

Furniture centre stage : "Röthlisberger Kollektion" - 30-years of success

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FURNITURE CENTRE STAGE

Top designers and high-quality craftsmanship have turned many pieces of "Röthlisberger Kollektion" into timeless classics.

Author: Meret Ernst, photo: Alexander Jaquemet

In autumn 2007, Swiss furniture experts met at the Röthlisberger where Atelier Oi had turned the production halls into a showroom by separating them with a chipped wood curtain. The latest exhibits of the "Röthlisberger Kollektion", as insiders call it, were on display. The designers were present to answer questions. The launch of the first furniture of the "Röthlisberger Kollektion" in 1977 made a virtue out of necessity: Röthlisberger had produced almost all the tables and cabinets for the company Knoll International (Switzerland) under licence from 1958 onwards. That was until a new owner took over and decided to relocate production to the south of France and Italy where production was cheaper. At Röthlisberger, the production under licence had made up at least half of their turnover – the carpenters had run a high risk. So when the crash came, the company had to look for alternatives. Röthlisberger had already produced small series of furniture for businesses such as Wohnbedarf Basel and Zurich and Teo Jakob, but this production could not compensate for the loss.

A DECISION AMONG FRIENDS Patron Ernst Röthlisberger had to do something, so he sat down with his friend, Teo Jakob, a designer and furniture trader from Berne who suggested that Röthlisberger should produce his own collection. Together they chose some designer friends: Ulrich P. Wieser, Koni Ochsner, Susi and Ueli Berger, and, of course, Trix and Robert Haussmann as well as Hans Eichenberger whose "Perfo" bed and "HE 153" exclusive storage furniture were produced by Röthlisberger. These two pieces of furniture had been on display at Teo Jakob and Wohnbedarf since 1959 and 1960 respectively. The idea started to take shape: orders were placed and drafts were exchanged. A jury consisting of Ernst Röthlisberger, Teo Jakob, Uli Wieser and jury secretary, Peter Röthlisberger, checked the proposals. Finally, they all sat together and discussed which furniture should actually be built and which drafts should be rejected. This joint decision among friends must have been the reason for the large volume of the collection: 36 pieces. Ernst Röthlisberger's motto was: better ten pieces too many than three too few. In terms of quality, this furniture set the standard for all future designs.

The first pieces of furniture were presented at the International Furniture Fair in Cologne in 1978, and the recipe for success discovered: take some renowned designers, keep up a high level of material and cultural stability and finally add your entire carpentry know-how and expertise. This was the birth of the classics, such as the "Rollladenschrank" (shutters cabinet) by Trix and Robert Haussmann and the extendable "Oval Tisch" (oval table) by Teo Jakob. Two years later, the second series was launched. From that time on, the development of each new series took three to five years.

UNIQUENESS INSTEAD OF SYSTEMS From the start, the "Röthlisberger Kollektion" focused on high-class individual pieces of furniture. That is what made it so special and different from the furniture systems popular in the 70s. The reason for their success was chipboard which, together with other semi-finished products, replaced the expensive coreboard. It seemed ideal for manufacturing unit system furniture. Furniture for storage purposes and chairs such as Susi and Ueli Berger's "Soft Chair" for Victoria (Baar) provided a room with down-to-earth and re-arrangeable furnishings. On the other hand, individual pieces of furniture boomed in the 80s, including designs such as Susi and Ueli Berger's "Schubladenstapel"

(stacked drawers) chest in 1981 – the Collection's secret trademark, inspired by stacked drawers in a second-hand shop. The chest consists of seven drawers in a staggered formation around their axis and screwed on top of each other. The original design was much refined by the veneer and the perfectly mitred finishing on the surfaces.

In 1982, Peter Röthlisberger became responsible for the Collection and he started expanding to Germany, the Benelux countries and the USA in 1983. All furniture has always been produced in Röthlisberger's own workshops, and today the Collection makes up almost one third of the work volume.

DESIGNER COMMITMENT The Collection, also serves to strengthen designer loyalty to Röthlisberger. In the 1980s and the fourth edition of the Collection, senior designers such as Hans Eichenberger (*1926), Robert and Trix Haussmann (*1931 and *1933), Koni Ochsner (*1933-1995) and Susi (*1938) and Ueli Berger (1937-2008), who had worked for the company over decades, were joined by new faces, designers such as Silvio Schmed and Stefan Zwicky (both *1952) and, in the nineties, by Ubaldo Klug (*1932) and Urs and Carmen Greutmann Bolzern (*1956, *1959). Around the turn of the millennium, designs made by Atelier Oi, Tomoko Azumi (*1966) and Hanspeter Steiger (*1971) were integrated in the Collection. This list of names is incomplete but the afore-mentioned designers play an important role in the history of Swiss design. Sometimes, things develop in the opposite direction: The co-operation with architect Hans-Jörg Ruch was followed by the successful interior fit out of Engadin houses. In the meantime, Röthlisberger has added Ruch's solid chestnut "Plusminus" cupboard to the Collection.

MORE THAN JUST SPIRIT OF THE TIME Koni Ochsner's cupboard "Mondrian 1" designed in 1977 for the first edition was the perfect piece of furniture for those times: Referring to Piet Mondrian, he adopted the interplay between architecture, art and style and was to influence the post-modern eighties. His cupboard and Berger's stack of drawers are individual and unique pieces of furniture which follow quite opposite design strategies: Ochsner's "Mondrian" cupboard turns art into an object for everyday use and is a parody, while the chest of drawers ennobles the daily use of objects – a joyful travesty of perfect carpentry. This is underlined by the fact that the stack of drawers is made of plywood but the veneer precious rosewood. Such characteristics appealed to people's taste at that time. The appeal of the chest of drawers even outlasted it: it is still sold today. The "Mondrian" cupboard and the "Stack of Drawers" characterize the Collection: fostering furniture design which draws on surprising and reasoned sources, blessed with a feeling for zeitgeist.

The designs always set high technical standards and some of them border on the infeasible, for example the "Shell" wardrobe designed by Ubaldo Klug in 1997. The light wardrobe which opens like a travelling wardrobe trunk only weighs 28 kilos. Specially made flexible panels measuring a mere 3 mm in thickness and made of Finnish birch are folded to form a solid carapace which, gliding on its rollers, can be opened and closed. In 1998 and 1999, the wardrobe won several international design awards. "Shell" is one of the Collection's best-sellers. Like the "Mondrian" cupboard and the "Stack of Drawers", its reduced and minimalist design appealed to the zeitgeist. It is one of those nomadic furnishing designs, i.e. furniture which can be easily re-arranged and adapted to changing living conditions. This is why "Shell" is so often found in photographs of contemporary lofts. >>



» **COMING TOGETHER** Has Röhrlisberger found the magic formula, sought by all producers, for furniture which sells well over decades? "Of course not", says Jürg Scheidegger laughing. He joined the company's sales department in 1992 and soon advanced to the management level where, together with others, he is responsible for the Collection. "The 20 to 80 principle of the furniture industry applies to us, too. 20 per cent of the designs sell well or even extremely well, and the remaining ones do not." Nonetheless, it is striking how many items in the Collection are real classics. What turns a piece of furniture into a classic piece? There is no patent recipe for it. At Röhrlisberger it very much depends on the choice of designers. It is not so much marketing strategy as trust in the interpersonal chemistry between people. The choice of designers reflects the network of existing and long-lasting friendships.

Among these friends are Trix and Robert Haussmann: They designed the first edition of the "Rollladenschrank" (shutters cabinet), one of the Collection's best selling pieces of furniture. The latest model was added in 2007: the "Credenza" sideboard. Hausmann's "illusionistische Lehrstücke" (illusionist practice models) produced in batches of fifteen from 1977, are everyday objects and design statements. His "Lehrstück II" or "disturbance of shape by function" designed in 1978 consists of a veneered chest of drawers split into eleven column segments. The exclusive heirloom is one of the objects with which the designer couple presented their "Manifest Manierismo critico" (1977-1986): A series of ironic and illusionist compositions which are also pieces of furniture. However, the criticism of functionalism's lack of expression in the background carefully follows functionalist rules, which also adds to the long life of such designs.

The choice of designers also depends on meeting by chance. Or on recognizing the right moment for bonding by placing an order. This is how Jürg Scheidegger met young Hanspeter Steiger when a short report on his study workpiece entitled "Chair seeks Producer" featured in a design magazine. Jürg Scheidegger found out that Steiger was displaying pieces at the Milan show for young up-and-coming designers "Salone Satellite", and he visited him there together with Peter Röhrlisberger. They got to know each other, got on very well and started working together. The result is the stackable "Torsio" chair made of two pieces of laminated wood. In terms of volume, it is one of the best-sellers.

CREATING A PIECE OF FURNITURE The individual piece of furniture stands in the foreground, be it in sales or communication. "After the launch we no longer speak about an edition." This would be a contrast to the intention that every piece of furniture should express the designer's powerful perspective and hold its own against the other pieces. Each new design must therefore fit in with the Collection's vision. It must be independent and combine good craftsmanship and technical know-how. Or, as Peter Röhrlisberger puts it: "We ask the designers to develop something that cannot yet be done by cabinet-makers. That is our aim." Therefore, the editions are not theme-based, and the term "edition" is not used as a sales slogan. Apart from that, individual pieces of furniture are also developed in the interim. The furniture market is insatiable and there is great pressure to launch new products. According to Jürg Scheidegger, new furniture must be "digested" before the next is launched. So far, approximately ten designs have been presented together. At the beginning of each new edition, the board of directors must reach a decision. Jürg Scheidegger steps in, and Peter Röhrlisberger telephones designers ensuring the contact is much closer than usual. He just takes time for this despite his daily workload. Many designers feel his commitment, and they are the ones who make the first move to contact Röhrlisberger.

Jürg Scheidegger does without detailed briefings, he does not speak about any definite product ideas. "This is what we expect of the designers. They must feel the zeitgeist and approach us with their own ideas." As soon as we have their design concept we start working together, and our work becomes more intensive as we approach the construction phase. In the sec-

ond stage, Jürg Scheidegger tells the designers what the market requires. The designers make drawings and sketches, and the carpenters and joiners build prototypes. Then the experienced design expert, Kurt Strub, has his say, and finally the company's carpenters deal with the project. Everybody is involved in the design until the product is perfect.

THE MARKET HAS THE FINAL SAY The market must be able to cope with batches of 25 and 50 units produced in one go. A piece of furniture that does not achieve this level is rejected from the Collection, unless it develops into an icon such as Susi and Ueli Berger's "Fächermann". After all: All designs may have a slow start, for example, only five of the "Stacked Drawers", were sold within the first five years, but then sales increased up to 300 pieces per year, and even today 120 to 170 units are purchased by wholesalers.

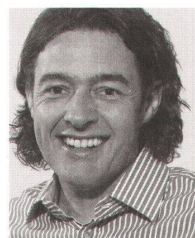
For designs to achieve such figures, Jürg Scheidegger expects the designers not to follow a specific trend but to see what might have ageless qualities. The company always looks for new materials and production methods. Their target has been and will be high-quality craftsmanship in serial production. Röhrlisberger aims to produce a piece of furniture which requires such exacting production standards that it, or similar versions, cannot be copied by competitors.

Hence, the "Röhrlisberger Kollektion" will be what it has always been: The company's calling card, and an area which provides proof of their competence and passion for carpentry. Since their pieces of furniture reflect zeitgeist and are, at the same time, heirlooms, many of them have already gone down in Swiss design history.

JÜRGE SCHEIDEGGER (*1962)

Head of Collection, board member and partner.

Jürg Scheidegger has a degree in business studies and marketing management. In 1992 he joined the Röhrlisberger sales department and has been one of the partners since 1996.



< Jürg Scheidegger



^ The "Torsio" chair by Hanspeter Steiger. Photo: Alain Bucher

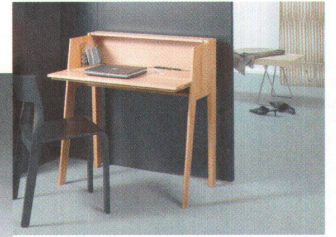


<Bench and partition "Plus" by Atelier Oi are based on the same principle.

∨Armchair and table "Muscat" by Greutmann Bolzern.



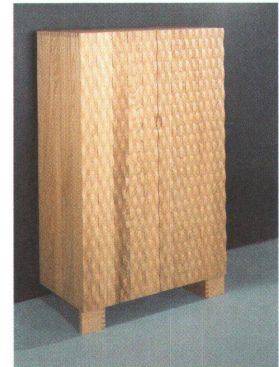
∨The graceful "AT-AT" writing desk by Tomoku Azumi.



^"Plusminus" cupboard by Hans-Jörg Ruch.

<They, too, are part of the "Röthlisberger Kollektion": "Bankstuhl" (bench-type chair) by Willy Guhl, "Schubladenstapel" (stacked drawers) by Susi and Ueli Berger and "Shell" wardrobe by Ubaldo Klug.

∨Trix and Robert Haussmann added "Credenza" to the Collection in 2007.



>Hanspeter Steiger also designed the "Canto" table.



<Fitigrane woodwork design of the "Allumette" table and chair legs by Atelier Oi.