

Press release
Frankenberg, September 2022

A timeless and sustainable solution Thonet and canework

What comes to mind for most people when they think of a traditional coffee house chair, the kind made famous by period film and TV dramas? It's most likely something made from dark, slender elements of wood and pale canework. This attractive contrast is precisely what makes Thonet's classic 214 chair so recognisable and iconic.

The chair is also available with a moulded plywood or upholstered seat, as well as in natural or coloured stains, but it's this combination of dark wood and a light cane that represents the epitome of a "coffee house" chair. While the beech trees that Thonet uses to make the bentwood sections are sourced from sustainable forests in Europe, the material for the seat has further to travel. The woven seat covering is made of cane produced from the Calamus rotang or rattan palm. This tropical creeper grows in the rainforests of South-East Asia and produces long shoots that climb trees like vines.

Thonet's founder, Michael Thonet, began the company tradition of using canework in his early designs over 200 years ago. His Boppard chairs, which he produced from the late 1830s onwards, were made of layers of glued wood and included models with a rattan seat, as well as upholstered pieces. Once Thonet began producing his bentwood chairs on an industrial scale in the 1850s, he relied largely on this canework. Also known as "Viennese canework", this type of covering was less expensive than leather or upholstery and also easier to replace if damaged.

The raw materials for the canework were (and still are) imported from South-East Asia, primarily from Indonesia. Precisely when rattan first came to Europe is unclear – either in the late 16th or early 17th century. That was when Europeans first began trading with and colonising South-East Asia. What we do know, however, is that the octagonal weaving technique, which Thonet employs to this day, has its roots in Asia. In England, the popularity of rattan soared toward the middle of the 17th century. Rattan chairs were so fashionable that they often replaced upholstered furniture altogether. In Germany, the first pieces of furniture with canework appeared around the year 1700. And when Michael Thonet opened his first workshop in Boppard, Germany in 1819, woven seats were back in vogue.

Naturally, it made sense to work with this material, which was typical of the Biedermeier period, particularly as canework offers two key characteristics essential to quality seating: stability and elasticity. It's a natural material that's robust, but also has a certain give, offering comfort even without a cushion. Canework is also sustainable – especially important nowadays – because the rattan palm is dependent on biodiversity. It can only thrive in symbiosis with its neighbouring trees, which means that rattan harvesting and production contributes to the preservation of the rainforest. Rattan palms also grow back quickly and absorb more CO₂ than trees.

To create fibres for weaving, the outer shell of the harvested rattan shoots is peeled away and cut into strips. These strips are then glued together to create one long, continuous fibre. Traditionally, each Thonet chair and armchair was woven by hand. Holes were drilled into the seat frame, through which the fibres were pulled. Today, Thonet uses industrially woven canework mats which are hammered into a groove that runs around the entire seat frame and then secured with wood glue.

These prefabricated rolls of canework include only the vertical and horizontal fibres, however. The diagonal fibres are still woven in by hand. Before weaving, the mats are briefly soaked in water to make them flexible. After they dry, the rattan contracts again, giving the desired tension. Thonet completes the seat with a ring made from the inner core of the rattan, known as the splint. The splint is glued onto the canework in the groove, creating a seal. Since the splint and the canework are made of exactly the same raw material, they create an aesthetically uniform look. This technique also saves resources, since it uses multiple parts of the plant.

Canework remains so visually appealing today largely because of this decorative, cut-out pattern, which lends the furniture an element of lightness and transparency. In addition, rattan – like every natural material – has irregularities in its colour and texture, lending it a vibrant liveliness. Its subtle, shimmering, honey tone has a natural and welcoming warmth, wherever situated. And if, despite its

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inherent stability, the canework happens to break, Thonet offers a repair service, which means these timelessly appealing chairs can be passed on to the next generation.

Synthetic mesh support

Canework is a renewable and durable material that has been used for centuries in furniture making. To give it extra stability in high-traffic locations, such as restaurants, cafés and other busy places, Thonet has developed a discreet layer of extra support: a white polyester mesh fixed underneath the canework. The patented, almost invisible synthetic mesh is stretched under the seat to provide even more confidence. This measure also makes sense from a sustainability perspective, significantly prolonging the life of heavily used woven furniture. The synthetic mesh comes as standard with the canework seats for the tubular steel chair models S 32 and S 64, as with all the bentwood chairs.

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Thonet – future-oriented furniture design with a long tradition

The unique success story of Thonet began with the work of master carpenter Michael Thonet. Ever since he established his first workshop in Boppard on the River Rhine in 1819, the name Thonet has stood for high-quality, innovative and elegant furniture. The breakthrough came with the iconic chair No. 14, today known the world over as the Vienna Coffee House Chair: the pioneering technique of bending solid beechwood enabled the mass production of chairs for the first time. The second milestone in design history was the tubular steel furniture by the famous Bauhaus architects Mart Stam, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer in the 1930s. During those pioneering years, Thonet was the world's largest producer of these tubular steel furniture designs, which are today considered timeless.

For the company today, the continuous process of innovation is the top priority, together with a focus on tradition and fine craftsmanship. Thonet's furniture designs originate both from its collaborations with renowned national and international creatives and from the in-house Thonet Design Team. Chief Executive Officer Brian Boyd and Creative Director Norbert Ruf manage the company from the corporate head office and production site in Frankenberg/Eder (Germany). Michael Thonet's fifth- and sixth-generation descendants are actively involved with the company's business as partners and sales representatives.