

all photographs - alexandre georges, unless otherwise indicated

Museum of Modern Art - New-York
 "THONET" Exhibition.

Enrico Peressutti, - 1952

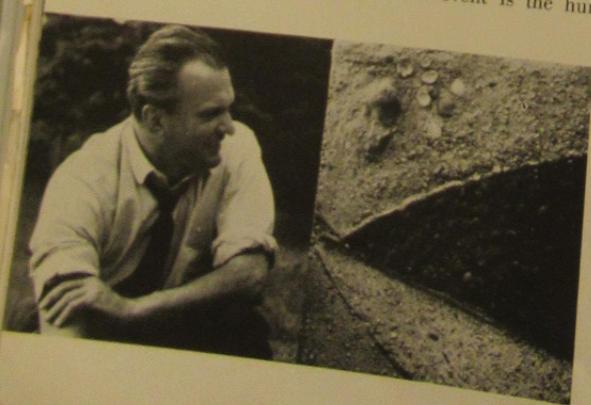
In every part of the world where people sit on raised seats instead of on the floor, millions—for more than three generations—have planted their backs against the familiar wooden loops of the standard Thonet "Vienna" chair . . . without bothering to give them a second glance. The Thonet has always been a mere utility, anonymous as a coffee mug, no more to be admired than a thick glass tumbler. When a proprietor bought it for his beer hall or restaurant it was not for Art's sake, but because there was no cheaper, lighter, or more durable chair on the market.

Yet this commonplace relic, so redolent of dingy libraries and Victorian ante-rooms—plus several of its prototypes, variations, and descendants—has been placed on view in New York's glassily elegant Museum of Modern Art. Moreover, the Museum went to the trouble of getting Enrico Peressutti, of the Italian architectural team of Belgiojoso, Peressutti, and Rogers, to design the exhibition. The occasion for this event is the hun-

dreth anniversary of Thonet Brothers, the firm manufacturing the chairs. But the *reason* for it is something else. Peressutti's lighthearted setting helps to explain that with the clarity of a revelation—important not only for what it tells us about Thonet as a technological innovator and industrial pioneer, which is well known, but for what it tells us about him as an artist, which has been relatively neglected.

As an appropriate accompaniment to this review, we recommend the official foreword by the Museum's Assistant Curator of Architecture and Design, Greta Daniel, reprinted on pages 156-158. Another article on Thonet, written by the late Francis de N. Schroeder in the May 1947 issue of this magazine is unfortunately available only to readers who have access to back copies.

The Thonet success story is basically ironic. Michael Thonet (1790-1871) was born the son of an humble Rhenish cabinet-maker and trained as a craftsman. His life's work (Continued on Page 86)

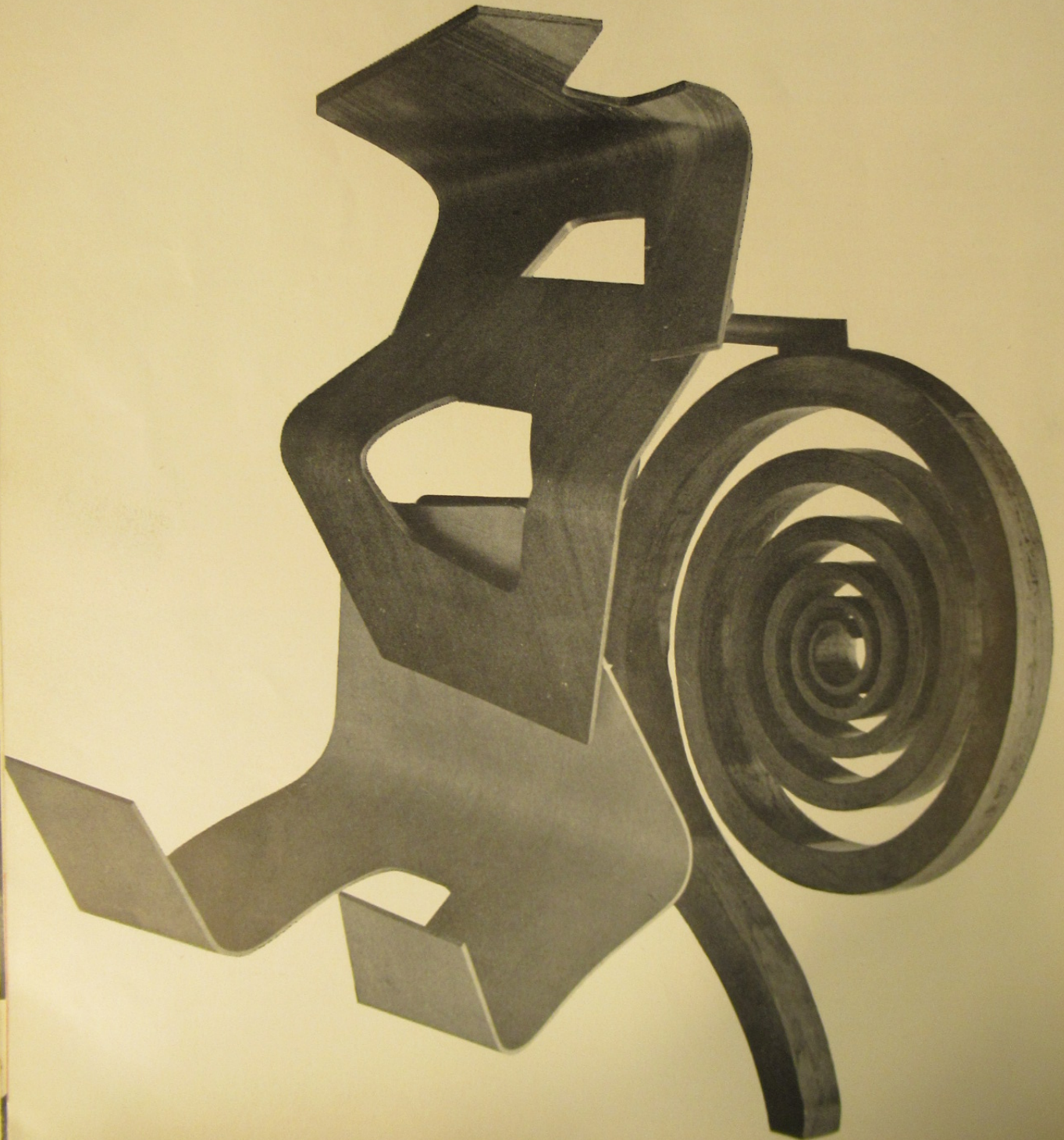


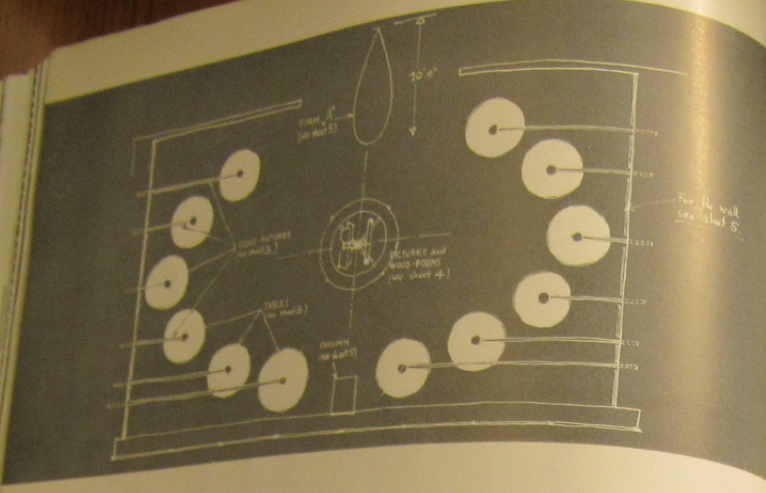
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Enrico Peressutti

Architect Peressutti, with his colleagues Belgiojoso and Rogers of Milan, has designed skyscrapers, interiors, and a famously stark war monument. He has also taught architecture at M.I.T. and Princeton, and is completing a spectacular New York store for Olivetti Corporation, a firm as noted in its field for progressiveness in design as Thonet.

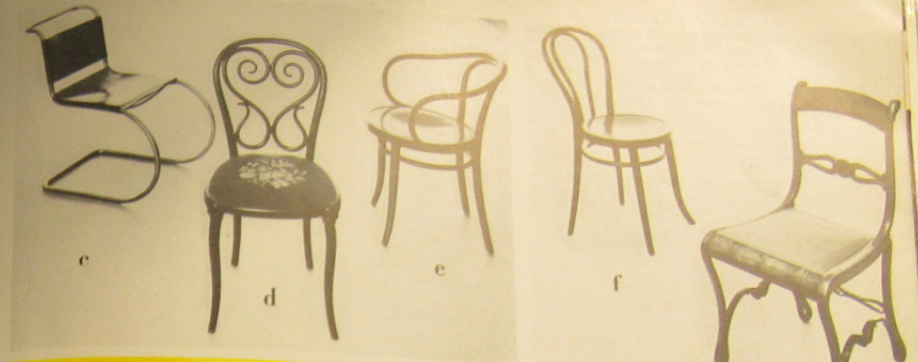
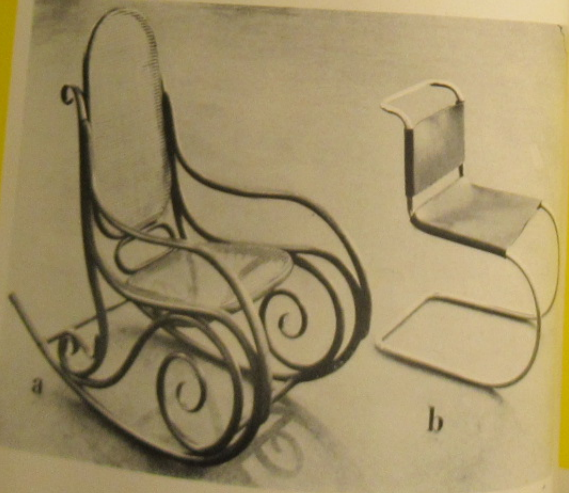
Held aloft like massive banners in the center of the exhibition are two abstract sculptures which turn out not to be sculpture at all, but examples of technical Thonet prowess. The great coil is a 17-foot tree laminated, steamed, and subdued originally for an international exposition in the 1880's, while the slim-sheered zig-zag shows the finesse attainable in molded laminates for chair forms today. Birch, wahnul, and mahogany sections are screwed together.



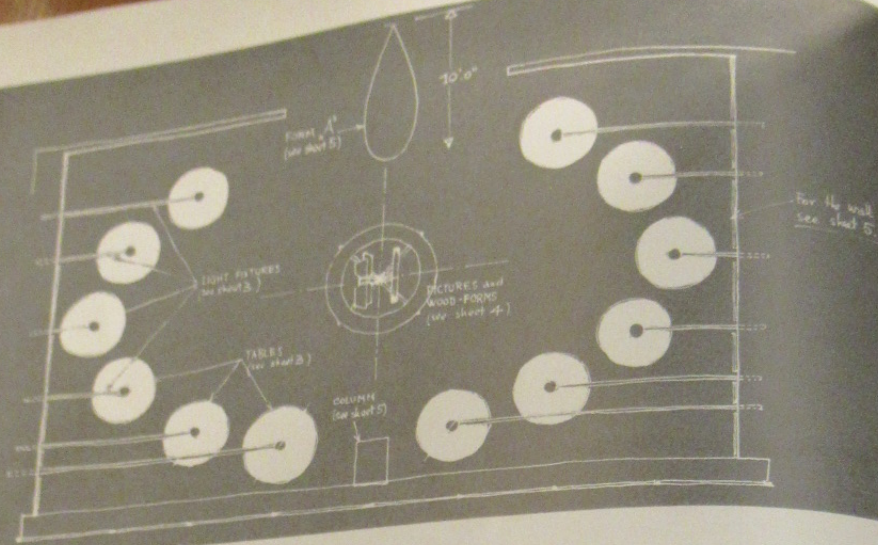


The circles of display tables shown in plan above are the magnets of the exhibition, the models which they hold being assured of attention by spotlights held out from the wall on horizontal pipes, and also by the fact that the felt table covers are the only color in the predominately white, gray, and black room. Their carnival hues do not compete with the furniture, which is primarily linear, and the felt prevents reflections from spotlights.

The more important Thonet's, arranged not chronologically, but in terms of design ability. Below: The racy grace of an 1880 rocker (a) parallels Mies's metal cantilever chair of 1926 (b). Next page: The Mies chair (c) is compared to Thonet's Cafe Daun veneer chair of 1884 (d) and Le Corbusier's favorite 1870 bentwood armchair (e) for sheer calligraphic verve. The 1876 version of the famous "Vienna" bentwood side chair (f) is only slightly different from the 1953 version (not shown), comprising what is probably the most widely sat on standard chair in the world. The hairpin-legged (g), Thonet's first mass-produced chair, is surprisingly sturdy and light, though made between 1836 and 1840. Revolving steel tube chair (h) and ingenious two-part reclining chair (i) are both by Le Corbusier. Cantilever chair (j) designed by Breuer in 1925 is a classic today, though his (k) of 1923 may strike most observers as an interesting period piece.

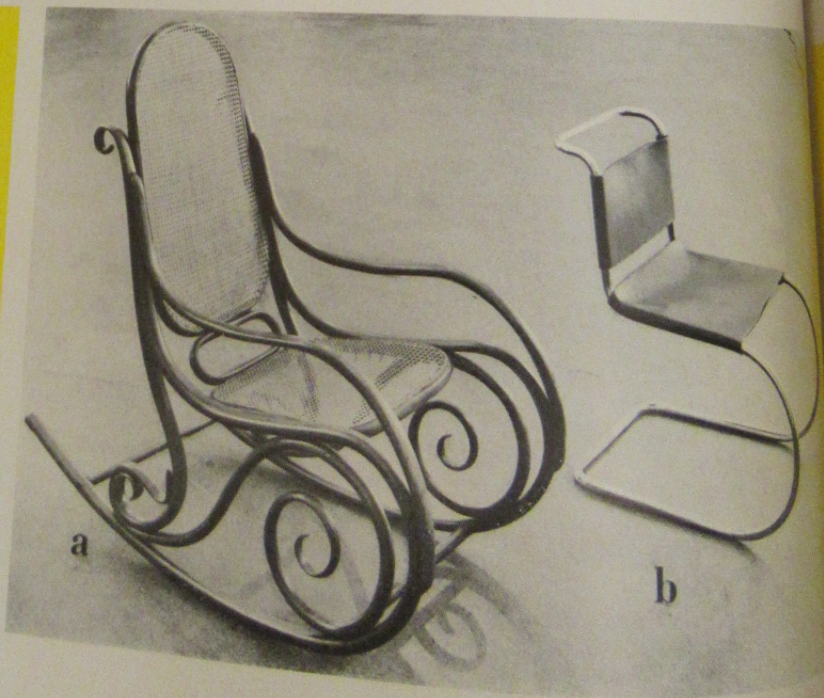


The Thonet's of this generation are taking up where Thonet left off in experiments with molded laminated plywood. Ilmari Tapiovaara's knockdown armchair of 1949 (l) and Joe Adkinson's side chair of 1952 (m) are virtually distinct from their predecessors because of the shift from bent tubing to laminated sheets cut out and molded.



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c



d



e



f



g



h



i



j



k



l



m

The designs of this generation are being set where Thonet left off in experiments with welded reinforced aluminum. Oscar Egg's innovative structure of 1929 and the Japanese iron chair of 1930 are closely related from their fundamental because of the great stress being falling in horizontal planes not vertical and radial.



was to develop production line furniture that eliminated the craftsman entirely—with inventions to laminate, steam, and bend rods of wood along the grain into light, resilient frames that would not crack like straightgrained wood carved into equivalent shapes.

The exhibition spans more than a century, from pieces Thonet made decades before founding the firm he named for his five sons, the Thonet Brothers, to pieces their sons commissioned. These are by great names indeed—Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Breuer, Tapiovaara. The extraordinary thing is that Thonet's own style remains dominant, even when the basic material changes from wood to metal.

It is the singular nature of this style that the disarmingly simple exhibition dramatizes, with an almost musical integration between the setting and the models. Thonet's calligraphic sculpture



leaps, coils, and spirals through the luminous space whose architectural faults—close side walls and disproportionate height—Peressutti has overcome.

He has designed a black-framed white void the focus of which is a shockingly colorful oval ring of low, round disks. The disks are tables, covered each with a different, vibrating-hued felt on which stands a Thonet chair or chaise. The height of the white side walls is divided by thick, black strokes of paint into two levels of panels, the lower six feet high, the upper seven, and the horizontal division is emphasized by being used as a base line for long gray metal pipes that lunge horizontally to support spotlights spang over the display tables. Spectators more than six feet tall can skirt them easily, but they form a trellis that serves as a psychological canopy relieving the room's excessive height.

On the black-framed white side walls float linear black silhouettes—drawings and photographs of Thonet models. Some of them "bleed" from one panel to the next, disregarding the vertical dividers. The effect is that they seem to hover behind the panels, dissolving the walls. The bulk of the room's two columns is negated by a reverse trick—white Thonet silhouettes swoop on their black backgrounds.

Here, for once, we can see that Michael Thonet produced forms that were not only minimal, functional, and well proportioned, but dashing as well. No designer since has turned curves with such verve, except Mies, in the most beautiful of the metal chairs, and it is a testament to Thonet's influence that this wonderful S is not a general characteristic of Mies's. Perhaps we now are too self-conscious to turn such unabashed curlicues or fling such whiplashes and Spencerian flourishes.

In any case, this inventive technician and successful businessman was one of the handful of genuine "originals" in the world of design. And his personality still dominates his descendants who, though developing other materials and other methods, still aim for his incisive artistic effects. Which is a very good thing, now that we are all so preoccupied with technology anyhow.—O.G.