

Basic press text
Frankenberg/Eder, November 2010

Thonet – A pioneer of furniture history

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1. The history of Thonet

The unique success story of Thonet began with the work of master joiner Michael Thonet (1796-1871). Since he founded his first workshop in Boppard/Rhine in 1819, the name Thonet has stood for high-quality, innovative and elegant furniture for the home as well as public buildings. Today, Claus Thonet with his brothers Peter and Philipp – direct descendents of Michael Thonet – are running the family company at the corporate headquarters and production facilities in Frankenberg/Eder. Famous bentwood furniture and tubular steel classics from the Bauhaus era are complimented by modern designs from renowned contemporary architects and designers.

1.1. From woodworking shop to industrial production: Thonet bentwood furniture

Michael Thonet's work is synonymous with the transition from craftsmanship to industrial furniture production. In his workshop in Boppard/Rhine, which he founded in 1819, Michael Thonet experimented with innovative wood bending techniques. The first designs made of bent plywood date back to 1830. Duke Metternich gained an interest in Michael Thonet's talent and invited him to Vienna in 1842. There, Thonet played a decisive role in the furnishing of, among others, the Palais Lichtenstein, Palais Schwarzenberg, and Café Daum.

Michael Thonet had his breakthrough towards industrial production in 1859 with chair No.14, which was later called „Vienna coffee house chair,“ and employed the innovative technique of bending solid beech wood. The work stages were standardized for mass production and the concept of the division of labour was applied to furniture production for the first time. In addition, the chair was easily disassembled and could be transported in a very space saving way. All of the above enabled an attractive price for the modern chair, and the No.14 became a coveted mass produced item. Nearly 60 million chairs have been sold to date – leaving aside the innumerable plagiarized versions.

In the 19th century, the chair No.14 paved the way towards Thonet becoming a global enterprise. Numerous bentwood designs followed. Some models also became icons of design history: the rocking chair No.1 from 1860, later in the 19th century the successful models No.18 and No.56, around 1900 the elegant chair No.209 with its curved armrests, which Le Corbusier adored, and the art nouveau armchair 247 by Otto Wagner, the so-called „postal savings bank chair,“ in 1904, to name but a few. Thonet production peaked in 1912, when two million different products were manufactured and sold worldwide.

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1.2. A new material from the spirit of modernism: Thonet tubular steel furniture

Tubular steel furniture is the other domain in the Thonet collection. During the 1930s the company was the world's second largest producer of this innovative furniture designed by famous architects such as Mart Stam, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, Charlotte Périand and Guyot. Today, the early tubular steel furniture designs are considered milestones in the history of design. Their clear, open and simple forms were an expression of a new attitude in everyday culture and architecture, which became famous under the name „New Objectivity.“ The most important „invention“ of the time was that of the cantilever chair, the flexing chair without back legs. Today, it is considered one of the most prominent design innovations of the 20th century. In 1932, the Dutch architect Mart Stam was awarded the artistic copyright for the design. Marcel Breuer also had experimented with cold bent tubular steel at Bauhaus since 1925. The cantilever chair became possible only due to this new material.

The Werkbund exhibition „Die Wohnung“ at the Weissenhof development in Stuttgart in 1927 was an important stage in this development. For the first time the public was presented with tubular steel furniture on a large scale, with designs by the Bauhaus instructors Mart Stam and Mies van der Rohe, among others. The exhibition was widely acclaimed and generated great international interest. At first however, the new tubular steel furniture was not entirely well received by the general public. But in the end, as a result of Thonet's involvement, the tubular steel concept took on an entirely new dimension and distribution. As the inventor of the lightweight and cost-efficient bentwood furniture for all, the company was not only known to a broad public and appreciated by avant-gardists including Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, but was also involved in the emerging subsidized housing concept. By the end of the 1920s, Thonet adopted the entirely new production technology. The tubular steel furniture was manufactured in the Frankenberg facility; prior to the beginning of World War II the corporate head offices were located in Vienna. Today, numerous successful classic models are still part of the program, among them the first cantilever chair S 33, (Mart Stam was awarded the artistic copyright for its form and basic principle), and models S 32 and S 64 by Marcel Breuer, as well as S 533 by Mies van der Rohe.

1.3. Timeless furniture for the home and contract: Thonet furniture today

The facility in Frankenberg/Eder in Germany was built in 1889. It is the most recent in Thonet's corporate history. Frankenberg in the north of Hesse has been the company's corporate headquarters since the end of World War II. During World War II all of the facilities in the Eastern European states had been lost due to dispossession, and the Vienna headquarters at Stephansplatz was destroyed. Georg Thonet, the

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great-grandson of company founder Michael, rebuilt the entirely destroyed facility in Frankenberg from 1945 to 1953. Economic success returned quickly, and once again, cooperation with outstanding designers was sought. The list of designers who have worked for Thonet during the past 60 years is very long. It includes Egon Eiermann, Verner Panton, Eddie Harlis, Hanno von Gustedt, Pierre Paulin, Ulrich Böhme and Wulf Schneider, Alfredo Häberli, Christophe Marchand, Lord Norman Foster, Delphin Design, Glen Oliver Löw, James Irvine, Piero Lissoni, Stefan Diez, Hadi Teherani, Naoto Fukasawa and f/p design.

Today, all of the famous Thonet bentwood and tubular steel classics as well as the current collections are produced in Frankenberg. The facility provides cutting-edge production technologies on the one hand, and specialist know-how, compiled during two centuries of corporate history on the other. Nowadays, Thonet develop innovative products, which are also of the highest quality and durability, in both material and workmanship. They achieve this by combining contemporary design with new technology and always keeping an eye on the future and a third century of corporate history.

1.4. An overview of the history of Thonet

1796	Birth of company founder Michael Thonet in Boppard
1819	Foundation of the company Thonet in Boppard/Rhine
1842	Michael Thonet moves to Vienna
1853	Transfer of the company to his sons as „Gebrüder Thonet“
1856	Foundation of the first furniture factory in Koritchan (Moravia). In the following years foundation of four additional production facilities in Eastern Europe
1859	Beginning of the production of chair No.14 (today: 214)
1889	Establishment of facility in Frankenberg/Eder in Germany
1912	Production peak with two million products per year
1923	Merger into Thonet Mundus
1929	Acquisition of Marcel Breuer and Kálmán Lengyel's company Standard Möbel; acquisition of the rights to Marcel Breuer's designs; beginning of tubular steel furniture production
1931	Beginning of the production of first cantilever chair „S 43“ by Mart Stam
1932	Mart Stam is awarded artistic copyright in cantilever chair
1938	Buyback of shares in Thonet Mundus by the Thonet family
1945	Dispossession from the facilities in Eastern Europe and destruction of the Thonet building in Vienna; bomb attack on the facility in Frankenberg
1953	Reconstruction of the facility in Frankenberg by Georg Thonet is completed. Frankenberg becomes the Company's headquarters
1953	Thonet exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York

- 1961 The Federal Court of Justice confirms Mart Stam's artistic copyright of the cantilever chair
- 1972 Claus Thonet appointed a member of the management board; the fifth family generation enters the management
- 1985 Peter Thonet takes over as Marketing Director
- 1989 Opening of Museum Thonet in Frankenberg; Philipp Thonet joins the company
- 1990 Touring exhibition „The Thonet Principle“ (among others, at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, in Prague, Brno, Pressburg, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Odessa, Moscow, Breslau, Warsaw and Posen)
- 1992 Exhibition at the Bauhaus Dessau; publication of book: „Ein Stuhl macht Geschichte“ (A chair makes history)
- 1993 Thonet exhibition at Pillnitz Castle (arts & crafts museum)
- 1994 Exhibition „Thonet, Pioneer of Industrial Design, 1830-1900“ at the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein
- 1996 200th anniversary of Michael Thonet; large-scale special campaign in furniture retail Thonet exhibition in Meran „A cultural history of sitting – Thonet chairs from past to present“; Thonet exhibition in Koblenz
- 1999 Tubular steel exhibition at the Berlin House of Representatives
- 2000 Cologne Furniture Fair; presentation of program A 900 by Sir Norman Foster; takeover of trademark rights from Thonet Frères/France
- 2001 Collection of Peter Ellenberg at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich
- 2002 Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; comprehensive Thonet bentwood exhibition (permanent installation)
- 2006 iF Gold Award for chair model A 660 by James Irvine
- 2008 Claus Thonet switches to the advisory board, Roland Ohnacker becomes Managing Director of the Thonet GmbH
- 2009 150th anniversary of bentwood chair 214; 90th anniversary of Bauhaus: Thonet produces the S 43 chair as special edition; Classic for Kids: a kids edition of 214 and S 43 is introduced at the market
- 2010 Thonet Photo Competition '214 x 214: A Chair the World Over', at the occasion of the 150th anniversary of bentwood chair 214; opening of new living showroom in Frankenberg, the childhood home of the Thonet brothers.

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2. Thonet: brand, facts, data

2.1. The company and the Thonet brand

Company 5th generation family-owned

Founded: 1819 in Boppard/Rhine

Head offices: Frankenberg / Eder, Germany

Managing Director: Claus M. Thonet

Director Marketing and Sales: Peter A. Thonet

Director International Sales: Philipp H. Thonet

Distribution: Worldwide. In Germany through specialist dealers. Abroad through importers and specialist dealers.

Export markets: All countries of Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Middle East, Russia

Collections for the following areas of use: conference and meeting, auditorium seating, training and seminar, dining and living, reception and waiting, outdoor

Brand: The brand rights to the name „Thonet“ are owned by Thonet in Frankenberg in Germany and in most other countries. This is the only company that can refer to the more than 150 years of tradition. This tradition is adhered to especially by preserving the heritage of bentwood and tubular steel furniture and through continuous innovations in product development. Today, Thonet furniture is represented in the most important collections in the world, among them the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the Centre Pompidou and Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as many other national and international museums for applied arts. Historic Thonet furniture achieves top prices at international auctions.

2.2. Selected references

Some of the most important reference buildings furnished with Thonet furniture during the past years:

RAI convention center, Amsterdam

Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden

Deutscher Bundestag, Berlin

Olympiastadion, Berlin

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Landesvertretung Niedersachsen/Schleswig-Holstein, Berlin
Restaurant Vau, Berlin
Wolford/Palmers, Bregenz
Twede Kamer (Parliament), Den Haag
Bauhaus, Dessau
Infineon, Dresden
Sächsischer Landtag, Dresden
Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Düsseldorf
Robert-Schumann-Saal, Düsseldorf
Scottish Equitable, Edinburgh
Park Hotel, Edinburgh
Messe Frankfurt
IG Metall Zentrale, Frankfurt
Industrie- Kreditbank, Frankfurt, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Luxemburg
Degussa AG, Frankfurt
Allianz, Frankfurt/Munich/Hamburg
Juridicum, Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg
Universitätsklinik, Innsbruck
ETH Lausanne
Deutsche Bücherei, Leipzig
Bundesverwaltungsgericht, Leipzig
University of London, London
Swiss Re, London
British Museum, London
International School of New Media, Lübeck
Banque Central, Luxembourg
Arbed, Luxembourg
Hotel Seeburg, Lucerne
Technische Universität, Munich
Audi AG, Neckarsulm
Hearst Tower, New York
Arcelor, Paris
OECD, Paris
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Bouygues, Paris
BMW Showrooms Tokyo und Shanghai
Restaurant La Maremma, Tokyo
UBS AG, Zurich
Züricher Kantonalbank, Zurich
Schweizer Börse, Zurich
Café Reitschule, Munich
Palacongressi di Rimini, Rimini

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3. Thonet and culture

3.1. The Museum Thonet

The Museum Thonet is located in Frankenberg/Eder. It owes its existence to Georg Thonet's passion for collecting. As the great grandson of company founder Michael Thonet he collected a wealth of historic pieces and by the opening of the museum in 1989, he made it accessible for the public. Early bentwood furniture, art nouveau furniture, tubular steel furniture from the Bauhaus era, and post-war furniture is shown in a total area of more than 700 square meters.

Museum Thonet, Michael-Thonet-Straße 1, D – 30566 Frankenberg
T. +49 (0) 6451 - 508-0; F. +49 (0) 6451 – 508-108; museum@thonet.eu,
www.thonet.eu

Opening hours: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 2-5 p.m., every first Saturday of the month 2-4 p.m. and by appointment

3.2. Publications and exhibition catalogues about Thonet

3.2.1. Reference books

Bang, Ole: Thonet, Geschichte eines Stuhls, Stuttgart 1979
Bangert, Albrecht, and Ellenberg, Peter: Thonet Möbel. Ein Handbuch für Liebhaber und Sammler, Munich 1997
Gleining, Andrea: Der Kaffehausstuhl Nr. 14 von Michael Thonet, Frankfurt/Main 1998
Mang, Karl: Thonet Bughölmöbel, Vienna 1982
Möller, Werner, and Otakar Mácel: Ein Stuhl macht Geschichte, Munich 1992
Nothelfer, Karl: Das Sitzmöbel, Ravensburg, 1941
Renzi, Giovanni: Thonet 14, Silvana Editoriale, 2003
Schneck: Der Stuhl, Stuttgart, 1928
von Vegesack, Alexander: Das Thonet Buch, Munich 1987
von Vegesack, Alexander: Thonet Classic furniture on bentwood and tubular steel, HAZAR Publishing, 1996

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3.2.2. Exhibition catalogues

Sitz-Gelegenheiten, Bugholz- und Stahlrohrmöbel von Thonet, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, 1989/1990 (later as a touring exhibition of the Foreign Office in St. Petersburg, Prague, and Odessa)

Thonet – Pionier des Industriedesigns 1830-1900, Vitra Design Museum, 1994

Thonet – Biegen oder Brechen, Landesmuseum Koblenz 1996, ed. Ulrich Löber

Buigen, Zien en Zitten – Designklassikers van Thonet, Drents Museum Assen, 1998

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