

## Bent chairs as poster inspiration

GRZEGORZ WIELOCH

Faculty of Wood Technology, Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, LAB-TECH Radomsko

**Abstract:** *Bent chairs as poster inspiration.* In 2020, an exhibition of posters based on seating equipment was presented at the National Museum in Poznań. The exhibition referred to the chair and the metamorphosis it underwent, that apart from the function of utility furniture, it became a part of art. Equipment basically used for sitting - to which we are used to everyday practice of its use, it is an indispensable element of the interior design of apartments, offices, waiting rooms, schools, stadiums, health clinics, shopping malls, cinemas, theatres and other public places. The posters on display showed chairs with a structure based on bent beech elements. Some of them accurately represented the types of bent chairs currently in production. A number of other chairs had bent elements in their design, e.g. backrests, legs or armrests, allowing for economical serial production of elements. The exhibition included works advertising films, theatre and opera performances, exhibition and party posters. They are mostly works by Polish designers.

*Keywords:* Bent chairs, poster

### INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Museum of Applied Arts, a branch of the National Museum in Poznań, organized an exhibition of posters on the theme: "Seat-Chair- Throne", devoted to seating equipment (Fig. 1). The posters on display came from the museum's collection. The leitmotif of the exhibition was seating equipment - chairs (Przymus 2020).



Figure 1. A poster advertising the exhibition of seats in the National Museum in Poznań



Figure 2. A monument to a bent chair standing in the Warsaw shopping malls of the Centrum

A wide spectrum of meanings related to the motif of a seat, chair or throne provokes reflections of a philosophical nature, but also allows you to get to know the designers' inventiveness and the variety of creative artistic concepts presented. A common object then transforms surprisingly with an intriguing metaphor, and subjecting it to expressive deformation increases the dramaturgy of the viewer's reception. An example of such a complex

treatment is the statue of a bent chair at the back of the Centrum department stores in Warsaw (Fig. 2). The chair motif turned out; so vivid and dynamic, and therefore attractive, that graphic designers often used it in visualizing the topics they undertook.

## HISTORICAL PICTURE OF THE CHAIR

A chair as a piece of furniture has been present in human life for centuries, in every culture and on every continent. During this time it took on various forms and historical varieties; starting from the ancient stone throne in Knossos, through the imperial, papa and royal throne, decorative lounge and cafe armchairs and chairs, as well as simple seating equipment used in a peasant cottage. In its long history, the chair-seat has fallen into the common consciousness primarily as a symbol of power and a sign of the highest dignity, rank, dignity and authority (Fiell 2013, 2015).

In antiquity, the chair - the throne was a seat for gods, pharaohs, kings or people from the highest levels (e. g. the throne of St. Peter or Charlemagne. It also gave the possibility of various applications as e.g. office chair, medical chair, treatment chair, rocking chair, tourist folding chair, and even a catapult chair for a pilot and an electric chair (Charytonowicz 2007).

This simple object adapted in its form to the needs and customs that changed over the years. At the same time, the ambiguous symbolism was created by new chair structures evoking many associations. Thus, a chair can stand for power, position, prestige, power and weakness, comfort and convenience, but also pain and suffering, and even death. The complex symbolism of the chair-seat-throne inspired artists from many fields, many examples of which can be found in the visual arts, as well as in literary texts. It could not be missing in poster designs.

At the same time, thanks to their spatial form, they have been the subject of numerous projects that have found the possibility of implementation. The works selected for the exhibition reflected the full range of various artistic solutions and the individual approach of the poster authors to the commission; there are projects based on association, surprise and wit; posters with a concise, purely graphic form that carry a clear, strong message and painting posters; works set in surreal poetics and those whose authors prefer a realistic photographic approach. The discussed exhibition presented 59 most interesting examples of this type of solutions from the Poznań museum collection. They included works advertising films, theatre and opera performances, exhibition and party posters. They are mostly works by Polish designers. Among them there are posters with chairs that had elements bent in such a way that it is easier for the human body to adjust to them. It was popular and still is to engage in the transformation of the image of chairs into numerous stories told with the image, the shape of the chair using the technique of bending wood. Thonet furniture made in the technology developed by him fits perfectly (ART/Power 2012).

Initially, in 1830, Michael Thonet made his furniture from bent, folded and glued elements from 4-5 layers of beech veneer (patent from 1841), which were then veneered with mahogany or walnut. From around 1859, only solid beech wood, less often ash, bent using the Thonet method, was used for production. Combining the lightness, subtlety and smoothness of curvature, the Michael Thonet Konsumstuhl No.14 chair is more commonly known as the Model 14, or cafe chair. The backrest is reinforced by adding a smaller headband. The clean lines of the model contrasted with contemporary furniture overloaded with ornaments. The chair, resulting from its revolutionary process of bending solid beech wood using clamps, metal straps and hot steam, proved attractive for its modest, limited design and affordable price. It was bought in large numbers, especially in cafes and bistros all over Europe (Kostrikov 1982). The early versions were glued, but from the 1860s each chair was assembled from just six pieces held together by ten bolts and two washers. These products achieved the highest sales of any chair ever produced. Widely regarded as the first mass-produced chair and one of the most successful pieces in the history of industrial mass production.

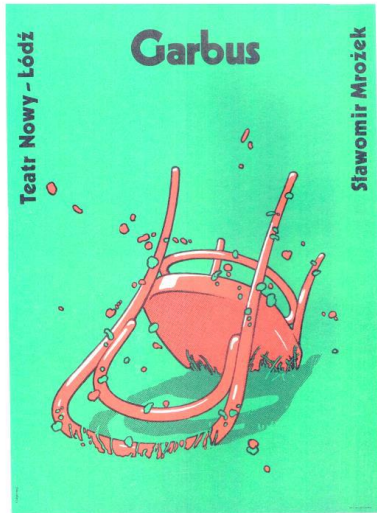


Fig. 3. Waldemar Świeży: *The Hunchback*. Sławomir Mrożek, Łódź 1975



Fig. 4. Exemplary chair with elements bent with the pattern for the chair in Figure 3



Fig. 5. Michał Kliś: *The exhibition of poster and prints* by Michał Kliś. Tychy 1997



Fig. 6. Exemplary chair with elements bent with the pattern for the chair in Figure 3

### CURVED CHAIRS ON POSTER EXPOSURE

A strong, yet light, elegant chair was something special at a time when other furniture designers were able to create curves by hand carving. It aroused the admiration of eminent architects and designers, as well as our poster makers, who portrayed the Thonet chairs No. A-14 (Fig. 3) and A-18 (Fig. 5).

For comparison, a view of the chairs from the factory catalogue (KATALOG Famag 2018), Figures 4 and 6 is provided. With a similar chair base skeleton, the artistic representation of the chair backrests in Figure 3 does not differ from the shape of the backrest in the actual chair A14 (KATALOG Famag 2018). In the second case, the reinforcement of the backrest with an internal bail from the seat itself to the arch of the main backrest differs slightly for the A-18 chair. In this case, the inner headband does not reach the outer support. The artistic treatment of the leg-strengthening hoop also differentiates the poster presentation from reality.

The form of the chair A-14. The above-mentioned backrest arches can be seen in Figure 7, where you can see elements of the backrests coming out of the torsos.



Fig. 7. Marian Nowiński: Problem. Theatre on One Sign. Warszawa 1988

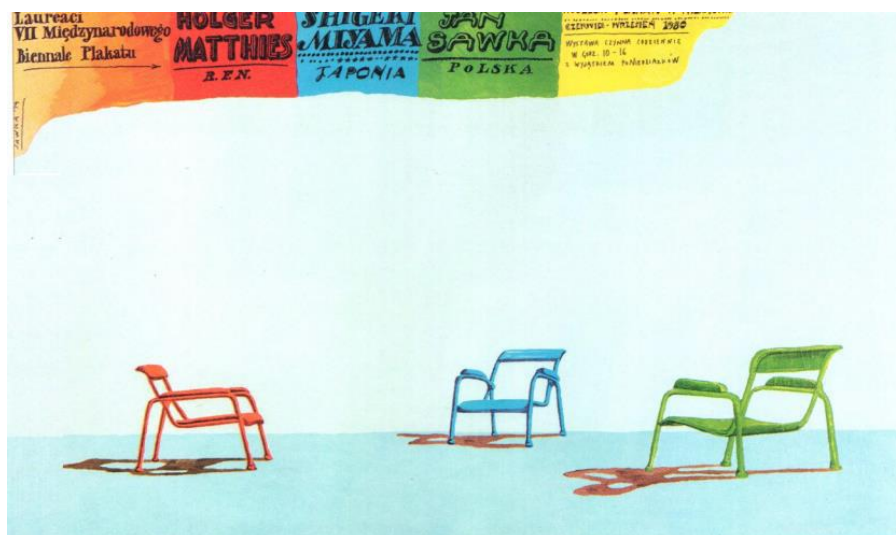


Fig. 8. Jan Sawka: Laureates of the 7th International Poster. Wilanów. 1980

On the poster of Annick Orliange. (Fig. 17) is a chair similar to Thonet bent chairs. Its backrest refers to the classic elements of the chairs discussed earlier. Although the backrest is completely different than, for example, in classic furniture. His eight legs, on the other hand, suggest a chair dance. The curved backrests are shown in Figures 8, 9, 10, 11. On the other hand, bent elements in the form of backs and armrests can be found on posters Figure 15 and 17.

The smooth curvature of the backrest is made from a single piece of wood, along with the back legs of the chair, giving it stability and reducing the number of components. He was convinced by the idea of mass production, but he wanted to create elegant, light and graceful furniture curvi linear shapes. He was looking for ways to bend wood with the aim of recreating the techniques developed by coopers and boat builders. At first he tried to glue together very thin layers of wood, but eventually he invented a method of bending solid beech bars beyond their natural elasticity, using metal clamps and steam. Jan Lenica's chair (Fig. 12) is distinguished by its expressive form, as well as bent legs and a backrest with lamellas. The shapes of the armrests with rounded ends are interesting. Both posters are mysterious which manifests itself in the transformation of the armchair into the form of a cat (Fig. 13) and in an



undefined female person waiting for someone who will want to use the armchair created by her person (Fig. 14).



Fig. 9. Gunter Rambow. Antigone nach Sophokles 1978. Germany

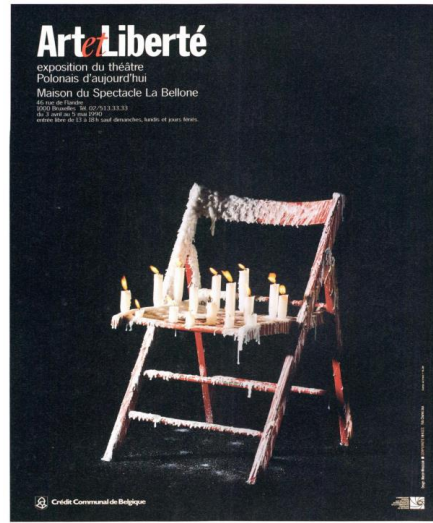


Fig. 10. Marcin Mroszczak: Art and Freedom. Contemporary Polish Theatre Exhibition. Bruxelles 1990 Poland



Fig. 11. World Child in the Centre, Osnabruck. Hamburg 1987



Fig. 12. Jan Lenica: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe 1991

### CURVED ARMCHAIR ON THE POLES

The single chair in the poster exhibition is the rocking chair by Jan Sawka, whose shape is maximally simplified, and both poles dominate it. A cane or palm fiber braid was used for the seat and backrest because it is light and harmonizes with the wood in terms of aesthetics, and the elasticity of the braid increases the comfort of the chair beech wood.

Thonet produced several types of models of such armchairs, most of which had supports in the form of decorative curves. The bent wood method opened up new possibilities for this type of chair, as previously the curves of the poles had to be cut. The rocking chair No.1, built in 1860, with its elaborate curves and hand-woven reed seat and backrest, is the flagship model of Thonet's bent chairs. Their shapes are a counterpoint in interior design, but at the same time they harmonize with the text on the poster and with the literary texts that they announce in the form of, for example, the title of the play (Fig. 12).

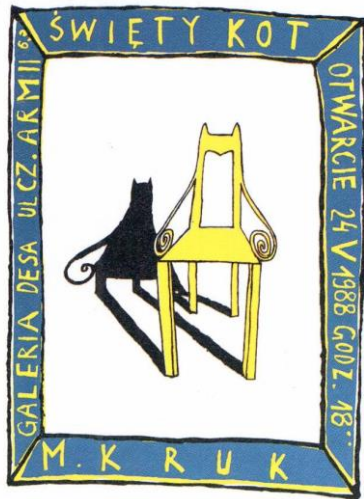


Fig. 13. Piotr Kurka: Holly Cat. M.Kruk, Desa Gallery, Poznań 1988

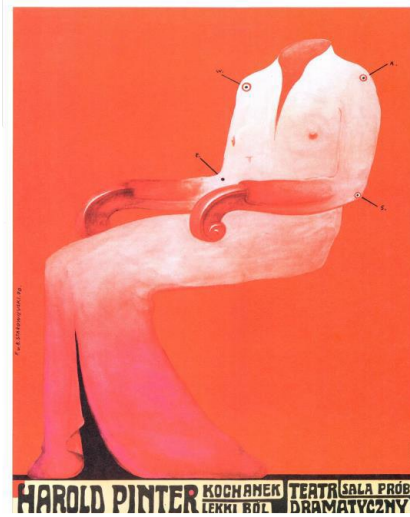


Fig. 14. Franciszek Starowiejski. The Lover. A Sligh Ache Harold Pinter, Warszawa 1970

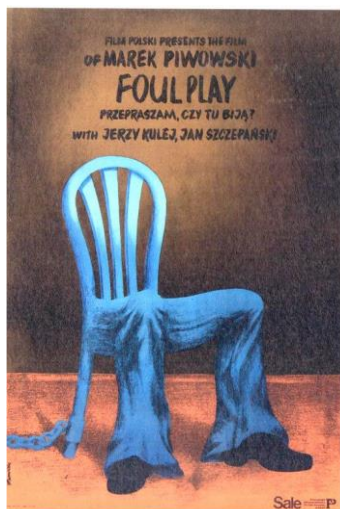


Fig. 15. Tomasz Rumiński, Foul Play. Warszawa 1977. Polska

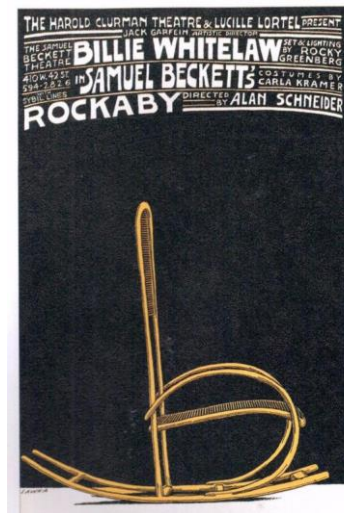


Fig. 16. Jan Sawka., Rockbaby. Samuel Beckett the Harold ClurmanTeatre. Nowy York



Fig. 17. Annick Orliange, Feast of Babigny. Paris 1996



Fig. 18. Poster Workers Theatre in Nowy Sącz, Tadeusz Różewicz. Little stabilization

These works break the everyday experiences and thought patterns of the observer-viewer; they also allow us to see in a new light (without forgetting about the function of the poster) the relations between man and object being viewed (Wilhide 2014). They also allow us to see the chairs used in everyday life in a new light, as well as the interaction between a person and the object used.

Elected works with chairs from the entire exhibition set show that there are many artistic solutions and the individual approach of poster authors to the commission; there are projects based on surprise and wit; posters with a concise, purely graphic form that are a carrier of a clear, strong message and painting posters; such as Jan Lenica's Chair (Fig. 12).

That there are many artistic solutions and the individual approach of poster authors to the commission; there are projects based on surprise and wit; posters with a concise, purely graphic form that are a carrier of a clear, strong message and painting posters; such as, for example, Jan Lenica's Chair (Fig. 12); works set in surreal poetics (Fig. 13 and 14) and those whose authors prefer a realistic photographic approach (Fig. 9). The exhibition presented only selected posters related to chairs produced by the bending method of this type of solutions from the museum collection. The exhibition included works to advertise: films, theatre and opera performances, exhibition posters and party openings.

The play is devoted to *Little Stability* which we often choose as a society in the hope that it will allow us to live without problems. The chair on the poster has the form of a simple Thonet chair with bent legs and a backrest. In its shape, it can provide us with a seat, but without any special comfort. It illustrates a slight stabilization because although it is without a soft seat, we sit on a chair and do not stand or squat. We can often compare this situation to the proverbial saying that politicians provide hot water from the tap.

The last of the posters in the work is a poster (Fig. 18) advertising Tadeusz Różewicz's play staged by the Workers (Robotniczy) Theater in Nowy Sącz. The play is devoted to *Little Stability* which we often choose as a society in the hope that it will allow us to live without problems. The chair on the poster has the form of a simple Thonet chair with bent legs and a backrest. In its shape, it can provide us with a seat, but without any special comfort. It illustrates a slight stabilization because although it is without a soft seat, we sit on a chair and do not stand or squat. We can often compare this situation to the proverbial saying that politicians provide hot water from the tap.

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**Streszczenie:** Gięte krzesła inspiracją dla plakatów. W 2020 roku w Muzeum Narodowym w Poznaniu przedstawiano wystawę plakatów, których kanwą były sprzęty do siedzenia. Wystawa odwoływała się do krzesła i metamorfozy, jakie ono przechodziło, że obok funkcji mebla użytkowego, zaistniało ono w sztuce, Sprzęt zasadniczo służący do siedzenia, do czego przyzwyczaiła nas codzienna praktyka jego użytkowania, stanowi nieodzowny element wyposażenia wewnątrz mieszkań, biur, poczekalni, szkół, stadionów, przychodni zdrowia, galerii handlowych, kin, teatrów i innych miejsc użyteczności publicznej. Ekspozycja muzealna składała się z 59 plakatów z różnorodnym przedstawieniem krzesła inspirowanego lokalnymi wydarzeniami. Obejmowały prace anonsujące filmy, przedstawienia teatralne, plakaty wystawowe i imprezowe. Na wystawianych plakatach można było wyodrębnić krzesła o konstrukcji opartej o gięte elementy bukowe. Niektóre z nich dokładnie przedstawiały typy krzeseł giętych będących w produkcji. Wybrane na wystawę prace odzwierciedlały pełen przekrój różnorodnych rozwiązań plastycznych i indywidualne podejścia autorów plakatów do zlecenia; są projekty oparte na zaskoczeniu i dowcipie; plakaty o lapidarnej, graficznej formie, plakaty malarskie; prace osadzone w surrealistycznej poetyce i takie, których autorzy preferują realistyczne ujęcie fotograficzne.

**Corresponding author:**

Grzegorz Wieloch  
Warsaw University of Life Sciences-SGGW  
Faculty of Wood Technology  
166 Nowoursynowska St.  
02-787 Warsaw, Poland