



- Title:** “Bentwood on the Veranda”
- Short Description:** Light falling on our veranda illuminates a bentwood chair
- Photographer:** Tim Heath
- Where and when:** Pūrākaunui, June, 2017
- Sustainability:** If it ain’t broken, don’t fix it. If it’s a bit broken, try to fix it.

I love old stuff, especially if it has a patina of long service. Bentwood chairs are classics, first made in Austria in 1859. Wood (a renewable resource) is bent after soaking or steaming. The designs are simple and elegant which often are predictors of sustainable solutions. They are usually made out of just four pieces of wood bolted together. This thing of beauty has more soul than a plastic chair (made from oil) or steel (made by burning coal) which has been extruded by a machine for a mass market. And what a waste stream we are creating in a mindless chase for the latest fashion.

Austrian Bentwood chairs were being advertised in the Oamaru Mail regularly in the 1890s. Cabinet makers found that as well as retailing their own manufactured items, it was profitable to also import cheap and easy to assemble furniture, thus expanding their range – an early version of Ikea then!

Part of the pleasure in objects like bentwood chairs is appreciation of the artisanal knowledge and skill required to make them. There is comfort from knowing that the tradition has been passed down over the generations – the original Thonet bentwood chair factory is still going.

Similar methods are used by the First Nations people of the North American west coast including the Haida, Gitksan, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Sugpiaq, Unangax, Yup'ik, Inupiaq and Coast Salish to make "Bentwood boxes". These boxes are generally made out of one piece of wood that is steamed and bent to form a box. Traditional uses of the boxes were varied and included storage of food goods, clothing and for burial.

Cultures everywhere have reinvented wheels, a type of converging cultural evolution to make good use of local resources. And when we lose artisanal knowledge in an increasingly commercialised and mechanised world, we may be eroding our local self-sufficiency and resilience.

Photographer's notes: iPhone 6+

Exposure: 1/4s, f/2.2, 4.15 mm, ISO 400

Digital specs: 1,280 x 1,280 (1.6MP)

Key words: Bentwood chairs, waste, artisanal knowledge, Traditional & Local Knowledge, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Tim Heath, Aotearoa, New Zealand, Ecosystems Photography, Sustainability.

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Tim Heath

9 December 2021