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NeoCon | Groupe Lacasse - **Showroom 1042**



Thonet Reconnects to Legacy Collection

THE HISTORY OF THONET'S INNOVATION BEGAN MORE THAN 170 YEARS AGO WHEN MICHAEL THONET REGISTERED A PATENT FOR BENDING SOLID WOOD. BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

A handful of furniture makers have cashed in on the legacy of past products, trotting out the names of important designers who have created furniture for them in decades gone by, regardless of whether they continue to honor that history today.

Thonet is a brand that has

avoided this revisionist history, despite its legacy being able to stand up to any in the industry. Arguably, Thonet's history is the most important in terms of innovation and design. The company's designers included Otto Wagner (Postparkassen Stool), Marcel Breuer (Wassily chair), Mies Van der Rohe (double canti-

lever chair), Le Corbusier (haise lounge) and Bruno Weil (1294 chair and Model 1177).

The history of Thonet's innovation began more than 170 years ago when Michael Thonet registered a patent for bending solid wood. This simple act set in motion a series of design, material and process innovations that

inspired many of the designers who became icons of the Modern age.

For NeoCon, Thonet is returning to its roots and introducing the Legacy Collection. But instead of simply retreading classic products, the brand is making classic designs new again through the use of the latest materials and furniture construction methods. Inspired by Bruno Weil's bent plywood collection for Thonet in 1945, the Legacy Collection uses the same bent plywood manufacturing methods of that era.

Designed to facilitate multi-purpose, collaborative space in corporate, education, hospitality and health care environments, the Legacy Collection includes chairs, barstools, personal desks, dining tables and community tables at various heights. It is a modern twist on midcentury modern design.

Although plywood has a very ancient lineage, today's plywood technology allows Thonet to bring ultra modern aesthetic, environmental and functional benefits to the Legacy Collection. It will be available in numerous species, including maple, birch, ash, oak, walnut and cherry.

The design process for the Legacy Collection began last year when Thonet commissioned Dorsey Cox — a very successful Thonet designer during the '80's — to create a new furniture collection that would pay homage to the company's design legacy.

"The brief was simple to say, but very challenging to do," says Seamus Bateson, president and

chief executive officer of CF Group. "First, stay true to the Bauhaus idea of 'less is more.' Next, use a very modern material, plywood, and ensure that the products can be 100 percent made in the USA. Lastly, give it the aesthetic qualities of a 21st century classic."

Thonet couldn't have re-engineered the Legacy Collection without innovative new products. Today's plywood technology allowed the company to create the early Thonet designs to develop features not viable at that time. Thonet's 1177 and 1294 chairs, designed by Bruno Weil, were the bridge to the new collection, but the company wanted a thinner profile, a less "clunky" construction, leaner, yet stronger than the original and BIFMA compliant.

"We preferred soft, rounded edges to deliver greater ergonomic comfort and a smooth, sensuous, tactile effect, yet we wanted to retain the simple architectural lines of the original," Bateson says, adding other key objectives were for the new collection to be lighter in weight, easier to move and cost less to ship.

Plywood has become an ultra-modern material, says Bateson, noting it is being used more and more in construction since it is more fire resistant than steel and can be used to create substantial buildings. The Stadthaus in London is 75 percent plywood and a new 12-story building made of plywood is going up in Portland, Oregon.

It isn't that Thonet abandoned plywood as a material for furni-

ture as much as style and fashion changed. Aluminum, plastic and solid wood furniture took over. But the market is moving back toward plywood. "There was a fashion trend away from (plywood), and we were caught up in it as much as anyone," Bateson says. "In recent years, as mid-century modern furniture has (made a comeback), plywood has become more important. Every design intern in the world knows that plywood has become an important construction material."

Seating in the Legacy Collection combines comfort and classic design. While retaining the basic lines of the original design from the 1940s, the back and undersides of the plywood components have gently rounded profiles that offer greatly improved ergonomic comfort. Chairs and barstools feature finished wood seats or an upholstered seat option. The barstools and bar-height tables have metal foot rails.

A personal desk is available with casters. "The Legacy Collection uses modern design and manufacturing techniques to refine Thonet's timeless classics and builds on Thonet's legacy of bringing reasonably priced, beautifully designed products to the commercial market, while staying true to the simplicity and beauty of the originals," Bateson says.

It is worth looking at Thonet's history to better understand what the brand is doing today.

After patenting his bentwood process 170 years ago, Michael

Thonet established a furniture company, Gebrüder Thonet, or in English, Thonet Brothers, which later was shortened to Thonet. The company was based in Austria, but quickly became well-known around the world for producing sturdy, low cost, highly functional furniture.

Thonet's strategic advantage was that his patented bending process provided the means to create the first mass-produced line of furniture that was beautiful and unique. Prior to Thonet's innovation, all furniture was handmade by artisans who crafted each piece one at a time. This costly method of production meant well-designed furniture was out of reach for most consumers.

While the first patent awarded to Thonet was in France in 1841, his company was founded in 1830, and his first chair on record dates back to 1836. Named the Boppard Chair after Thonet's birthplace, Boppard, Germany, this masterpiece was manufactured from laminated veneer, known today as plywood. However, this type of plywood chair did not establish Thonet

as a household name — it was instead the solid bentwood products introduced years later. Arguably the most popular chair created in bentwood was the No. 14 chair, which didn't reach the market until 1859, many years after the original patent registration had been awarded.

During the late 19th century, many bentwood furniture designs were created by Thonet, with the help of unknown artists and artisans, who received little or no recognition for their innovations. However, by the turn of the century, a new design trend had emerged, and furniture manufacturers recruited renowned artists and architects of the time to create innovative new products. Throughout the early 20th century, the volume, expertise and reach of the Thonet Company's manufacturing capabilities attracted many of the world's leading designers, listed earlier in this story.

In 1941 as demand for their furniture in the U.S. continued to grow, and as WWII disrupted their European markets and material supplies, Thonet sent several experienced family members to start production in Statesville, North Carolina. Soon after they added locations in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and New York City, where the factory was outfitted with state-of-the-art, radio-frequency bending equipment to produce the highest quality plywood furniture parts available at that time.

The idea of using bent plywood to produce chairs became increasingly popular during the middle of the 20th Century. The technology was evolving rapidly due to the demands of the war effort and the subsequent post WWII construction boom.

There were several iconic furniture designers, notably Alvar Aalto, Gilbert Rohde and Charles Eames, who worked with bent plywood at this time. It is unclear who was really first to use bent plywood for seating during this period. However, it is indisputable that the process traces back to Thonet's patent in the mid-1800s, more than 100 years before anyone else.

Now fast forward to more recent times. In 1987 Shelby Williams, a company now owned by CFCGroup, purchased Thonet's business in the U.S., and by doing so made it independent from the European parent company. This enabled it to continue to make Thonet furniture in the U.S.

Thonet's U.S. workforce and management took great pride in honoring the company's rich heritage and traditions while bringing an American sensibility and practicality to chair making. Many new models, including 1250, 1311, 1312, 1177, 2001, and 1318, were introduced between 1945 and 1955 and became staples in universities, libraries and restaurants in every state. Now, in the early years of the 21st Century, Thonet pays homage to Michael Thonet's essential and influential role in midcentury modern furniture with the introduction of the Legacy Collection designed by the American furniture designer Cox, and manufactured completely in the U.S. **BoF**

