

Press Release
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From coffee houses into the world A short history of culture – 200 years of Thonet

Today and in the past, Thonet furniture has been a part of the lives of many people all around the world. Some appreciate them as classics with history and patina, others as timeless design icons with a collector's value, and people of a younger generation perceive the style and the culture which a Thonet original represents. Thonet furniture can be found wherever people meet, network, have a rest or pursue mobile work – at home, in waiting areas and lounges, in offices or cafés. They are more than just interior design objects for many – rather, they are familiar cultural assets that are truly timeless and appreciated as well as bequeathed.

From Boppard to Vienna: the bentwood era, a great success story

The history of Thonet began with the work of the cabinetmaker and joiner Michael Thonet, who opened his first workshop in 1819 in Boppard/River Rhine. With filigree and elegant chairs and the testing and application of innovative wood processing technologies, Michael Thonet achieved fame beyond his home region. When the Austrian State Chancellor Clemens Graf von Metternich learned about Thonet and his furniture, he convinced Michael Thonet to move to Vienna. Thonet was therefore able to participate in the interior design of Palais Liechtenstein, expand his knowledge and skills, and establish a network that he did not have in his home town. In 1849, Michael Thonet founded a company in Vienna, which he renamed Gebrüder Thonet in 1853 – a family company from the beginning. Today, his inventive, innovation-oriented company would be called a start-up.

Based on the coffee house culture of the mid-19th century, which brought the founder his first successes, Thonet furniture can since be found wherever people get together for conversations or joint activities. As a communicative place of encounter and self-presentation, the coffee house also enables retreat in the midst of public – it is a cornerstone of Thonet's product history.

One of the first commissions for the young company – furnishing the Café Daum on Kohlmarkt, a Vienna institution mainly frequented by aristocrats and military personnel, with chair No.4 – made Thonet furniture famous across the city from 1850 onward. Michael Thonet had his international breakthrough in 1859 with chair No.14, the so-called Vienna Coffee House Chair: the innovative technique of bending solid beech wood for the first time enabled an almost industrial production of a chair. Long before globalisation, a product that was available nearly worldwide was created. It was based on a modular principle, while the individual components were produced based on division of labour and could be combined as needed. This method created a demand-oriented, economically highly efficient production. The former model No. 14 (today 214) was delivered to the customers disassembled into its individual parts in a space-saving way.

Thonet established a rapidly growing network of facilities where raw materials and workplaces were available – close to transportation routes if possible – to supply the appropriate markets. In addition to internationality, the regional expansion played an important role for the development of the company and its programme range.

Around 1890, Thonet's bentwood chairs had already spread throughout the Vienna in restaurants and cafes. The members of literary modernism met at Café Griensteidl due to the large selection of newspapers and sat on Thonet No. 4 chairs. Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Arthur Schnitzler were regular guests there. At around the same time, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec painted elegant ladies and gentlemen

sitting on the characteristic bentwood chairs in his 1892 painting “At the Moulin Rouge”. Henri Matisse staged the Thonet No. 20 in his “Intérieur au violon” in 1918/19, which he painted in Nice at the Hotel de la Méditerranée. Whether on the Lido in Venice, on London’s Oxford Street in Fleming’s Restaurant, in Berlin’s Kempinski-Weinstuben or the Hamburg Dammtor Pavilion: on numerous postcards from the early 20th century, European ballrooms, casinos and grand hotels are documented with Thonet chairs. In the 1920s, many venues where metropolitan life was pulsating –cafés, restaurants, dance clubs and concert and lecture halls – were furnished with Thonet. Although designers including Josef Frank and Adolf Schneck reinterpreted Thonet’s traditional material, bentwood, in a contemporary way with their own furniture, chair No. 14 remained especially popular. In the magazine of the Deutscher Werkbund, “Die Form”, architect Ferdiand Kramer reported in a company portrait about Thonet at the beginning of 1929 that the average daily production amounted to 18,000 chairs at the time. For Kramer – and not only for him – Thonet was a bright and shining example with regard to the issue of typification and the development of standards, which was very important to architects and furniture designers back then. Kramer furnished the Café Bauer in Frankfurt, where Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer were among the regular patrons.

A new era and a new material: tubular steel furniture, fascinating to this day

Around the same time, seventy years after the development of chair No. 14 (today 214), Marcel Breuer created his first interior design objects made of tubular steel. After the takeover of the company Standard Möbel co-founded by Breuer, Thonet produced Breuer’s designs starting in 1930. Today’s tubular steel classics S 32 and S 64 were created. They are important links between the traditional bentwood technique and the modern bending of tubular steel. Their Vienna wicker work is reminiscent of traditional handicraft, and their space-defining design with its function (the cantilever chair initiated by Mart Stam) already pointed in the direction of the future. With the tubular steel chair S 35, which was first presented in 1930 during the “Section Allemande”, an exhibition of the Deutscher Werkbund in Paris, Breuer underlined the international importance of his designs.

As an architect in Berlin, Breuer furnished the homes of artists and intellectuals with the innovative furniture into the early 1930s. Modern artists, beyond the direct Bauhaus environment, were enthusiastic about Thonet furniture at an early time. Karl Hubbuch, a representative of the New Objectivity, repeatedly painted and drew his wife Hilde Isay with the then new tubular steel furniture. Photographic self-portraits from his studio show her with either a bentwood chair or Thonet nesting tables.

In the 1930s, the company was the largest producer of the innovative furniture designed by famous avant-garde architects such as Marcel Breuer, Mart Stam, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Charlotte Périand. The tubular steel furniture was manufactured with an entirely new production technology at the Frankenberg/Eder facility, the company’s headquarters since the end of World War II. Today, the early tubular steel furniture designs are famous milestones of design history.

Since the 1930s, Thonet furniture has been a silent star of international cinema, orchestrating places where protagonists meet and the plot takes a turn – and not just in those films with self-avowed Thonet collectors like director Billy Wilder behind the camera.

Since 1945: classics that remain, and new designs that optimistically welcome the future

By the end of World War II, Thonet had lost its facilities in Eastern Europe due to expropriation, and the sales office on Vienna's Stephansplatz was destroyed. From 1945 to 1953, Georg Thonet, great-grandson of the founder, rebuilt the Frankenberg facility in the north of Hesse, which had also been destroyed, and soon the economic success returned – largely with new products reflecting the era. Thonet began producing existing tubular steel models of classic modernism with improved technological possibilities, at first in small series. In addition, starting in the 1960s, Thonet returned to cooperating with famous designers, including Egon Eiermann, Verner Panton and Pierre Paulin. Designers such as Eddi Harlis and Hanno von Gustedt are known to insiders today especially due to their furniture designs for Thonet.

Tubular steel furniture has always been – and still is – subjected to particular economic situations due to the transformation of society, personal living conditions and specific trends. Thonet furniture is based on the know-how and expertise of those who produce it. Today, tubular steel furniture can be produced with less effort than bentwood furniture, which continues to require a lot of labour. Tubular steel can be precisely and reliably formed by machines. The tubular steel collection is continuously being developed. Every generation can discover the appeal of Thonet originals. Materials, surfaces and colours of classics of modernism are repeatedly reinterpreted. Designers who create these careful reinterpretations – for example Studio Besau Marguerre from Hamburg, most recently – intensively deal with the original designs and revise them with the necessary sensitivity. The Thonet classics available today are not museum pieces but rather living elements of the collections, conceived and refined for everyday use. Over the course of the past decades, internationally recognised architects and designers, including Stefan Diez, Lord Norman Foster, Alfredo Häberli, James Irvine, Naoto Fukasawa, Piero Lissoni, Glen Oliver Löw, Christophe Marchand and Hadi Teherani have designed for Thonet. "Range 118" by Sebastian Herkner has a seat frame bent from one piece and a wicker cane seat; it references the Coffee House Chair 214 – the archetype of a Thonet chair.

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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. Since establishing 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, the so-called Vienna Coffee House Chair: the pioneering technique of bending solid beech wood for the first time enabled the mass production of chairs. 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. At the time, Thonet was the world's largest producer of these tubular steel furniture designs, which are considered timeless today.

For the company today, the continuous process of innovation stands in the foreground alongside a focus on tradition and fine craftsmanship. Thonet collaborates with renowned national and international designers – in addition, some of the furniture is designed by the in-house Thonet Design Team. All of the furniture is produced in the company-owned manufacturing facility, and, following the motto "Individuality is our standard", custom-tailored solutions are part of everyday life in Frankenberg. Chief Executive Officer Brian Boyd together with Chief Operating Officer Michael Erdelt and Creative Director Norbert Ruf manage the company at the corporate head offices and production site in Frankenberg/Eder (Germany). The descendants of Michael Thonet, the fifth and sixth generations, are actively involved with the company's business as partners and sales representatives.