

# **Thonet – a pioneer of furniture history**

## **Content:**

### **1. The Thonet story**

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

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

**1.3 Timeless products: Thonet furniture today**

**1.4 An overview of Thonet's corporate history**

### **2. The Thonet brand: facts and figures**

**2.1 The company and the Thonet brand**

**2.2 Selection of current references**

### **3. Thonet and culture**

**3.1 The Museum Thonet**

**3.2 Publications about Thonet**

**3.2.1 Specialist books**

**3.2.2 Exhibition catalogues**

## **1. The Thonet story**

The unique success story of the company Thonet began with the work of master joiner Michael Thonet (1796-1871). From the time he founded his first woodworking shop in 1819 in Boppard/Rhine, the name Thonet has stood for high-quality, innovative and elegant furniture.

Today, CEO Brian Boyd together with Creative Director Norbert Ruf manage the company with its head offices and production facilities in Frankenberg/Eder (Germany). Michael Thonet's direct descendants in the fifth and sixth generation remain involved in the company's business as associates and sales partners. The collection comprises famous bentwood furniture, tubular steel classics from the Bauhaus era and current designs by famous contemporary architects and designers.

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

In his workshop, which he established in 1819 in Boppard/Rhine, Michael Thonet began experimenting with innovative wood bending techniques. The first bent plywood designs date back to 1830. When Prince Metternich took notice of Michael Thonet's talent, he brought him and his family to Vienna in 1842. There, Michael Thonet played a decisive role in furnishing the Palais Liechtenstein, Palais Schwarzenberg and Café Daum. In 1849, he opened another shop, this time together with his four sons.

Michael Thonet had his breakthrough in 1859 with chair no. 14, the so-called Vienna coffee house chair: his innovative bending technique paved the way for the first-ever industrially produced chair. What was revolutionary about the former no. 14, today's no. 214, was the fact that it could be disassembled into a few components and thus mass produced using a division of labour. The chair could be exported to all nations of the world in simple, space saving packages: 36 disassembled chairs could fit into a one-cubic-metre box. This allowed the modern chair to be competitively priced, and the no. 14 quickly became a popular and coveted mass-produced item. By the 1870s, Thonet had sales offices throughout the world, from Hamburg and Frankfurt to Brussels, Barcelona and Rome, to Moscow, Chicago and New York. To date, more than 50 million copies have been sold – not counting the innumerable pirated copies.

At the time, chair no. 14 cleared the way for Thonet to become a global company. Numerous pieces of bentwood furniture followed. Some models also became icons of design history: the rocking chair no. 1 from 1860, later on in the 19th century the successful models no. 18 and no. 56, around 1900 the elegant no. 209 with its curved armrests, which Le Corbusier adored, and in 1904 the art nouveau armchair 247 by Otto Wagner, which was known as the Postal Savings Bank chair, to name but a few. Thonet's production peaked in 1912 when two million different products were manufactured and sold worldwide.

In 1857, Michael Thonet's sons, working together as "Gebrüder Thonet", commissioned the first Thonet furniture factory to be built in the Moravian town of Koritzchan using their father's plans. In the coming years, five more production sites were established in Eastern Europe, and in 1889 the seventh and last production site was added in the Hessian town of Frankenberg, Germany, where the company's head offices are located today.

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

Tubular steel is the second key material in Thonet's product portfolio. In the 1930s, the company was the world's largest producer of innovative tubular steel furniture designed by famous architects such as Mart Stam, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, Charlotte Périand and A. Guyot. Today, the early tubular steel furniture designs are considered milestones in design history. Their clear, open and simple forms were an expression of a new attitude in everyday culture and architecture, which became famous under the catchphrase New Objectivity. The most important "invention" of the time was the cantilever chair, the flexing chair without back legs. Today, it is seen as one of the most important innovations of 20th century design.

Marcel Breuer had already been experimenting with cold bent tubular steel at the Bauhaus in 1925, which provided the cantilever effect. In 1926, Dutch architect Mart Stam designed the cantilever chair. The Werkbund exhibition “The Dwelling” in the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart in 1927 was an important stage in the success story of tubular steel: here, tubular steel furniture designs by architects Mart Stam and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, among others, were presented to the public for the first time on a larger scale. The exhibition was internationally acclaimed. The general public, however, was at first rather critical about the furniture made of the innovative material.

By the end of the 1930s, Thonet had adopted this entirely new production technique and began manufacturing tubular steel furniture in the Frankenberg/Eder facility. Due to Thonet's diligence and commitment to using this material in its furniture, the tubular steel concept finally took on a completely new dimension and distribution was expanded. Thanks to Thonet's reputation as the inventor of the lightweight and low-cost bentwood furniture, the company was known to a broad public and also appreciated by avant-gardists including Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffman and Le Corbusier. Its active participation in creating social housing also played a role in the popularity of tubular steel furniture. Today, numerous successful classic models are part of Thonet's product portfolio, among them the first cantilever chairs S 33 and S 43 by Mart Stam and models S 32, S 64 and the cantilever chair S 35 by Marcel Breuer, as well as the S 533 by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

### 1.3 Timeless products: Thonet furniture today

In the aftermath of World War II, Thonet lost all of its production facilities in the Eastern European states through expropriation, and the sales office at Vienna's Stephansplatz was destroyed during the war. In the years 1945–1953, Georg Thonet, the great-grandson of company founder Michael Thonet, rebuilt the completely destroyed facilities in Frankenberg/Eder in the north of Hesse. Economic success returned quickly and the company sought the cooperation of outstanding designers. The list of designers who have worked with Thonet over the past 60 years is long and filled with top calibre names: Egon Eiermann, Verner Panton, Eddie Harlis, Günter Eberle, Hanno von Gustedt, Rudolf Glatzel, Pierre Paulin, Gerd Lange, Hartmut Lohmeyer, Ulrich Böhme and Wulf Schneider, Alfredo Häberli, Christophe Marchand, Lord Norman Foster, Delphin Design, Glen Oliver Löw, James Irvine, Piero Lissoni, Stefan Diez, Lievore Altherr Molina, Lepper Schmidt Sommerlade, Hadi Teherani, Läufer + Keichel, Sebastian Herkner, Marco Dessí, Harri Koskinen, Frank Rettenbacher, Jil Sander. Moreover, the company's own Thonet Design Team regularly adds new designs to Thonet's versatile portfolio.

### 1.4 An overview of Thonet's corporate history

- 1796 Company founder Michael Thonet is born in Boppard/Rhine
- 1819 Founding of the company Thonet in Boppard/Rhine
- 1842 Michael Thonet moves to Vienna
- 1853 Transfer of the company to the sons under the name “Gebrüder Thonet”
- 1856 Founding of the first furniture factory in Koritchan (Moravia); in the following years, five more Eastern European production sites are established: Bystritz (1862), Nagy-Ugrócz (1866), Wsetin (1867), Hallenkau (1867), Nowo-Radomsk (1880)
- 1859 Beginning of the production of chair no. 14 (today: 214)
- 1889 Establishment of the seventh production facility in Frankenberg/Eder (Germany)
- 1895 Design of the bentwood classic 233 by Gebrüder Thonet
- 1900 Gebrüder Thonet design the bentwood chair 209
- 1921 All companies of “Gebrüder Thonet” merge with Mundus AG to become the world's largest furniture manufacturer
- 1925 At the Paris “Exposition des Art Décoratifs”, Le Corbusier furnishes his “Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau” with Thonet bentwood furniture.  
In the same year, Marcel Breuer designs the B 9 H stool, which is currently also available as the elegant B 9 nesting table. The B 9 was Thonet's first tubular steel product, and is considered a classic to this day.
- 1926 With the S 33, Mart Stam develops the first cantilever chair in furniture history

- 1927 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designs the elegant cantilever chair S 533, which is characterised by its rounded frame. The chair was first presented in 1927 at the Stuttgart Weissenhof Estate.
- 1929 In this and the following year, Marcel Breuer designs the tubular steel classics S 32 and S 64. Acquisition of rights to more designs by Marcel Breuer; beginning of tubular steel furniture production
- 1930 Beginning of tubular steel furniture production in Frankenberg
- 1938 Buyback of the shares in Thonet Mundus AG by the Thonet family
- 1945 Expropriation of the Eastern European facilities and destruction of the Thonet house in Vienna; bomb attack on Frankenberg and destruction of the facility
- 1945-1953 Reconstruction of the Frankenberg facility by Georg Thonet
- 1953 Thonet exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York
- 1961 The Federal Court of Justice confirms Mart Stam's artistic copyright for the cantilever chair.
- 1972 Appointment of Claus Thonet to member of the board; the fifth family generation takes over the company's management
- 1976 Division of Thonet into a German and an Austrian company (Thonet Vienna). For a short time, Thonet Vienna belongs to the Poltrona-Frau Group, but today the two companies are totally independent of each other.
- 1984 Philipp Thonet joins the company
- 1985 Peter Thonet joins the company and takes over the marketing management
- 1989 The Museum Thonet in Frankenberg opens its doors on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Thonet production facility in Frankenberg
- 1990 Touring exhibition "The Thonet Principle" (e.g., in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, in Prague, Brno, Bratislava, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Odessa, Moscow, Breslau, Warsaw and Poznan)
- 1992 Exhibition at Bauhaus Dessau and publication of the book "Ein Stuhl macht Geschichte" (A Chair Makes History)
- 1993 Thonet exhibition at Pillnitz Castle (Arts and Crafts Museum)
- 1994 Exhibition "Thonet, Pioneer of Industrial Design, 1830-1900" at the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein
- 1996 Michael Thonet's 200th birthday  
Exhibition in Meran: "A cultural history of sitting – Thonet chairs from past to present"  
Exhibition in Koblenz: "Biegen oder Brechen" (Bend or Break)
- 1998 Exhibition "Designklassiekers van Thonet" at Drents Museum, Assen (NL)
- 1999 Tubular steel exhibition at the Berlin House of Representatives
- 2000 Presentation of the A 900 range by Lord Norman Foster at imm cologne
- 2001 Exhibition of the collection of Peter Ellenberg at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich
- 2002 The Ellenberg collection is taken over by the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, resulting in the most comprehensive permanent Thonet bentwood exhibition
- 2002 Felix Thonet is the first member of the sixth generation and takes over the position of Sales Manager for the region of Cologne/Düsseldorf
- 2006 Gebrüder Thonet becomes Thonet GmbH
- 2007 Introduction of the 404 wooden chair by Stefan Diez
- 2009 Thonet cooperates with the Japanese trading house Muji and brings a special simplified version of the 214 chair to market
- 2009 The 150th anniversary of the 214 chair is celebrated with, among other things, the photo contest "214x214"
- 2011 Exhibition "Möbel design: Roentgen, Thonet und die Moderne" (Furniture Design: Roentgen, Thonet and Modernism) at Roentgen Museum, Neuwied
- 2011 Percy Thonet takes over responsibility as country manager for Austria.
- 2013 Thonet presents itself with a new, contemporary website; five current Thonet models are given to the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna
- 2014 Introduction of the S 1200 desk (Thonet Design Team/Randolf Schott). The S 1200 promptly wins the Interior Innovation Award 2014 and the iF Product Design Award 2014.
- 2014 Opening of the first Thonet showroom in the Netherlands at the Concept Gallery Amsterdam
- 2014 Exhibition "SIT.LIE.ROCK. Furniture from Thonet" at the GRASSI Museum for Applied Arts and donation of 15 contemporary Thonet chairs to the museum
- 2014 Thonet opens pop-up store at stilwerk Hamburg for a period of five months

- 2015 Introduction of the 808 lounge chair (formstelle) and the 2000 bentwood sofa by Christian Werner. The 808 promptly wins the Interior Innovation Award 2015.
- 2015 Thonet opens pop-up stores in Dubai, Vienna and Stuttgart
- 2016 Market launch of the “Thonet All Seasons” outdoor collection with selected tubular steel classics and the 1025 side table by James Van Vossel
- 2016 Opening of the first showroom in Belgium at the Concept Gallery in Antwerp
- 2016 Opening of a pop-up store in Hong Kong and a pop-up café in Vienna
- 2017 Opening of a pop-up store in Paris
- 2017 Opening of the Thonet Concept Gallery in Frankfurt/Main
- 2018 Market launch of the 118 wooden chair by Sebastian Herkner
- 2019 200-year company anniversary
- 2019 100-year Bauhaus anniversary
- 2019 Exhibition “Thonet & Design” at Die Neue Sammlung – The Design Museum at Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich (Germany)
- 2019 Exhibition “Thonet Re-Imagined” at Gallery Schellmann Art + Furniture in Munich (Germany)
- 2019 Exhibition “BENTWOOD AND BEYOND – Thonet and modern furniture design” at MAK – Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna (Austria)
- 2020 Thonet launches new website
- 2020 Exhibition: “From Thonet to ‘Dutch Design’” at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam
- 2020 Cooperation with Jay Gard and the Bauhausmuseum Dessau: special edition B 9
- 2020 German Sustainability Award 2021 for the Viennese coffeehouse chair 214
- 2021 Introduction of the S 5000 Retreat modular system by Marialaura Rossiello-Irvine for the New Work area
- 2021 Extension of the exhibition “Thonet & Design” in “Die Neue Sammlung – The Design Museum” in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich until summer 2021
- 2021 Thonet celebrates Michael Thonet's 225th birthday on 2 July 2021
- 2022 Introduction of the S 661 moulded plywood chair based on Günter Eberle's design from 1954, which received an award at the 10th Triennale in Milan (1954)
- 2022 Introduction of the material-efficient, all-purpose moulded plywood S 220 chair, designed by Sam Hecht and Kim Colin (Industrial Facility)
- 2023 Introduction of the S 32 lounge chair
- 2024 Thonet presents the tubular steel classics S 32/S 64 for the first time in the DARK MELANGE version with dark canework
- 2024 Introduction of the stackable tubular steel S 243 chair by Frank Rettenbacher, the S 12 wall hook by Harri Koskinen and the A 1750 conference table system by Uwe Sommerlade for the New Work era
- 2024 Thonet's 214 bentwood classic is awarded the Timeless Design award from the German Ecodesign Award
- 2025 Thonet presents an exclusive collaboration with fashion icon Jil Sander, whose signature collection JS . THONET comprises multiple interpretations of the S 64 and the B 97 table set

## **2. The Thonet brand: facts and figures**

### **2.1 The company and the Thonet brand**

**Founded:** 1819 in Boppard/Rhine

**Head offices:** Frankenberg/Eder, Germany.

Established in 1889 in the north of Hesse, the facility in Frankenberg/Eder is Thonet's youngest and, since the end of World War II, has also housed the company's head offices. Today, all of the famous Thonet bentwood and tubular steel classics as well as its modern collections are manufactured here at this site. The facility boasts cutting-edge production technology as well as specialised expertise gathered over the course of the company's more than two-century long manufacturing history. Today, as in the past, innovative products are developed here, which are characterised by high-quality materials, exceptional durability and timeless design.

**Management:** CEO Brian Boyd and Creative Director Norbert Ruf

**Distribution:** in Germany through specialist dealers, in numerous other countries through importers and specialist dealers. Export markets: all European countries, the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Middle East, Russia

**Collections for hybrid spaces and various use concepts:** whether in today's spaces for concentration, such as a home office, coworking space, office or lounge; in spaces for communication, such as conference or meeting rooms; in social spaces, such as a home kitchen, dining room, canteen, café, restaurant or bar; in spaces for experience, such as event, conference or meeting rooms or in spaces for relaxation, such as the break room at work or a reading nook at home – Thonet furniture pieces are constant companions that retain their beauty and value in an ever-changing world.

To this day, the trademark rights to the name "Thonet" are owned by Thonet GmbH in Frankenberg for Germany and most countries worldwide. Thonet GmbH proudly looks back on almost 200 years of tradition in furniture manufacturing. This tradition is upheld in particular by preserving the heritage of bentwood and tubular steel furniture and through continuous innovations in the company's product development. Today, Thonet furniture is represented in the most important museum collections around 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 Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as many other national and international museums of applied arts. Historic Thonet furniture is often sold at exceptionally high prices at international auctions.

### **2.2 Selection of current references**

(in alphabetical order by city)

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Netherlands)  
Cap d'Antibes Beach Hotel, Antibes (France)  
Greenhouse Collection, Antwerp (Belgium)  
Tagungshotel St. Ulrich, Augsburg (Germany)  
Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden (Germany)  
Kassenärztliche Vereinigung Schleswig-Holstein, Bad Segeberg (Germany)  
Architektenkammer, Berlin (Germany)  
Deutscher Bundestag, Berlin (Germany)  
KaDeWe Department Store, Berlin (Germany)  
Landesvertretung Niedersachsen/Schleswig-Holstein, Berlin (Germany)  
Max-Schmeling-Halle, Berlin (Germany)  
Olympic Stadium, Berlin (Germany)



Restaurant Vau, Berlin (Germany)  
Vattenfall, German headquarters, Berlin (Germany)  
Vattenfall Europe, Berlin (Germany)  
World Conference Center, Bonn (Germany)  
Mid-century apartment, Brisbane (Australia)  
Josef Rädlinger construction company, Cham (Germany)  
Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, Cologne (Germany)  
Tweede Kamer (Parliament), Den Haag (Netherlands)  
Bauhaus, Dessau (Germany)  
Hotel Castelbrac, Dinard (France)  
"Schouwburg Kunstmin" Theatre, Dordrecht (Netherlands)  
AOK, Dortmund (Germany)  
Sächsischer Landtag, Dresden (Germany)  
Triodos Bank, Driebergen (Netherlands)  
Robert-Schumann-Saal, Düsseldorf (Germany)  
Codic, Düsseldorf (Germany)  
City hall, Echting (Germany)  
Landeskirchenamt, Erfurt (Germany)  
Thyssen Krupp head offices, Essen (Germany)  
Allianz, Frankfurt/Munich/Hamburg (Germany)  
Degussa AG, Frankfurt (Germany)  
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Frankfurt and Leipzig (Germany)  
Quadriga Capital, Frankfurt (Germany)  
Stadt Germering, Germering (Germany)  
Johannisberg monastery, Geisenheim (Germany)  
Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg (Germany)  
Hamburger Ding, Hamburg (Germany)  
Stilwerk Hotel "Heimbude", Hamburg (Germany)  
Marktkirche, Hanover (Germany)  
Café Höijer, Helsinki (Finland)  
Pizzeria Via Tribunali, Helsinki (Finland)  
Restaurant OX, Helsinki (Finland)  
SLS Coffee Bar, Helsinki (Finland)  
Bundesgerichtshof, Karlsruhe (Germany)  
Casals Forum, Kronberg (Germany)  
Villa Kamogawa, Kyoto (Japan)  
Café del la Paix, La Rochelle (France)  
Lolita Café, Ljubljana (Slovenia)  
University of London, London (England)  
Swiss Re, London (England)  
British Museum, London (England)  
Restaurant Wirtshaus Mättle, Lörrach (Germany)  
BaseCamp, Lyngby (Denmark)  
Landtag, Mainz (Germany)  
Solo Office, Matarraña (Spain)  
Restaurant Al Gatto Verde, Modena (Italy)  
Ägyptisches Museum, Munich (Germany)  
Deutsches Patent- und Markenamt, Munich (Germany)  
Restaurant Kismet, Munich (Germany)  
Restaurant Pageou, Munich (Germany)  
Restaurant Pepe Nero, Munich (Germany)  
Technische Universität, Munich (Germany)  
Café Herr Hase, Münster (Germany)  
Audi AG, Neckarsulm (Germany)  
Hearst Tower, New York (USA)  
Arcelor, Paris (France)

OECD, Paris (France)  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris (France)  
Printemps, Paris (France)  
Concert Hall, Ravensburg (Germany)  
Palacongressi, Rimini (Italy)  
LUISS Business School, Rome (Italy)  
World Trade Center, Rotterdam (Netherlands)  
Engelbert Strauss, Schlüchtern (Germany)  
Buchinger Wilhelmi Clinic, Überlingen (Germany)  
Jaarbeurs, Utrecht (Netherlands)  
Ambassador's residence, Vienna (Austria)  
BDDR Rechtsanwälte, Vienna (Austria)  
Hotel Grand Ferdinand, Vienna (Austria)  
Motel One Wien-Staatsoper, Vienna (Austria)  
Restaurant Steirereck, Vienna (Austria)  
Hotel Schloss Waldeck, Waldeck (Germany)  
Villa Harnischmacher, Wiesbaden (Germany)  
UBS AG, Zurich (Switzerland)  
Schweizer Börse, Zurich (Switzerland)  
Zurich University of the Arts, Zurich (Switzerland)

### **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, Georg Thonet amassed a large collection of historic pieces and, when the museum was opened in 1989, made it accessible to the public. Early bentwood furniture, art nouveau furniture, tubular steel furniture from the Bauhaus era and post-war furniture is shown in the museum's floor space of over 700 square meters.

Museum Thonet, Michael-Thonet-Straße 1, D-30566 Frankenberg, Germany  
T. +49 (0) 6451 50 80; [museum@thonet.de](mailto:museum@thonet.de), [www.thonet.de](http://www.thonet.de)

#### **3.2 Publications about Thonet**

##### **3.2.1 Specialist 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 Kaffeehausstuhl Nr. 14 von Michael Thonet, Frankfurt/Main 1998  
Mang, Karl: Thonet Bugholzmöbel, Vienna 1982  
Möller, Werner, and Mácel, Otakar: Ein Stuhl macht Geschichte, Munich 1992  
Nothelfer, Karl: Das Sitzmöbel, Ravensburg 1941  
Renzi, Giovanni: Thonet 14, Silvana Editoriale 2003  
Schneck, Adolf: Der Stuhl, Stuttgart 1928  
von Vegesack, Alexander: Das Thonet Buch, Munich 1987  
von Vegesack, Alexander: Thonet Classic furniture in bentwood and tubular steel, HAZAR Publishing, London 1996  
Thillmann, Wolfgang: Perfektes Design – Thonet Nr. 14, Bielefeld/Berlin 2015  
Schäfer, Lilo: Die Marke Thonet – ein Blick auf ihre grafische Geschichte, Salenstein 2018



### **3.2.2 Exhibition catalogues**

Sitz-Gelegenheiten, Bugholz- und Stahlrohrmöbel von Thonet, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, 1989/1990 (later as a touring exhibition of the German Federal 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. by Ulrich Löber

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

Möbel Design, Roentgen, Thonet und die Moderne, Roentgen Museum Neuwied, 2011

SITZEN.LIEGEN.SCHAUKELN. Möbel von Thonet, GRASSI Museum for Applied Arts in Leipzig, Kerber Verlag, 2014

Thonet & Design, Die Neue Sammlung – The Design Museum in der Pinakothek der Moderne, 2019

Thonet Re-Imagined, Galerie Schellmann Art + Furniture, 2019

BUGHOLZ, VIELSCHICHTIG, MAK Museum Wien, 2019

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