of course, is that they're both right. This is going to be a collection of truly original, beautiful, special things. Even if you do have almost everything you could conceivably want, and can buy almost anything you fancy, you are

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extremely unlikely to own any of the objects to be found in this particular Cabinet de Curiosités. Apart from anything else, everything is a one-off, made specially for this venture, and only those with the most energetic interest in the creative crafts are likely to have come across any of the creators before. Which is why there will be plenty of “presents for those who’ve got everything”. You know the sort: international sophisticates who have been there, seen and done almost everything the world has to offer. But it will also be a great place for those who love objects that are truly original – lovely things made by creative artists who genuinely have something to “say”.

It all came about because the Bursteins (Simon and his sister Caroline, Browns’ creative director) had met Erber through an Englishman who lived in Paris, James Healey, whose perfumes they had been selling for some time. Last year, Erber created a Cabinet de Curiosités for Colette, the Paris concept store, which created something of a stir. To Colette, Erber had brought a range of work by creators and designers, few of whom were widely known. “These were people I discovered through personal contacts. One person leads me to another,” he says. His next stop, he decided, needed to be London. “Way back when it first started, more than 40 years ago, Browns was, after all, the original concept store, so it seemed a natural partnership,” he says. For the Bursteins: “What we loved about it is that it is something unique; there will be things here that nobody will ever have seen before. It ticked all the boxes.”

Erber wanted to make the selection as catholic as possible: “I wanted it to cover the spectrum of things



Clockwise from top left: Kanni has curated an adventurous family trip to Namibia. José Levy aluminium notebook. Betak Stone Book End Lamps by Alexandre de Betak.

made by Pinel & Pinel (pictured on next page) in homage to the designer Mies van der Rohe (it’s a steel chair that combines being a relaxation space with housing an integrated sound system).

One of Erber’s notions has been to ask great designers and creatives to work outside their comfort zone. Thus, José Levy, best known as a fashion designer, has come up with a book made from polished-mirror sheets of aluminium (pictured above), while film producers Palmer West and Jonah Smith have turned their talents to clothing (they founded Aether clothing), and for this exhibition have produced a jacket (£1,600) designed to withstand extreme cold. Rodarte, the very cool fashion brand launched in 2005 by Kate and Laura Mulleavy, has collaborated with two highly acclaimed photographers, Catherine Opie and Alec Soth, to create a book that explores the world of Rodarte, but which at the same time is filled with original art – in particular, the cover painted by the artist Rebekah Miles. ST Dupont, a company best known for its pens, has come up with a handbag in crocodile-effect red leather, while Alyssa Norton, who started out as a painter before she became a jeweller, has produced an extraordinary bracelet of silver chain and plaited pink gold with hand-dyed silk and diamonds in different colours.

Then there are the clothes: shoes by Common Projects; a hooded poncho in cashmere (£3,850) by the

I’m interested in,” he says, which means that you will find pieces connected to music and photography, beautiful crafts, fashion, perfume and travel. When it comes to jewellery, look out especially for Loree Rodkin’s extraordinary, carefully articulated hand piece, but also a brooch by the House of Waris, featuring rubies and 24ct gold (pictured on previous page). From the world of photography there is a wonderful black-and-white print by the photographer, filmmaker and theatre director John Pepper.

Representing Erber’s continued fascination with music, there are some truly extraordinary skull-shaped hi-fi speakers by Oliver Kuntzel and Florence Deygas, who are mostly known as designers and illustrators (they created the title sequence for Steven Spielberg’s *Catch Me If You Can*), and a “chair trunk”

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German couturier Wommelsdorff; jeans by Superfine (about £250; loved by Kate Moss and Christy Turlington); unisex boots in soft black kid leather, lined in mink by Pierre Hardy (pictured on opening page, £1,645); and a men's double-faced coat (pictured on opening page, £2,900) by Melinda Gloss. Most striking of all, perhaps, are the small pieces of furniture and furnishing accessories: the gorgeous Betak Stone Book End Lamps by Alexandre de Betak (pictured on previous page), stones from which emerge pink light bulbs; the stainless-steel polished desk or dressing table (£52,900)

by Paul Kelley; the exquisitely crafted jewellery box (pictured on opening page, £5,400) made from a rare Japanese wood, tamo ash, by Deanne Steinberg. There's a fantastical shoe tree made from crocodile skin and silk-satin leaves by Manolo Blahnik, and a very elegant bicycle by a young German company, Schindelhauer. And then we mustn't forget travel – Kuoni has curated two very special journeys that can also be bought during the exhibition. One is a romantic road trip leading to the coast of Uruguay, an area that Erber has explored, and loves; the other is an adventurous family trip to the heart of what he calls the "rugged but soulful Namibia" (pictured on previous page), right into its desert, accompanied by knowledgeable local people.

Most of these artists and destinations have been put forward by Erber, with a little input from Caroline. But the point of it all was to bring to Browns' customers truly beautiful things. "It's not about a name," says Caroline, "it's about the quality of the work." Erber put it another way: "I'm not interested in fashionable names – people don't need me to discover Gucci. I look for things with a special spirit, and what is important to me is not just to like the creation but also to like the creator. The human story matters, too."

Prices will vary enormously (they have not all been fixed at the time of writing), from the Superfine jeans at about £250 up to the Girard-Perregaux ceramic watch (pictured on opening page), which is likely to be about £30,000. To mark the occasion, Browns is producing three special things, none costing more than £50 – a special notebook that's handmade in England, a T-shirt and a silk scarf. Even if you aren't in a buying mood it will be intriguing to see what these (mostly) little-know artists and creators have been up to, and if you happen fall in love with a piece that has already been taken, you can always commission a special piece all your own. ♦ Browns, 24-27 South Molton Street, London W1 (020-7514 0039; www.brownsfashion.com).