

Noted as Invitation 168

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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THONET CHAIRS AT MUSEUM TRACE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN FURNITURE DESIGN

An exhibition of chairs manufactured by Thonet Brothers, Inc., 19th-century pioneers in mass produced bentwood furniture and outstanding leaders in the development of tubular steel furniture, both revolutionary innovations in modern design, will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from August 12 through October 4. The exhibition is being presented by the Museum on the occasion of the company's 100th anniversary in the United States.

Thirteen chairs, dating from 1836 to 1952, have been selected to show how Thonet Brothers created anonymous simple shapes, devoid of the craftsman's intricate detail but with a refinement and elegance suited to the material and production methods. Six chairs show the development of the Thonet bentwood chair from the early experimental model made by Michael Thonet in Germany in 1836 to the light, inexpensive cafe chair that was produced by the million and became familiar furniture throughout the world. Five tubular steel chairs, designed in the 1920s by such leaders of the modern movement as Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier, and manufactured by the Thonets are shown to illustrate the company's role in developing this new idea in furniture design. Molded plywood chairs designed by Joe Adkinson and an adjustable plywood and leather armchair by Ilmari Tapiovaara from the Museum of Modern Art's 1950 Low Cost Furniture Competition and produced by Thonet Brothers, are shown to indicate the new design directions being explored by this enterprising firm.

The exhibition is under the direction of Greta Daniel, Assistant Curator in the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design. The colorful installation is by the noted Italian architect and designer, Enrico Peressutti. Each chair in the exhibition is displayed on a low round platform covered with felt in brilliant colors including purple, lemon, tangerine, red and green. On the gallery walls enlarged photographs from old Thonet catalogs show additional bentwood and metal furniture. In the center of the gallery a large stand displays documentary material and photographs of Thonet furniture in homes in tropical countries, Europe and the United States. Above the display table is a 27' tree bent in a spiral and a 5' molded piece of plywood illustrating how these materials can be handled.

The earliest chair in the exhibition is a model Michael Thonet, founder of the company, made in 1836 in his cabinetmaker's shop in Germany. In this model wood

veneers were bent to form parts of the chair, thus producing a much lighter piece of furniture than the traditional chair carved from solid wood.

As veneer proved impractical, Michael Thonet then experimented with bending solid wood. Five bentwood chairs perfected after he moved to Austria and formed a partnership with his five sons, are shown in the exhibition. One of the early bentwood models, an elaborate bentwood armchair, a rocking chair and the most famous Thonet bentwood chair, the 1876 cafe or restaurant side chair and its present counterpart are on view. As these chairs were screwed together they could be shipped flat and assembled at little cost. Manufacturing these chairs and other bentwood furniture became a large industry for Thonet Brothers during the latter part of the 19th century. They built their factories near beechwood forests, set up a world wide sales organization and shipped this furniture around the world.

The bentwood armchair used by Le Corbusier in a room setting designed for the Paris Exposition of 1925 is also shown. When he selected this chair M. Le Corbusier said: "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 possesses nobility."

The next five chairs in the exhibition illustrate the development of tubular steel, a revolutionary idea in furniture design. Thonet Brothers obtained major production rights for these chairs designed in the 1920s by outstanding architects and thus participated in the commercial development of a new concept of design. The experimental steel armchair designed by Marcel Breuer in 1925 is shown and the tubular steel cantilevered chair of 1928 which became the prototype for thousands of modifications throughout the world which are now used in kitchens, restaurants and as outdoor furniture. A revolving armchair designed by Le Corbusier in 1927 is shown and a lounge chair also designed in 1927. Also included is Mies van der Rohe's famous "S" chair, a cantilevered resilient chair designed in 1926.

The most recent designs now being manufactured by Thonet Brothers which are shown in the exhibition are chairs by Joe Adkinson and Ilmari Tapiovaara. Mr. Adkinson's chair is of molded plywood; Mr. Tapiovaara's chair is an adjustable plywood and leather chair.

The chairs in the exhibition are from collections in Vienna and Paris, Thonet Industries, Inc., and from the Design Collection of the Museum of Modern Art.