



Before the no.14

Micheal Thonet was born in the small river town of Boppard am Rhein, Germany in 1796. After an apprenticeship in cabinet making he soon acquired a reputation as a creative innovator.

9 years after the French Revolution started, the French organised on a regular basis, exhibitions at the Louvre about art and industry at that moment and in 1812 the Germans also started organising exhibitions with juries and prizes. Micheal Thonet was visiting these big exhibitions a lot and took part in an exhibition in London and won the first prize with a table. After a couple of years Micheal Thonet was starting to work on a new famous chair called the Boppard chair. After a long period of by Roman and military inspired buildings, furniture, ornaments etc. people wanted more home loving and friendly formed furniture (biedermeier) and this was exactly what the Boppard chair was.

In 1841 Thonet took part in an exhibition in Koblenz and met Prince Metternich, who was impressed by Thonet furniture, he invited Thonet to come to Vienna to meet the emperor, and this was what Micheal Thonet did in 1841. He got a patent on his furniture and at that moment he was the only person in Austria who was allowed to make furniture with banded wood. Thonet was first working in the workshop of an old furniture maker called Franz List, but after a couple of years List stopped working, and Thonet got a new job in the factory of Carl Leister. Carl Leister was really satisfied with an employee as Micheal Thonet, but Thonet had other plans and opened in 1849 his own workshop. Thonet and his sons started working on a series of laminated chairs and they discovered a new technique. They called the chair the no.4 and this was the chair that produced their first big order for a café in Vienna and after a year a hotel in Budapest also ordered 400 chairs. In 1850 the family took part in an exhibition in London: The exhibition of the industry of all nations, and this became a great success for the family. Micheal Thonet got the highest distinction for industrial made products and a great number of orders from all over the world. The chair called the no.9 shows a solution for 2 problems: the connection between the front legs was much easier and the seat and the chair was much more strong because of a new construction. The chair was because of esthetic reasons still a little bit too expensive but they made it useable for mass production and the chair they developed called the no.14 is the most famous and best sold chair ever.

The no. 14

Over a hundred and forty years ago, in 1859, a Thonet factory in Koritschan in Moravia, produced the first chair known as no. 14 in the catalogues of the Viennese company. The furniture of the time was usually made from flat pieces of wood with numerous joints disguised by elaborate carvings, but Thonet rejected the traditional methods and looked instead for simpler and more economic means of production. He used bent veneers glued together and held in jigs, but this was labour-intensive and the wood could only be bent in one direction. By further cutting, twisting, and rasping it became possible to obtain three-dimensional bends with oval sections but it was the need to eliminate the glues which tended to dissolve in hot damp climates that led to the breakthrough.

Thonet discovered the solution: a solid piece of steamed wood and a metal strap could be bent together in a certain way without cracking the wood, and after being dried out in a jig the wood held its shape. This was a breakthrough in the production of the Thonet chairs and since then several million chairs of this model have been manufactured and sold. It is possible to speak of fifty million examples manufactured and sold by 1930,

the no. 14 expressed a complete rejection of decorative art, but within five years would greatly influence the direction of the modern movement, because of its emphasis on making the home a more efficient place, rather than the soon-to-be outdated emphasis on stylistic decor. Ever since the last quarter of the nineteenth century newspapers and magazines and travel magazines have portrayed people of all races and ranks sitting on the number 14, firstly in drawings and later in photographs.

This was one of the visions Thonet had, he wanted to make a chair that was durable, light and cheap. He wanted to make a chair for all ranks. In 1860 the chair was sold in Austria for three florins, with which sum it was possible to purchase 3-dozen eggs or 1 litre of "house wine". The chair was the first product of the industrial way of thinking, before Ford, Coca-Cola or any other product that is sold world wide. One of the reasons the chairs were sold all over the world is because the design was universal: you could not say it was a chair from a specific country. And the other reason was when you took it apart (it was in fact a package of 6 pieces of banded wood 10 screws and 2 nuts) 36 chairs fit in one square meter, this means it could also be easily transported to destinations all over the world.

Because of this world wide success Micheal Thonet opened offices all over the world. (London, New York, Paris) after all this success he transferred the business to his five sons who kept on working on new techniques of bending wood and kept on experimenting.

After the no.14

After this success and the transfer to his sons, the family lost the patents and this was followed by extremely widespread competition from local, national and international firms, with several million (2) copies of the original built using the same bent beech-wood technique. Nonetheless, it is not completely correct to talk of copies of the number 14 as during the first 40 years of production Thonet itself modified the dimensions and proportions of its basic product. Furthermore, following the Second World War, several factories of the original Gebrüder Thonet Wien found themselves in Eastern Europe, but continued manufacturing the number 14 under another name. In Italy, for example, from the Fifties onwards, firstly Herbaschek and subsequently Italcomma marketed the number 14 chair manufactured in ex-Thonet factories situated in Eastern Europe. Consequently, although it is not really right to speak of copies, it is interesting to understand what the various competitors offered in a market with frozen prices and what were the technical and formal differences in respect to the mass consumption product manufactured by Thonet. At the end of the Second World War none of the Thonet companies that survived the conflict featured the number 14 chair in their catalogues. It managed to survive the dark moments and the business ups and downs of the Thonet trade name thanks to the small competing companies that continued to produce it uninterruptedly. Gebrüder Thonet was in business until 1922, when it was absorbed into a corporate empire, the Thonet-Mundus holding company, headed by Leopold Pilzer (1871-1959), with over 10,000 workers and 20 production sites. In 1938, Leopold Pilzer, head of Thonet-Mundus, emigrated to the US, purchased three US furniture companies as subsidiaries, and established Thonet Industries, Inc. with headquarters in New York. Thonet chairs influenced in the past a great number of big names in design and architecture, like Le Corbusier and the brothers also worked together with designers like Marcel Breuer, Mart Stam and the company still works together with a lot of designers.

And now a day's young designers do projects with the designs of Thonet as main point, such as the Thonet tomorrow project. THONET TOMORROW offered students from the Milanese school an opportunity to design for a company which has produced masterpieces of design in more than 200 years such as the revolutionary and universally accessible "No. 14" chair.

And this company still produces masterpieces of design as you can see on their website and their shops all over the world.



