

## Thonet Bentwood Furniture and the Iconic Chair No. 14 from Moravia

by Ivan Margolius

Michael Thonet, a cabinet maker, was born in 1796 in Boppard, Rheinland, Germany, setting up his furniture workshop there in 1819. He began experiments with bending wood to make chairs in the late 1830s and early 1840s, trying to shape laminated wood veneer strips bundles by having the wood cut into laths which were then soaked in vats of hot glue to make them flexible. He then clamped the strips into iron formwork, pressing the bundles into permanent curves. These bent laminations were fitted, lapped and pinned together to form the final shapes required. Thonet first exhibited his designs in 1841 at a trade fair in Koblenz where he met Prince Metternich. The Prince invited him to move to Vienna, which Thonet did the following year, and granted him an Austrian patent for his invention. On 16th June 1842 Thonet became the owner of the Imperial and Royal privilege Z.28.877/1.158 "to bend every kind of wood, even the most refractory, by any chemico-mechanical means into any form or curve".

After moving to Vienna, Thonet furnished the Palais Liechtenstein, Palais Schwarzenberg and the Café Daum. In 1849 Thonet Söhne was established with a workshop in Vienna and four years later the firm was renamed Gebrüder Thonet when Michael transferred the business to his five sons: Michael Jr., Josef, August, Franz and Jacob. August Thonet (1829-1910) being the most artistically and technically gifted contributed many designs as well as improving production techniques. Two years later Thonet made a breakthrough through having light, strong beech wood bent into curved forms by shaping the solid, turned beech wood rods through a hot steam treatment, instead of using the laminated strips and the hot glue baths. Then he introduced his so-called Viennese bentwood chairs at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, held at the Crystal Palace, for which he received a bronze medal. Four years later he gained a silver medal at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* and, again in Paris in 1867 a gold medal for the most famous chair of all times, the number 14. With many orders coming in, the Viennese workshop could not cope with large-scale production. In order to continue supply, Thonet established factories conveniently close to the source of the plentiful material needed for the production - the beech forests. The first factory and his own villa were built in Koryčany, near Uherské Hradiště in Moravia in



*The Thonet chair No. 14, dated 1859, complete and in component form*

1856. Five years later a factory was built in Bystrice pod Hostýnem near Přerov, followed by factories in Halenkov in 1867 and Vsetín in 1871, with other plants in Nagyugróc in Hungary, Radomsko in Poland, Frankenberg in Germany and subsequently in other parts of the world. By 1900 there were 6,000 Thonet employees producing 4,000 pieces of furniture a day.

Thonet rationalised the production by constructing each furniture product in individual elements that could be made separately on a production line manned by specially trained workers, rather than employing highly skilled furniture craftsmen to fashion the whole piece one at a time. The final pieces of furniture were assembled by simply screwing the components together, rather than using complex junctions, which at that time required fixing by using glued-peg jointing. The other advantage of using screws was that the connections could be easily retightened as required during the chair's use, thus prolonging the life of the product. A highly innovative production process was established, with each stage of manufacture being taken up separately, but in sequence, then all coming together at the end of the line, a method of mass manufacture still in use successfully in many other industries to the present time.

Some designs such as the Chair no. 14, invented in 1859, with its simple elegant bentwood double rod backrest first made in Koryčany, were sent out unassembled in one-cubic-metre packs which contained simple component parts for 36 units. Once delivered, these parts could be easily put together on site. By the early 1860s Thonet paved the way for massive furniture production of



*Above, 36 units of No. 14 packed into one cubic metre*

products sent all over the world. Some sources claim that by 1930 over 50 million Thonet chairs had been sold, with 18,000 chairs made daily. The No. 14 then cost only 8.50 Deutschmarks each, making it one of the most successful products in the history of industrial mass production.

Michael Thonet died in 1871 in Vienna but his five sons carried on successfully with the enterprise and kept introducing further innovations such as using the cheaper ply seats, later decorated by pressed or flame-branded patterns instead of the wicker cane work. Leading architects Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier and others admired Thonet products because of their simple, elegant, functional forms perfectly fitting in to the modern interiors of the architects' building designs. Adolf Loos said, "When I was in America, I realised that the Thonet chair was the most modern seating available". The chairs were light, practical as well as comfortable without extensive upholstery.

Le Corbusier used Thonet chairs (Nos. 18 and 209)

*Below, Le Corbusier's 1925 Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau interior with No. 209 chairs*



in his 1925 *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* put up at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris. He explained his choice: "We have introduced the humble Thonet chair of steamed wood, certainly the most common as well as the least costly of chairs. And we believe that this chair, whose millions of representatives are used on the Continent and in the two Americas, possess nobility". Eight of the sixteen leading architects invited to build their Modernist designs at the *Weissenhofsiedlung* in Stuttgart in 1927 also chose Thonet chairs as no other pieces of furniture fitted so well with their avant-garde building interiors.

After the First World War in 1922 the company joined up with Kohn-Mundus (Jacob & Josef Kohn and Mundus AG) and was renamed Thonet-Mundus. In the late 1920s the company began also the manufacture of tubular-steel furniture. After the Second World War the company's factories in Czechoslovakia were nationalised and in 1953 renamed TON (*Továrny obýbaného nábytku*), eventually with all the production based in Bystřice pod Hostýnem. The factory in Koryčany became independent in 1953 and was taken over by Koryna a.s. in 1993. From 2011 it has been under the ownership of L. A. Bernkop company. There are also two other independent Thonet companies - Thonet GmbH in Frankenberg/Eder in Germany and Gebrüder Thonet Vienna GmbH in Austria. The proof that Thonet products are of lasting design is confirmed by the fact that the same chair, first made in the nineteenth century, is still popular and widely available today.

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*The Villa Thonet at Koryčany, photograph below, was once the home of Michael Thonet and stands alongside the site of the furniture factory. It is now empty and the local council is endeavouring to secure its future. The Friends would like to support this venture*

