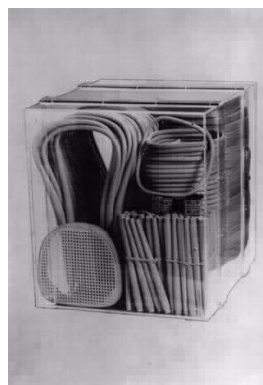
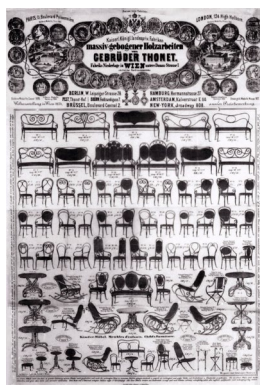
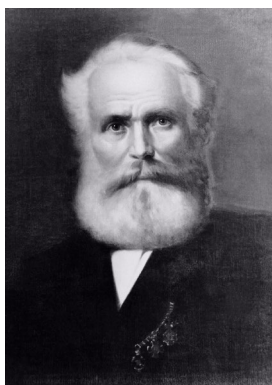


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## The chair man

**Furniture innovator, businessman and pioneer of industrial design: Michael Thonet was born 225 years ago and died 150 years ago.**

**Steam was the key driver of early industrialisation. Steam locomotives transported goods and people; steam engines set looms, boats and mills in motion. And thanks to carpenter and inventor Michael Thonet, born on 2 July 1796, steam was also the key factor in the first industrially manufactured pieces of furniture. A pioneer in the furniture industry, Thonet invented a technique in the mid-19th century that allowed rods of beechwood to be bent into delicate, curved shapes. It was using this method that he would go on to manufacture his famous coffee house furniture.**



### 1819: Boppard bentwood

When Michael Thonet took over his father's workshop in 1819 in Boppard, a picturesque town on the Middle Rhine, he could have settled for a career as a reputable carpenter. But the 23-year-old had grander aspirations. He began experimenting with veneer strips, which he boiled in glue and stuck to curved, moulded pieces of plywood. Using this method, Thonet was ultimately able to breathe new life into the classic late-Biedermeier chair with his innovative Boppard "loop legs".

In 1841 he presented his new creations to the Koblenz trade association where his talent caught the attention of none other than Austria's foreign minister, Prince Klemens von Metternich. Metternich was an aristocrat, chief diplomat at the Congress of Vienna and likely the most influential politician of his day; he was also a native Rhinelander and asked Thonet to come to his castle in Koblenz to present his work. "In Boppard you will always be a poor man. Come to Vienna," Metternich is reported to have told him. And it seems that the advice of the shrewd politician hit a nerve with the young Thonet, who was disenchanted with the growing number of copycats trying to steal his ideas. An application to patent his technique had been rejected and his business was suffering. One year after the meeting with Metternich, Thonet set off for Vienna, never to return to Boppard.

### 1849: Finding success in the coffee houses

In the Austrian capital, Metternich gave Michael Thonet a grand welcome and took him under his wing. As he described in a letter, Metternich "spoke of our work with such enthusiasm that it is almost impossible for anyone else to get a word in edgewise". Thonet was also introduced to the emperor. Just a few weeks after his arrival, he was finally awarded his long-awaited patent "to bend any type of wood, even the most brittle, into any shape and curve,

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using chemical-mechanical means". As he was initially barred from starting his own company, the newcomer first had to look for others to partner with. Seven years later he was able to open his own eponymous company, bring his family to Vienna and successfully produce his own furniture. The fledgling company's first significant order for bentwood furniture was placed by Anna Daum, the owner of the Viennese coffee house Daum. Thonet sensed that he was in the right place at the right time. As the popularity of the coffee houses grew, so did the grandiosity of their furnishings. Thonet did not need to wait long for his next success. He was able to show a collection of his bentwood furniture, which at the time was still largely made by hand, at the legendary Great Exhibition held in London's Crystal Palace in 1851. Thonet returned to Vienna with a bronze medal he had won at the exhibition and overflowing order books.

From that point on there was no stopping the company. On 1 November 1853, Michael Thonet transferred the business to his five sons and together they managed it under the name "Gebrüder Thonet". This new management structure was good for business and they received their first orders from overseas. As it began to be used in tropical climates, the layer-glued furniture was exposed to high humidity and some of the pieces quite literally "came unstuck".

This was all the incentive Thonet needed to continue with his experiments, and, after numerous attempts, in 1856 he succeeded in processing solid wood without the use of glue. His method involved taking long rods of beechwood and using steam to bend them into the desired shape. Thonet quickly patented his ingenious, efficient processing method, which marked the start of the company's industrial breakthrough. The first factory was built in the south-eastern Moravian town of Koryčany, followed by additional production sites in the forested areas of the Habsburg Empire that were rich in beech trees. At the same time, Thonet was planning to greatly increase his workforce: each factory site was practically a village complete with all of the infrastructure needed by the workers and employees, as well as their families.

## **1859: The Thonet principle leads to global success**

In 1859, the most successful piece of furniture in the company's history entered the market: the No. 14. The chair only had six individual parts, making it the perfect candidate for fast, industrial production, which was based on the patent from 1856 for bending solid wood. With a curved backrest typical of Thonet chairs and a circular canework seat, the No. 14 was not only pleasing to look at, it was also very inexpensive. At the time it was created, it was priced at only three guilders – the same price as three dozen eggs or a good bottle of red wine. When it came to logistics, Michael Thonet also proved to be visionary: in the heyday of steamships and the railway, he used large shipping crates to transport his chairs, disassembled into their individual pieces. 36 chairs could be packed into a one-cubic-metre shipping crate and then simply screwed together upon arrival, no glue necessary. Thus, Thonet's global export chair made its way around the world, no more to be bothered by a hint of humidity. Thonet's logistical feats, its sales networks located in major cities throughout the world and its product catalogues – an innovative idea at the time – all contributed to the company's international success.

When he died on 3 March 1871, Michael Thonet left behind a successful, stable company with factories and branches throughout Europe. The No. 14 chair lived on after the death of its maker as a prototype of sustainable design due to its minimal use of renewable raw materials and the ease with which it could be repaired. To this day, the chairs are proudly passed down through generations. It is no coincidence that the 214 (then the No. 14) was honoured with the German Sustainability Award in 2021.

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## **From the Bauhaus to the present**

The seeds sown by Michael Thonet – his revolutionary method of bending wood and his innovative modular principle – continued to flourish after he was gone. His sons turned Gebrüder Thonet (today known only as Thonet?) into an early multinational with branches and sales offices in New York, Ottawa and Moscow. The production facility in Frankenberg (Hesse, Germany), which opened in 1889, survived both world wars and has remained in the family: today, the sixth Thonet generation still plays an active role in the company as shareholders.

The simple, functional designs created by Michael Thonet still characterise the company's DNA today. They were in fact long regarded as the beginning of modern industrial design. With the advent of tubular steel furniture in the Bauhaus era, however, the company wrote another page of furniture history. Mart Stam's S 33, the first ever cantilever chair, Mies van der Rohe's S 533 and Marcel Breuer's cantilever classics, the S 32 and the S 64: there was hardly a name in the New Objectivity movement that did not design a chair for Thonet. To this day, Thonet products from designers such as Egon Eiermann, Verner Panton and Piero Lissoni or James Irvine, Stefan Diez and Sebastian Herkner reflect the principles of ethical design, which were already at play in the 19th century: designs build on one another and individual elements can be combined. Entirely in keeping with the principles of sustainability, the Frankenberg-based company still strives to create new interpretations of existing products and to adapt to the needs of the time.

From its humble beginnings in Boppard, to the present day and into the future, the designers of the one-and-only original Thonet brand have always reflected the spirit of their founder Michael Thonet. They are brilliant minds who bend to no one as they work to produce straightforward designs.

## **Thonet press contact international**

neumann communication  
Claudia Neumann, Anne Polch-Jahn, Hannah Knospe  
Eigelstein 103-113  
50668 Köln  
Germany  
Tel. +49 (0) 221 – 91 39 49 0  
Fax +49 (0) 221 – 91 39 49 19  
E-Mail [thonet@neumann-communication.de](mailto:thonet@neumann-communication.de)

Thonet GmbH  
Susanne Korn  
Michael-Thonet-Straße 1  
35066 Frankenberg  
Germany  
Tel. +49 (0) 6451 – 508 160  
Fax +49 (0) 6451 – 508 168  
E-mail [susanne.korn@thonet.de](mailto:susanne.korn@thonet.de)

## **Thonet press contact in the UK**

QuickStep PR  
Stephanie Bretherton  
Unit 405 United House  
North Road  
London N7 9DP  
United Kingdom  
Tel. +44 (0) 20 – 7609 1151  
E-mail [stephanie@qspr.com](mailto:stephanie@qspr.com)

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We would appreciate receiving an author's copy in the event of publication.

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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.*