The bentwood furniture of the Thonet variety has long been renowned for its quiet elegance and graceful lines. Its position in the history of design is secure; indeed, some of its types are considered classics. It is particularly appreciated from the viewpoint of industrial design, which was emerging in the mid-nineteenth century as a link between the aesthetic idea and the technical solution, in objects of everyday use produced by industrial methods. The Thonet furniture originated in Central Europe at a time when decorative craftsmanship was in retreat; yet it stood so strongly against the current that it was recently characterized as "a hitherto unsurpassed phenomenon of modernity" because it is "the most perfect example of industrial design in all respects. Its form is functional and yet fully based on the technology of production; its aesthetic value is absolute, its design timeless and tolerant to the forms of the ambient environment; its price makes it generally accessible."1 The handicraft and later the industrial production of bentwood furniture based on Thonet's invention of an original technology of wood bending is the subject of this essay.

Michael Thonet was born on 2 July 1796 in Boppard On the Rhine. His father was a tanner, but Michael trained as a cabinet maker and opened his own workshop. He began by experimenting with the replacement of solid wood with glue and pressed veneers; then he elaborated his initial idea to the degree that he could bend wood glued of very thin laminations into all imaginable shapes to permanent effect.

Thonet tried in 1841 to obtain patent rights for his invention in France, Great Britain, and Belgium, assuming that their sale

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* This is a modified version of an essay in Czech, "Kancelér Metternich a vynálezce Michael Thonet," that originally appeared in Dějiny věd a techniky (Prague), 21, No. 1 (1988).
would bring him sufficient funds for the development of production at home. Due to ignorance or underestimation, however, the demand in other countries was negligible. Meanwhile, in Boppard and its environs his furniture was becoming very popular because of its originality. Thonet also made beds and sofas, but the most widely known product of this early period (1836-1842) was the so-called Boppard chair.

The further life of this master cabinet maker was influenced by chance. In 1841, when the Chancellor of Austria, Prince Klemens Wenzel Metternich-Winneburg (1773-1859), was staying at his castle, Johannisberg, in the Rhineland, an exhibition was held in Koblenz, Metternich's native town, in which Michael Thonet displayed his furniture. The Chancellor visited the exhibition in August 1841 and was so struck by Thonet's work that he summoned him to his castle. At Johannisberg, Thonet explained his production process to Metternich in detail and showed him some of his other products.

Metternich immediately grasped the importance of Thonet's invention and invited the furniture maker to accompany him to Vienna, where he promised to recommend him to the Imperial Court. To save Thonet travelling expenses, the Chancellor permitted him to ride with the Government courier from Frankfurt am Main. Thonet accepted the offer. He arrived in Vienna in the evening of 7 May 1842 and the very next day was received by Metternich in his seat, the State Chancellery. As Thonet wrote to his family, the furniture he had brought with him "pleased the Prince extraordinarily; he spoke in my presence and that of the majority of Court officials about our affairs with such enthusiasm that he did not let anybody get a word in edgewise. He rocked to and fro in the chair; he took the cane he had received from me in Johannisberg and displayed its strength, contrasting it with its slenderness. He could explain the process as if he had worked with us...."3

2. Metternich lived with his family in the building of the State Chancellery that housed both the official rooms of the Chancellery and the Chancellor's representative, which were linked with his family residence. He stayed there regularly from the autumn until 15 May (his birthday), after which he moved with his family to his private villa on the Rennweg for the remainder of the year. Cf. Josef Karl Mayr, Geschichte der österreichischen Staatkanzlei im Zeitalter des Fürsten Metternich (Wien: Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, 1935), esp. the chapter, "Das Gebäude der Staatskanzlei."