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Peter Danko

Peter Danko (b. 1949), the best example of a designer-craftsman in the '70s, came to woodworking by chance. He had earned a fine-arts degree but was working in a store in Washington, D.C. when he was drawn into an adjacent wood shop by the smell of freshly cut lumber. Before long he was making sculptural furniture, much of it carved or stack laminated in the organic forms of the times. Discovering that there was little demand for this sculptural furniture, he turned to production to make a living.

Investigating his alternatives, Danko visited Thonet's North Carolina factory, which produced versions of the famous 19th-century bentwood chairs. He was irked by the fact that Thonet chairs were fabricated out of numerous discrete elements, wasting both time and material. He mused on the idea of an efficient, one-piece chair, and arrived at a solution while sitting in a bar, cutting up a menu with his Swiss Army knife. He thought he could bend front and back legs out of a single sheet of plywood—if he could make the plywood himself. He recruited his father, who had been a pattern maker for the Navy, to make a press capable of squeezing 12 thin sheets of veneer into a single shaped unit. The idea was to rout slots into separate plies, glue them together and trim the edges of irregularities after the chair had emerged from the press. Danko and his father also had to develop a glue spreader and an edge router. When all the kinks were worked out, Danko could produce a \$130 side chair in 3 1/2 hours, using \$10 in materials and wasting almost nothing in the process.¹

While one-piece plywood chairs had been designed and produced before, the *Danko Chair* (1976) is a modern classic and demonstrates that an experienced craftsman, intimate with

his materials, is ideally positioned to develop designs for mass-production. The *Danko Chair* is simple, durable and eco-friendly. By upholstering the portion cut out from between the front legs, the chair could be given a more comfortable seat. Danko also figured out how to bend arms up out of his chair. Eventually he licensed his design to Thonet—although the company had told him a few years earlier that a one-piece chair couldn't be made!

In time, Danko became a small manufacturer and was subject to all the pressures that come with running a business. By 1981 he was subcontracting various designs to a job shop. By the late '80s, he changed his mind and took over production again. At one point he had 25 full-time employees. But the recession of the early 1990s bankrupted him; he sold his business to a holding company. Today, he produces furniture, including two lines of one-piece plywood chairs, under the name The Danko Design Initiative.