

125 Jahre Dreipunkt

125 Years of Experience

Yardsticks **Workmanship and Quality Made in Germany**

Design goes far beyond the merely decorative outward appearance of a product. It is, in fact, closely connected to the manufacturing techniques which are applied and to the standard of quality which the product has to meet. "Quality", however, is an abstract term which is open to interpretation. So what exactly does "good quality" mean? Superior craftsmanship certainly is a sign of good quality, and it is still a prominent feature of the production process at Dreipunkt – even now at the beginning of the 21st century. Good quality is also achieved by only using superior materials and processing them with utmost skill. The intelligent combination of these different factors results in good quality. For example, the processing of open-pored thick leather requires a different technique than the processing of a soft tweed fabric. And only a well thought-out composition of superior materials in the multi-layered build-up of springs and padding can guarantee ultimate comfort. Above all, a sophisticated in-house product development ensures that innovative concepts are firmly based on durability and utility value.

Design changes in the course of time, as do the demands on quality and the way in which quality is portrayed. So, in order to be able to fully "understand" a piece of upholstered furniture, it is of crucial importance to literally get under its skin. High quality products do not only allow this scrutiny, they practically demand such close examination to enable the customer to understand why there may be such price differences between apparently similar products. More than likely, the beholder will notice at once that there is something missing in the cheap product, that it leaves one rather indifferent, whereas the high-quality product holds an inexplicable attraction that touches the soul.

Manual Workmanship **Unique Pieces instead of Machine-made Copies**

In nearly all industries, automation and serial production are replacing traditional workmanship, which is regarded as "too expensive", "uneconomical" and "too slow" to be able to assert itself in the economic process, especially in Germany, where non-wage labour costs are said to be too high. Such statements, however, make very little impression at Dreipunkt, where automated technical processes and serial mass production do not exist. Instead, all products are customised according to the wishes of the individual customer and manufactured by hand in a well-organised manufacturing process. Production is not carried out in apparently more profitable, cheap-labour countries, but, as it has been throughout the company's history, at the production site in Baden-Württemberg. This is made possible by the support of long-standing suppliers

who also produce in Germany according to similar principles. An array of handicraft skills flow into the production of every Dreipunkt product. By the time a Dreipunkt model reaches the final inspection and leaves the company, it has passed through many skilled hands.

Wrapped in Cotton Wool The Upholsterers

In their 1956/57 catalogue, Dreipunkt proudly pointed out the special Dreipunkt spring system as a prominent feature of their products handmade in Swabia. In keeping with the principles of high-quality upholstery of the time, only hand-tied springs were used. The substructure consisted of a bed of identical coiled springs which were tied down to the desired height and linked together by hand. Upholstering the seat and backrest of a single chair this way meant a whole day's work for a skilled upholsterer. The result of this procedure, which would appear both fascinating and archaic to a present-day observer, was a tightly stretched, crease-free surface. The seat, however, would not have met the modern demands on comfort, because although the seat cushion gave way under heavy weight, it never moulded around the person sitting on it and remained absolutely firm if a lightweight person took a seat on it.

In the course of technical innovation, hand-tied spring systems were replaced by pre-assembled pocket sprung components in which individual, unconnected springs were sewn into small fabric pockets. These were soon followed by upholstery foams, a new development which led the upholstery trade into an entirely new era. This new material transcended the limitations on formal design formerly imposed by the materials and brought forth hitherto unimaginable forms and styles. At the same time, there were also significant changes in the training requirements for the upholstery profession. What remained unchanged to the present day, however, is the high degree of manual craftsmanship involved in the customised manufacture of upholstered furniture.

At Dreipunkt, upholstery apprentices are also trained as so-called "development upholsterers" to suit the special needs of the company. Development upholsterers are not only able to duplicate existing products, but can also give a tangible shape to the ideas and drafts presented by designers in elaborate drawings or in detailed and abstract project descriptions. They act as pioneers in the styling of the product as well as in the solution of technical problems which might arise as the product makes its way from the drawing board to the production hall. Hence, Dreipunkt are not only a forerunner in the development of independent products, but also play an important role in ensuring that the apprenticed trades continue to exist – especially in times when manual skills are often unjustifiably regarded as inferior to white-collar work.

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the company is confronted with a situation similar to that of Hermann Schwarz in 1973. In spite of the soaring unemployment rate, "entrepreneurial initiative is hampered by a lack of skilled young craftsmen (...), and small high-end companies like our own are especially dependent on qualified manpower." Dreipunkt try to counter this deficit by committing themselves to the training of junior staff, teaching them skills which go far beyond the usual qualifications of the trade.

It is, however, not the upholstery alone which determines the quality and appearance of a Dreipunkt product, but just as much the frame construction and the sewing of the covers.

Needle-sharp The Sewing Department

In the 1971 company portrait, the sewing department was rightly described as the "soul" of the upholstered furniture production, and it has maintained this position to the present day. The smallest aberration in a seam, the slightest curve in a quilting seam or the most trifling irregularity in the gathering of a textile will inevitably ruin the overall impression of an otherwise immaculate product. Dexterity and sensibility are of crucial importance and cannot be substituted by any form of automation. The covers of the Dreipunkt models are individually sewn by hand, using precision sewing machines and sewing techniques that bring to mind haute-couture tailoring. All seamstresses have completed a professional training, but to be able to master all the details which lead to "Sitting in its Most Beautiful Form" they also need to be closely familiar with each individual furniture model. It takes months of painstaking training before a professional seamstress can master the covers of only a few models. So, instead of semi-skilled casual workers, Dreipunkt only employs highly qualified professional seamstresses who stay with the company long-term. On average, a seamstress will need a whole day to complete the sewing work for a single suite.

Nailed Down The Frame Construction

The frames of Dreipunkt's upholstered furniture are invisible, but they nevertheless determine its overall appearance. In the past, the wooden frames used to be a visible part of the finished products' outer appearance and therefore obviously justified the use of high-quality materials and workmanship. Until the 1990s, all frames were manufactured in the Dreipunkt on-site joinery. To attain an even higher level of specialisation, this production step has been sourced out – but, of course, not to low-wage countries which allegedly offer better value for money. The "foundations" of the Dreipunkt models are produced by professional frame manufacturers in Germany in a fixed, long-standing cooperation. Superior joinery skills are applied to process solid beech wood into curvaceous, sculpture-like shapes – components which are nowadays invisible once the piece of furniture has been upholstered, but which nevertheless have to meet the highest demands in terms of quality.

"Made in Germany" – this statement is true not only for the location of the company as such, but also for all phases of a production process.

Material Science

Exquisite Surfaces meet with In-depth Quality

The often-told tale of "exorbitant labour costs" in Germany serves as a ready excuse for many manufacturers to shift their production to foreign countries where absolutely no commitment is required on the part of the entrepreneur. Throughout their history, Dreipunkt have distanced themselves from such a policy, knowing that their high-set standards of quality can only be met in Germany and that the necessary flexibility of production sequences can only be ensured at a local production site. But in fact, labour costs only account for thirty per cent of the overall production costs of a Dreipunkt product, while the remaining seventy per cent are spent on high-quality materials. These materials are carefully selected to do justice to the high quality standards and complex manual processing at Dreipunkt. In other words, a reduction of manufacturing costs could only be attained by accepting cutbacks in material quality – a measure which Dreipunkt oppose as strongly as they oppose the present trend of production site relocation. Instead, the company is constantly on the lookout for new suppliers of superior materials which are able to meet its high standards of quality.

The most obvious quality criterion for a piece of upholstered furniture is its cover fabric. The covers of the Dreipunkt models are made of leather, fabrics or high-tech materials manufactured by the most renowned European suppliers. Accordingly, the company's leather warehouse is an awe-inspiring sight: In a large hall, hides of different colours and qualities are stacked on racks waiting to be hand-selected by an experienced employee for individual orders. The different hides needed for a single piece or a suite have to be carefully matched according to colour and surface texture. The size of the hides also has to be taken into account when selecting the leather for a certain order, because the required amount of leather not only depends on the pattern layout of the product cover, but also on the quality of the individual hides. Basic leathers with a heavy surface finish feature a largely homogeneous surface texture in which natural irregularities such as fat wrinkles, thorn scratches and other skin markings are no longer visible. These leathers can be processed with a relatively low amount of scrap material, which offers a certain advantage for the producer. The processing of high-quality open-pored leathers, however, is much more complex. This type of leather retains its natural appearance, so instead of looking at a uniform surface, the customer will be able to enjoy fine colour shadings and the warm, soft surface feel of a natural material. Processors of leather have to meet high standards when they let their eyes wander over the fine leather surface. It is almost a matter of conscience to decide which pieces can still be used and which ones have to be rejected because they show irregularities that exceed the desired measure of naturalness and must therefore be rated as actual flaws. This leads to the paradoxical equation that the higher the quality of the leather, the more scrap material will be left over. So, the higher price of superior leather is not only caused by the basic difference in price between the various types of leather, but is also due to the higher amount of scrap material which is left after processing.

Beneath the carefully sewn leather and fabric covers, an equally elaborate upholstery structure is hidden. A solid beech wood frame serves as the base of an almost architectural build-up of different foams, which have been carefully selected according to their specific qualities.

The use of upholstery foams is often regarded as being a bit "on the cheap side" – but wrongly so, because, once again, it is the quality of the material in question which determines the degree of comfort and durability of a piece of furniture upholstered in this way. Foams are defined by their compression load deflection (CLD), which specifies the firmness with which they resist a certain pressure, and by their volume weight, which specifies the density of the material in question. This means that an identical compression load deflection can be achieved even if only lighter foams are used. This inexpensive – and in fact "cheap" – alternative lowers the material costs for the manufacturer and initially also convinces the customer. After all, the CLD is identical to that of heavier foams. However, the differences soon become apparent with use. The thin partitioning walls between the single pores of a light foam very quickly show signs of material fatigue; dents and depressions which do not spring back to their original shape appear. The more expensive alternative is to use only heavy foams, which feature a considerably higher density – and are consequently more durable.

At Dreipunkt, long-term loading tests are carried out to determine whether a certain type of high-density foam is eligible for processing. Specific sets of material properties are chosen according to the intended sitting comfort. Foams with a high CLD serve as a stable foundation. The upper layers are built up with foams featuring a successively lower CLD to ensure softness and comfort without the risk of the user sinking in too deep.

The Making-of Manufacturing a Dreipunkt Product

Once the groundwork has been laid – that is, a product has been made ready for production by the in-house development team, and top quality materials as well as competent manpower are available – the production of a Dreipunkt model can begin.

At the outset, there is a control slip which not only states the mandatory start and finishing date, but also the details and the scheduling of every individual production step. This slip of paper accompanies the model during the entire production process.

The first step is to choose the cover material. While this is easy enough with fabrics, the combining and matching of different hides of leather requires a sound visual judgement and a good feel for the material. The cutting-out of leather or monochrome fabrics is carried out by a computerised cutting system – the only production step formerly done by hand which has been replaced by a technical innovation. Where once silhouette-like stencils were carefully placed on the fabric or the leather and the pattern was cut out by running a knife along the edges, laser technology has now taken over. CAD data are projected onto the material by means of fine lines of light and are shifted to the optimum position before leading the way for the cutting knife. This procedure not only accelerates the operating process, but also provides the possibility to integrate pattern changes directly into the process at any time without having to rework single wooden stencils. However, this sophisticated technology also has its limitations, for example when it comes to cutting out fabrics with a very finely striped pattern. In such cases, the human eye is superior to any other device. Even the slightest distortion of the fabric or minimal displacement of the pattern repeat would lead to unacceptable

results in the finished product, so that such orders are processed by hand without the help of laser technology.

Identified by their control slip, the different parts of the cover then move on to the sewing department where skilled hands put them together to make the "dress" of the model being produced.

Simultaneously with the cutting-out and the sewing, the upholsterers set to work assembling fleece, cotton wool and different foams to form a sculptural shape on the wooden frames, until finally the foundation of the model is ready to be "dressed". Cover and body now come together, and once again it takes the handicraft skills of specialised upholsterers to "clothe" the basic elements of a piece of upholstered furniture in their exquisite covers. The back and the base frame are then screwed together; the legs are attached, and the cushion covers are filled. This last, seemingly mundane job requires the dexterity of professional "cushion fitters". Each cushion is shaken up, beaten and smoothed with utmost care before it is finally placed onto the corresponding Dreipunkt model – just as one would imagine a houseproud aunt to give her lovingly decorated living-room the final touch.

It is these countless single production steps carried out by hand which are characteristic of the high-quality upholstered furniture made in Baden-Württemberg/Germany – starting with the sophisticated product development and going all the way through to the final inspection under the critical eyes of the quality controllers. Much of this is apparent at first sight – inherently soft materials sewn together with utmost care, a rounded backrest unblemished by any unevenness, exquisite surfaces that invite you to take a seat, proportions that are perfectly balanced. Yet this is only the visible tip of the iceberg, because many high-quality features are hidden within and can only be experienced through use, for example, the overall comfort of the models, which ensures that the user will still be sitting comfortably after many hours instead of restlessly shifting back and forth. And it remains clear even after many years that these pieces of furniture were not made to have only a short life span that an inherently good design proves itself by its timeless appeal and that high-quality materials effortlessly bear up even under long-term use.