

Thonet – a pioneer of furniture history

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1. The Thonet story

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

Today, Thorsten Muck runs 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 Lichtenstein, Palais Schwarzenberg and Café Daum. In 1849, he again opened his own shop together with his four sons.

Michael Thonet had his breakthrough in 1859 with chair no. 14, the so-called Vienna coffee house chair: for the first time, the innovative bending technique allowed for the industrial production of a 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 produced in work-sharing processes. 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 meter box. All of the above 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 – leaving aside the innumerable pirated copies.

At the time, the 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, the so-called postal savings bank chair, to name but a few. Thonet production peaked in 1912: two million different products were manufactured and sold worldwide.

In 1857, Michael Thonet's sons as "Gebrüder Thonet" commissioned the first Thonet furniture factory to be built in the Moravian town of Koritchan 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 significant material in the Thonet program. 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 defined 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 enabled the cantilever effect. In 1926, the Dutch architect Mart Stam designed the cantilever chair. The Werkbund exhibition "The Dwelling" in the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart in 1927 formed an important stage in the success story of tubular steel: here, tubular steel furniture designs by the 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. However, the general public was rather critical at first about the furniture made of the innovative material.

By the end of the 1920s, Thonet adopted the entirely new fabrication technique and began producing tubular steel furniture in the Frankenberg/Eder facility. Due to Thonet's commitment, the tubular steel concept finally took on a completely new dimension and distribution was expanded. As the inventor of the lightweight and low-cost bentwood furniture, the company was not only known to a broad public but also appreciated by avant-gardists such as Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffman and Le Corbusier, but was also committed to the emerging social housing. 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 Viennas Stephansplatz had been 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 caliber names: Egon Eiermann, Verner Panton, Eddie Harlis, 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. Moreover the company's own Thonet Design Team regularly adds new designs to Thonet's versatile portfolio.

1.4 An overview of Thonet history

- 1796 Company founder Michael Thonet is born in Boppard
- 1819 Foundation 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 Foundation of the first furniture factory in Koritchan (Moravia); in the next 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 facility in Frankenberg/Eder (Germany)
- 1921 All companies of "Gebrüder Thonet" merge with the 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.
- 1926 Mart Stam develops the cantilever chair.
- 1929 Acquisition of rights to designs by Marcel Breuer; beginning of tubular steel furniture production
- 1932 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 the Frankenberg 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 of the cantilever chair.
- 1972 Appointment of Claus Thonet to member of the board; entry of the fifth family generation in the company's management
- 1976 Division of Thonet into a German and an Austrian company (Thonet Vienna). The two companies are totally independent of each other.
- 1985 Peter Thonet joins the company and takes over the marketing management.
- 1989 The Museum Thonet in Frankenberg opens its doors; with Philipp Thonet, the third of Georg Thonet's sons joins the company.
- 1990 Touring exhibition "The Thonet Principle" (e.g., in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, in Prague, Brno, 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 program range A 900 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.
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.
- 2009 Thonet cooperates with the Japanese trading house Muji and brings a special simplified version of chair 214 to the market.
- 2009 The 150th anniversary of the chair 214 is also celebrated with the photo contest "214x214".
- 2011 Exhibition "Möbeldesign: Roentgen, Thonet und die Moderne" (Furniture Design: Roentgen, Thonet and Modernism) at Roentgen Museum, Neuwied;
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 / Contemporary Art, Vienna; Thorsten Muck is appointed as managing director.
- 2014 Introduction of desk S 1200 (Thonet Design Team/Randolf Schott). S 1200 immediately wins the Interior Innovation Award and the iF Product Design Award.
- 2014 Opening of the first Dutch Thonet showroom in 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 in stilwerk Hamburg for a duration of five months.

2. The Thonet brand: facts and figures

2.1 The company and the Thonet brand

Foundation: 1819 in Boppard/Rhine

Head offices: Frankenberg/Eder, Germany.

Established in 1889 in the north of Hesse, the facilities in Frankenberg/Eder is the youngest facility in the corporate history and, since the end of World War II, also the company's head offices. Today, all of the famous Thonet bentwood and tubular steel classics as well as the modern collections are manufactured at this site. The facility provides cutting-edge production technology as well as special know-how gathered over the course of more than two centuries of corporate history. Today, like in the past, innovative products are developed here, always with a focus on durability and characterized by high-quality materials and a timeless formal language.

Management: Thorsten Muck

Distribution: in Germany through specialist dealers, in numerous other countries 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, contract, training and seminars, dining and living, catering, reception and waiting areas, outdoors

Brand: To this day, the brand rights to the name "Thonet" are owned by Thonet GmbH in Frankenberg, Germany and in most other countries worldwide. Thonet GmbH looks back upon 195 years of tradition in furniture production. 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 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 / Contemporary Art, 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 achieves top prices at international auctions.

2.2 Selected contemporary references

(in alphabetical order by city)

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Netherlands)
Tagungshotel St. Ulrich, Augsburg (Germany)
Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden (Germany)
Deutscher Bundestag, Berlin (Germany)
Landesvertretung Niedersachsen/Schleswig-Holstein, Berlin (Germany)
Olympic Stadium, Berlin (Germany)
Restaurant Vau, Berlin (Germany)
Vattenfall Europe, Berlin (Germany)
Tweede Kamer (Parliament), Den Haag (Netherlands)
Bauhaus, Dessau (Germany)
Sächsischer Landtag, Dresden (Germany)
Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Düsseldorf (Germany)
Robert-Schumann-Saal, Düsseldorf (Germany)
Headquarter Thyssen Krupp, 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)
Bundesgerichtshof, Karlsruhe (Germany)
Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, Cologne (Germany)
University of London, London (England)
Swiss Re, London (England)
British Museum, London (England)
Ägyptisches Museum, Munich (Germany)
Deutsches Patent- und Markenamt, Munich (Germany)
Technische Universität, Munich (Germany)
Audi AG, Neckarsulm (Germany)
Hearst Tower, New York (USA)
Arcelor, Paris (France)
OECD, Paris (France)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris (France)
Palacongressi, Rimini (Italy)
Jaarbeurs, Utrecht (Netherlands)
UBS AG, Zürich (Switzerland)
Schweizer Börse, 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. The great grandson of company founder Michael Thonet, Georg Thonet amassed a large collection of historic pieces and, by opening the museum in 1989 he 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 on a total floor space of more than 700 square meters.

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3.2 Publications and exhibition catalogs about Thonet

3.2.1 Specialist books

Bang, Ole: Thonet, Geschichte eines Stuhls, Stuttgart 1979
Bangert, Albrecht, und 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, und 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

3.2.2 Exhibition catalogs

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. 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

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