

CLOSE UP

HAN PIECK'S 10,000 Chairs

By Wiet Hekking

Photography by Kevin van der Brug



Above Karrie-Ilja Pieck, Han Pieck's sister, sits in the LAWO 1 chair on her terrace in 1951.

This is the amazing story of Han Pieck, a Dutch adventurer who, in 1945, designed the LAWO 1, a stackable lounge chair whose seat, back, arms and legs are crafted of a single piece of bent plywood.

This comfortable and innovative chair was shaped using a new method of high frequency wood laminating, and the chair was one of the first made with this technique. Previously, plywood chairs were made in molds in which glue had to harden for hours — a time-consuming and expensive process. Using new types of glue, in combination with a high frequency electrical current that heated and conducted the glue very rapidly, this new technique reduced the time needed to bend the wood from seven hours to seven minutes.

Pieck supposedly sold 10,000 LAWO 1 chairs just after World War II — an incredible number in the Netherlands at that time, which counted just 10 million inhabitants. Then he went bankrupt, left Holland for England and, in 1951, moved to Brazil, where he still lives. Meanwhile his chair became a coveted classic and extremely hard to find.

It was not until 2002 that Pieck learned that his brief foray into furniture design had made such waves. Interviewed about his life and his now-famous chair, he revealed that he had, in fact, produced only 1,500 of them.

I got involved in this story in 2002, when Karrie-Ilja Pieck, Han's sister, phoned WonderWood, the Amsterdam-based gallery specializing in plywood furniture that I have owned since 1999. In an article about WonderWood and plywood in a Dutch newspaper, she had noticed a photograph of her brother's chair and asked for a copy of the photograph to send along with the article to her brother in Brazil. I was amazed.

I had bought my first LAWO 1 chair in 1988. Peter Vöge, a Dutch architect and co-author of the book *Stoelen* (Chairs), that featured Pieck's chair on the cover, had written several articles about plywood in Dutch magazines, and from these, I learned more about plywood and about Pieck's chair. One of Vöge's articles stated that Pieck had sold 10,000 LAWO 1 chairs. I found it hard to believe that this had been possible just after the war when there was a scarcity of nearly everything, and normal sidechairs were far more in demand than lounge chairs.

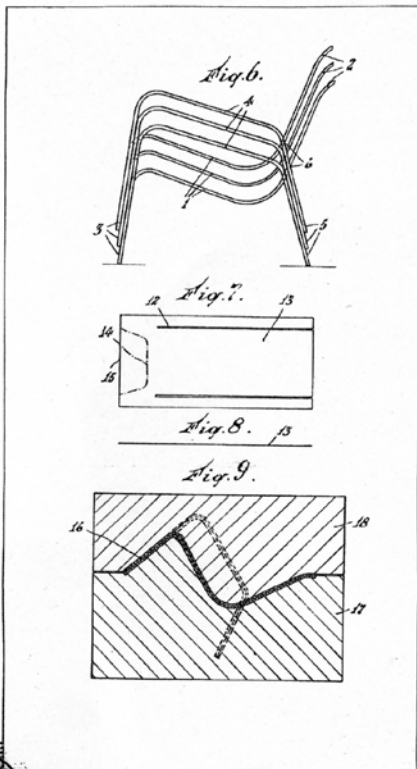
As a collector of plywood, I liked the LAWO 1 chair so much that I gave it a prominent place in an exhibition about Dutch plywood that I initiated at the Wickerwork Museum in Noordwolde in 2002. The chair was even on the poster of the exhibition and attention was given to it in all the reviews of the show.

Meanwhile, living far away in South America, Pieck had lost touch with the Netherlands, as well as with European design. Vöge had tried

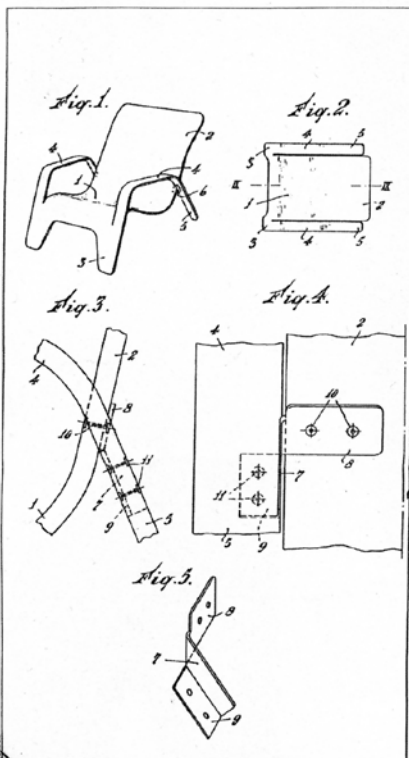


Above Pieck designed the stackable LAWO 1 lounge chair in 1945. It was made from a single piece of bent plywood.

Right The connection between the back and the armrest is reinforced with small hidden metal plates.



Bruxelles, le 11 Octobre 1949
 P. Pub. de H. PIECK
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to contact him several times by mail, without success. It was one of the reviews of the Wickerwork show that Pieck's sister had happened upon. So we sent the pictures and asked, of course, for Pieck's address in Brazil. The ensuing correspondence over four years resulted in a visit from Pieck to the Netherlands in 2006, when he finally revealed the true story of the LAW0 1.

Han Pieck was born in 1923, in the north of Holland. His father, Henri, was an artist and notorious double agent for the British and Soviets. Pieck went to the Amsterdam School for Applied Arts (now the Rietveld Academy) where the famous Mart Stam, considered by many to be the designer, in 1926, of the first tubular steel cantilevered chair, was one of his most inspiring teachers. Stam taught Pieck to observe carefully, Pieck recalled. He had a progressive view on furniture and always exhorted his students to "make strong pieces with limited materials." The T-46 bent plywood side table from 1946 by Hein Stolle, another of his students, is also a good example of Stam's vision.

While a student in 1945, as German-occupied Holland was suffering through the Winter of Hunger, Pieck designed his stackable, laminated plywood lounge chair. After the war, in 1946, together with his friend Maarten van Raalte, a Fokker aircraft engineer, he succeeded in making a prototype. (Pieck and van Raalte thought that they had made the very first chair out of a single piece of plywood; with limited access to international publications, they were not aware that Gerald Summers in England had in fact beaten them to that achievement in 1934 with his lounge chair for Simple furniture. However, Summers used "ready-made" industrial plywood, while Pieck and van Raalte glued all the layers of veneer themselves.)

But how to raise money for production? Pieck approached F. Gribbling, a wealthy Jewish grain merchant of the company Gribbling and Verkley in Amsterdam, whose daughter he had helped hide during the war. The grateful businessman had told Pieck to contact him if he could ever be of help. Pieck went to see him and told him that because of the scarcity of money and raw materials, he needed a large order for a special government license to start a factory for his chair. Asked how big the order should be, Pieck smiled. "Oh, just 10,000 pieces," he said. They went together to a lawyer, and Gribbling solemnly declared that he had ordered 10,000 chairs.

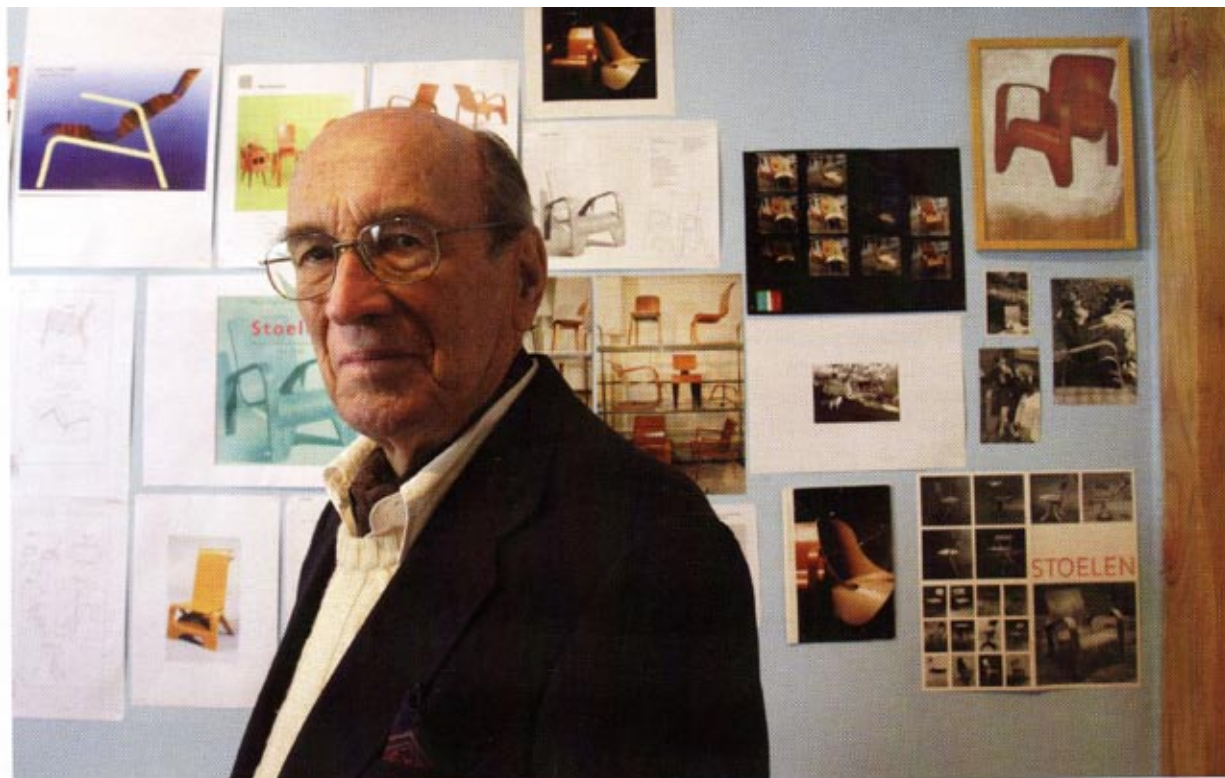
With this document, Pieck was able to apply for funding through the United States Marshall Plan, the economic program set up to help rebuild Europe after the war. He received 300,000 guilders, the equivalent of more than \$1 million today. Together with van Raalte, Pieck built an 8,600 square foot factory he named LAW0 (Laminated WOOD), in Ommen, in northeast Holland. They bought a blue van, a hydraulic press and, from Philips Electronics, a 15 kilowatt generator — an exceptionally powerful one in those days. Then they started to build the mold themselves.

Unfortunately, production was delayed by six months while Pieck and van Raalte figured out how to heat the chair in the mold. They realized that different parts of the chair needed different power frequencies — the armrests needed less time to heat than the seats, for instance. After many experiments and wasted chairs, they solved that problem with the application of split electrodes and variable condensers that enabled them to control different frequencies simultaneously.

Pieck applied for patent rights in 17 countries for his chair design and other furniture made out of one piece of bent plywood. The patent rights included "the treatment of wooden objects with the help of high frequency alternating current-generated fields, and the application of this method."

After six months, Pieck went back to Gribbling and told him that he was ready to start production of 50 chairs a day, assuming that he would want to market the chairs, but Gribbling responded, "Great. I helped you by getting the license to start the factory, but my business is grain, not chairs." So Pieck went back to Ommen to try to market the chairs himself. Despite all their efforts, Pieck and van Raalte succeeded in selling only 1,500 LAW0 1 chairs, mostly to family, friends and a health institution where they were used on balconies. Of these 1,500 chairs, no more than 50 are known to still exist, most of them owned by collectors or on display in museums around the world.

Not surprisingly, the factory went bankrupt, the blue van was sold and Pieck moved to London where he installed high frequency generators for Fasswoods



Above Designer Han Pleck at the WonderWood store in Amsterdam in 2006, during his first visit to Holland in many years.

Opposite Pleck's patent drawings for the LAWO 1, showing (top) how it stacks and the cut pattern in the plywood rectangle. The drawing below details the hidden metal support securing the arms to the back.

Products, a furniture company, and later for Morris & Co. in Glasgow, which specialized in plywood products. Pleck was involved in technology, but also in the design of new laminated products, such as golf club heads, helicopter rotor blades and his second chair, the *Bambi*, a beautiful but rather fragile side chair, also made of one sheet of bent plywood. Two-thousand *Bambi* chairs were produced. Pleck did well at Morris & Co. and was asked to set up a factory for the company in British Guyana in 1950, but the outbreak of the Korean War made this impossible. Disappointed, Pleck left the company he had worked for with so much satisfaction and, seeking a new challenge, he left for Brazil in 1951. There he started a plywood factory for the Brazilian government and a few years later became technical engineer for Moveis Cimo, a furniture factory with 23,000 employees. Meanwhile in Scotland, Morris & Co, without Pleck's knowledge, produced a less fragile version of the *Bambi*, the *Tobi*, with a metal frame.

In the late 1970s, Pleck, ever the adventurer, left the wood business and opened a photo laboratory in Rio de Janeiro. He worked with many professional photographers and received large orders from the government to develop satellite photos. A few years later, he sold his business and moved to Bahia in the north of Brazil, then sailed around the world in his own yacht for more than a year, before returning to Bahia, where he bought some property and designed and built a beach hotel.

Pleck rarely saw his family in the Netherlands and was not aware of the interest in vintage 20th-century design in Europe and the United States. Not until 2002, at the age of 79, when he received the newspaper article and photograph from his sister, did he learn about the international fame of his LAWO 1 chair. When he visited Holland four years later, he once again realized how comfortable his chair was; sitting on it, he recounted the true story of the LAWO 1 to the Dutch media.

Full of enthusiasm, Pleck returned to Brazil and started sketching furniture again. At the age of 84, he intends to set up a new factory to reissue the LAWO 1.

Anyone looking for 10,000 chairs? ■



Above The *Bambi* chair, designed in 1948, for Morris & Co., in Glasgow, Scotland.

Wiet Hekking is the owner of WonderWood, a gallery specializing in vintage and contemporary plywood furniture, in Amsterdam, www.wonderwood.nl.