

Marcel Breuer at Isokon

The Hungarian-born Marcel Breuer (1902–1981) first studied and then worked at the Bauhaus school in Germany, whose mission was to combine functional design with the principles of fine art. During the late 1920s and early 1930s Breuer designed a range of tubular steel chairs, which he is perhaps best known for, among these was the notable Wassily chair.

Breuer emigrated to England in 1935 where he then found work with Jack Pritchard of the Isokon Company, one of the earliest champions of Modernism in Britain. Pritchard's wife, Molly Pritchard, was one of the co-founders of the British based architect-design company Isokon (short for Isometric Unit Construction and a reference to Constructivism) founded in 1929. The founders were greatly inspired by Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus and set out to design and build Modernist housing. Their prime project was the Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, the earliest Modernist buildings in Britain, which later came to be known as the "Isokon Building". Designed by architect Wells Coates and completed in 1934 the Isokon Building was seen as a very bold and liberal-minded project amongst the otherwise quite conservative British. The residents of the building were a group of just as progressive writers, bohemians, artists, architects and intellectuals such as the Pritchards, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius a.o.

As a constant promotor of Modernism, the entrepreneurial Pritchard subsequently founded the Isokon Furniture Company in 1935 which grew out of the principles of the Isokon Company and became one of the most progressive British furniture manufacturers of the 1930s. Pritchard invited the former Head of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, to be Isokon's Controller of Design (a grand title considering the small scale of the company). Prior to leaving England for America in 1937, Gropius recommended Breuer, as his replacement. Despite the fact that several architects designed for Isokon, it was Marcel Breuer who would achieve international acclaim for the company.

Heavily influenced by Pritchard's experience with plywood from his second job as Marketing Manager for Venesta (short for Veneer Estonia), the British distributor of the Estonian made plywood, combined with the interest in comfort, the Isokon furniture designs were mainly executed in wood. The moulded plywood was a warmer material than the Spartan tubular metal and thus deemed more eligible to attract the British towards the modern style, at a time where their conservative taste was still dominated by plush interiors in dark wood. Breuer designed a handful of Modernist furniture designs in plywood for Isokon, which essentially was a translation of his tubular steel designs reiterated in wood. Three of these five models are offered in this sale; a set of six "Isokon" stacking chairs, the BT3 dining table and the Short Chair.

Breuer eventually accepted a post at Harvard University and followed Walter Gropius to America in 1937. The premature end of Isokon Furniture Company came with Britain's entry into World War II. The supply of plywood was cut off and the production ceased in 1939. Isokon was thus never a commercial success, and only a limited number of pieces were produced from 1936–1939.