

Press release
Cologne/Frankenberg, January 2020

Café Thonet – from coffee house to community base Just like the furniture on show, Sebastian Herkner's trade fair booth stands for communicative gatherings

In January 2020, Thonet is looking back on an exciting anniversary year that marked no fewer than 200 years of design history. At the same time, the company reaffirms its position as a cultural influencer with the second Café Thonet at imm cologne (Hall 3.2, E 021). The café will continue to play a crucial role for Thonet in future – as a place for get-togethers, a meeting point or a community base. Sebastian Herkner's booth concept is an extremely inviting interpretation of the idea that Thonet brings people together with its furniture. He draws on the themes of craftsmanship, quality and customised production, as well as Vienna wickerwork – a material that's typical of Thonet and is used to structure the café. The resulting spaces are clearly defined without being sealed off, providing a perfect opportunity for a chat and plenty of room for new products and classics.

The first trade fair booth under the Café Thonet concept was created by design duo Studio Besau Marguerre for the Frankenberg company's appearance at imm cologne 2019. The café metaphor, which Sebastian Herkner has revisited for this year's event, captures the very essence of the brand: both in the past and present, Thonet furniture is found wherever people come together to live, work – or simply enjoy life. Herkner's design emphasises the sensuous quality of the materials and the meticulous workmanship that goes into processing them at the Frankenberg production site. It directs visitors' attention to craftsmanship and quality – values that are vital to Thonet and exemplified by the furniture used to equip the booth. The focus is on the Vienna wickerwork that has been associated with Thonet throughout its history. The designer mounted large expanses of it in light wooden frames to create semitransparent walls that define spaces while simultaneously permitting views through the café and exuding a sense of lightness. Like in a coffee house, there are separate areas that provide screening and privacy while nevertheless ensuring – albeit discreetly – that both the people and furniture remain visible.

The boundaries of Herkner's Café Thonet have been given a quarter turn in relation to the booth's rectangular footprint so as to create intriguing edges, cross sections and sightlines. This leaves the four corners free for displaying new launches and highlights. "The resulting combination of private and public areas has a very special charm – both as a designed space and a space that invites associations," says Norbert Ruf, Thonet's creative director and inventor of the Café Thonet concept.

"I think it's a great idea to invite one or several designers with ties to Thonet to create a new Café Thonet every year. It's a nice symbol of continuity," says Sebastian Herkner, who also designed the successful 118 chair family for Thonet. Whereas Besau Marguerre's design featured curves and floor-to-ceiling textiles, Herkner's concept is based on the natural, warm and welcoming character of Vienna wickerwork and surprising angles. "Because of the nature of its materials, the booth has an almost Japanese feel. Any associations with the paper walls typical of Japanese houses are entirely intentional – they're light and transparent too," says Herkner, explaining another aspect of the booth concept that embodies the internationality of the brand: from European coffee house to Japanese tea house – an apt description that captures both Thonet's heritage and its aspirations for the future.

In addition to bentwood and tubular steel classics, the products on show will also include the upholstered chair collection 520 by Marco Dessí, which is making its debut at imm cologne, a new bistro table for the 808 range designed by Formstelle and the 118 H barstool by Sebastian Herkner himself. Another new star is the re-edition of the MR 515 side table by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in a revised version with a wooden tabletop by Studio Besau Marguerre.

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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. All the furniture is produced at the company-owned manufacturing facility in Frankenberg where, in line with the motto "Individuality is our standard", customised solutions are part of day-to-day life. 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.