



Michael with sons Michael, Jr., Josef, August, Franz, Jakob.

The *Schaukefauteuil* or "rocking chaise" (chaise longue No. 2, designed in the 1880s) was intended for affluent households that had space for it. Thonet borrowed the adjustable back from the Morris chair.

Michael Thonet throws a curve: his designs look fresh again

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THONET

Familiarity can breed contempt, but in the case of bentwood furniture it has historically generated numbing indifference. The wealth of bentwood chairs, tables, rockers, and settees that has populated both public and private spaces since the middle of the 19th century has by the very fact of its enormous popularity become nameless. We forget how much the heritage of Michael Thonet has changed our lives; perhaps that's the greatest compliment that can be paid these designs. They function effortlessly,

inexpensively, and, most of the time, anonymously. (When we do acknowledge Thonet's genius, we can't even get his name right; we use the fancy French Toe-NAY rather than the humble but correct German, TONN-ett.)

The history of bentwood furnishings dates back centuries; some historians, pointing to curved-leg stools in Egyptian tombs and the Greek *klismos* chair, say millenia. But not until Thonet, an enterprising cabinetmaker from Boppard am Rhein in Germany,

DEREK E. OSTERGARD





Above: No. 2 chair, 1848–50. **Below:** No. 3 chair, about 1850. **Bottom:** No. 51 (1890s) anticipated progressive Viennese designs.

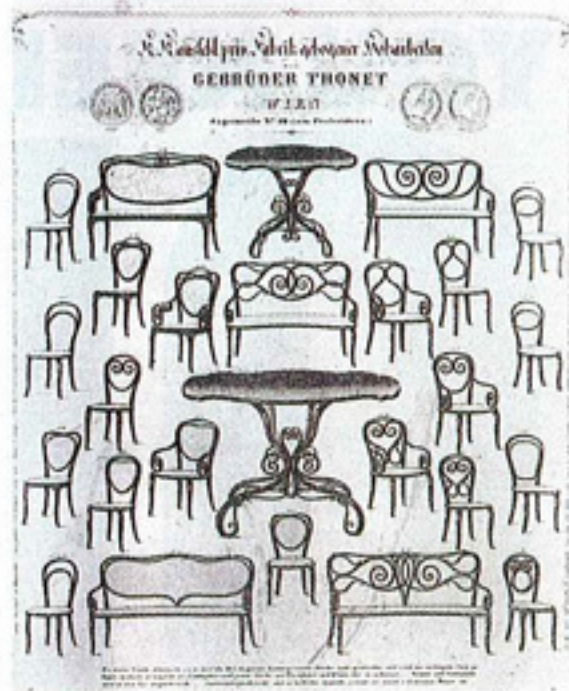


began experimenting in the 1830s with the bending and laminating of wood to produce delicate and lightweight Biedermeier design, did the process begin to achieve its industrial potential.

At the Koblenz fair in 1841, Thonet's experiments came to the attention of Klemens, Prince von Metternich, a native Rhinelander and foreign minister of the Austrian empire. Metternich persuaded the 45-year-old Thonet to come to Vienna in 1842, at the outset of what proved to be a decade of fruitful advances in production techniques. In May 1849, Michael Thonet set up a company with his sons Franz, Michael, August, Josef, and Jakob, which began producing Thonet furniture in quantity, notably the famous No. 4 chair that Madame Daum used to furnish her fashionable Viennese café. This remarkable chair was the progenitor of a series of generic café and restaurant chairs culminating in model No. 14, with its perfectly round seat and frame—and made of only six pieces of bent birch.

DOS AND DON'TS

- **DO VISIT MUSEUMS** and examine well-documented pieces before you buy.
- **DO VISIT LIBRARIES** to check Thonet catalogue reprints to determine dates of old models.
- **DON'T** fall for pieces that are impossibly perfect. (Look for wear on the legs near the floor, on arm and back rests.)
- **DO** remember that a few weeks' controlled neglect in the open air can replicate the effect of decades of wear.
- **DO** make sure that recaning has been done traditionally.
- **DO** verify labels. Thonet labels are sometimes removed from run-of-the-mill models, "distressed," and applied to copies of more desirable pieces by lesser manufacturers.



Thonet's 1859 catalogue.

Thonet exhibited at other fairs with success, winning a "prize medal" at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. He also won a bronze medal at the London International Exhibition over a decade later, when motifs from the Crystal Palace's glazing found their way into the exhibited chairs.

In 1853 Michael Thonet transferred the family business to his sons; by 1859, Gebrüder Thonet (Thonet Brothers) was turning out thousands of No. 14 chairs. In 1862, Gebrüder Thonet marketed its first rocker; by the end of the century Emperor Franz Josef was running the Austro-Hungarian em-

pire from a Thonet armchair, and President William McKinley worked from a bentwood chair in the White House.

In 1869 the Thonet family's patent for bending wood expired, and the market was flooded by innumerable firms, chief among them J. & J. Kohn. Most are now forgotten, but all readily imitated Thonet's models and achieved a measure of the firm's success. Nonetheless, when Michael Thonet died in 1871, his pioneering work was finished.

The factories that made his furniture were as efficient and flexible as the designs they produced. In the 1850s, Thonet sited two factories near beech forests in Moravia (in the present Czech Republic), and when supplies of wood ran out, the factories were relocated to be near another large source of timber—in this case, in Hungary. The exquisite ease of mechanical production enabled the factories to employ low-paid, unskilled peasant labor readily available in rural central and eastern Europe.

Thonet designs created an



In its catalogue for 1873, Gebrüder Thonet showed several tables and consoles made of bent solid wood, not laminates.

aesthetic revolution that came to dominate the market. The vast majority of cheap mass-produced furniture in the mid-19th century was massive, crudely made, and designed to emulate expensive pieces. The radical new bentwood designs were lean and graceful, and quite devoid of marquetry, carving, or elaborate painted effects.

The efficient lines of this furniture were the consequence of the manufacturing process: an undulant arm curled under to connect with a seat rail; a curvilinear side rail connected the other elements to promote stability. This economical and logical use of materials was most brilliantly achieved in Thonet's early designs, and is still evident in many present-day designs. To produce bentwood, machines

turned long rods of wood that were steamed and bent by unskilled workers into cast-iron molds. The consequent reduction of materials, time, and labor translated into lower prices—a major incentive to consumers.

Then, at the turn of the century, a second period of remarkable creative vitality opened in Vienna, which had evolved into an epicenter of progressive design and architecture. Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, and others gravitated to Vienna, where they championed the cause of progressive taste. Curiously, a sleek armchair designed anonymously for Thonet around this time (shortly after 1904), No. 9, has often been credited to Le Corbusier, who revived interest in it

Left: catalogue page, 1904. Child's chair **below** was designed in the 1860s; this one was probably made in the '70s. **Below right:** Designed by Le Corbusier? No, but he appreciated No. 9's Modernist lines.

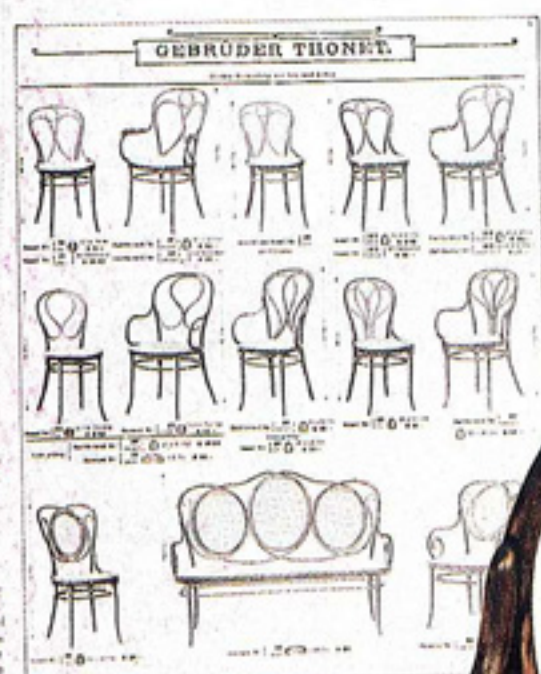


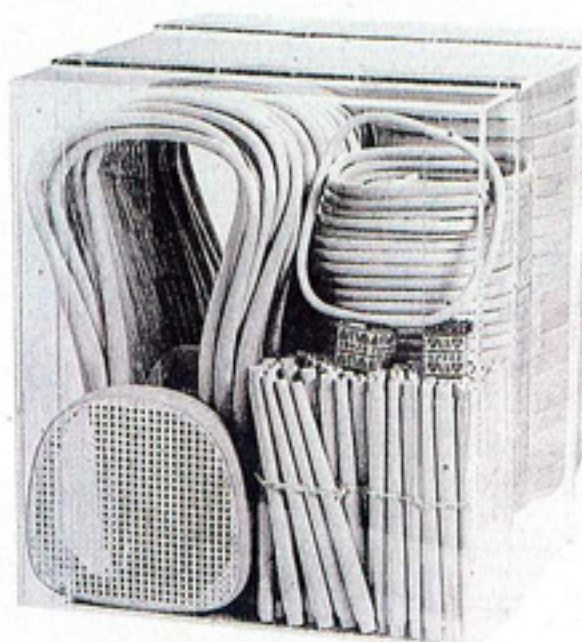
Figure 2.17
Page 50 of Gebrüder Thonet's catalogue, 1904 (© 2000, p. 50)



WHERE TO GET THONET

Every second-hand dealer has a bit of Thonet. But for vintage pieces:

- **BARRY FRIEDMAN, LTD.**, New York City; 212-794-8950. *Architect-designed, after 1900.*
- **STEPHAN AND PAUL ASENBAUM**, Kunst und Antiquitäten, Vienna, Austria; 1 431-512-2847. *German decorative arts of the 19th and early 20th centuries.*
- **SOTHEBY'S**, New York City; 212-606-7000. *Consult Barbara Deisroth, their specialist. The finest Thonet comes to the auction houses, particularly pieces with strong designer provenances.*
- **CHRISTIE'S**, New York City; 212-546-1000. *Talk to Nancy McClelland. Here, too, pieces are in superlative condition.*



Thirty-six Thonet chairs packed for shipment

HOW MUCH TO PAY

Maybe 85 percent of the Thonet you see on the market dates from 1890 onwards. This is because the period when bentwood knew its greatest commercial success happened to coincide with Art Nouveau, a style announced in the curlicues of bentwood. Hence, great rarities like the No. 1 rocker from the 1860s will fetch \$10,000 to \$12,000 retail (about half that at auction). The same model, c. 1895, will cost \$2,500. (An early Biedermeier-style Thonet has fetched \$45,000 to \$50,000.) An 1890s center table will run you \$3,800-\$3,900; a three- or four-piece suite, post-1900, goes for \$15,000 to \$18,000 retail. A console, \$3,600.

by using it in all his rooms in the early '20s—testimony to its avant-garde design.

But the company that capitalized on this historic shift was Thonet's major competitor, J. & J. Kohn, then under the artistic direction of Gustav Siegel. This body of modern Viennese design, which Kohn effectively utilized, had a brief heyday—from the turn of the century until the First World War—but it took the design world by storm with its radical architect-designed furnishings.

With production numbers historically in the millions, a collectors' market has been slow to develop except for a few important turn-of-the-century designs bearing a Viennese provenance. While the market for late-19th- and 20th-century decorative arts exploded in the 1980s, and has retained much of its vigor into the '90s, bentwood has not undergone a comparable growth in price or visibility. It remains underrecognized, underappreciated, and a great bargain for anyone interested in collecting it or living with it. Auction houses maintain the broadest market for the finest Thonet along with a few international dealers—primarily through private solicitation of museums and collectors. The story of Thonet? The story of the transformation of a Biedermeier cabinetmaker into a pioneering designer and industrialist. ♣

