

Ray Eames

1912–1988

one life & work

ABOUT HER

Ray-Bernice Alexandra Kaiser Eames was an influential artist, designer, and filmmaker during the 20th century. Along with her husband, they made groundbreaking contributions to the architecture field, the furniture industry, industrial design, the photographic arts, and manufacturing. They were some of the most important creative leaders who enlivened the post World War II period that the United States was experiencing.

Ray was born in Sacramento, California on December 15, 1912 where her parents taught her to be creative and inventive throughout her childhood. That mindset, as well as her natural surroundings, had a heavy influence on her work later in life. After her father passed away, she moved to New York with her mother where she began to study painting. Then, after her mother died, she enrolled at a school in Michigan where she met Charles Eames, who was Head of the Industrial Design department at the time.

Eventually, she started working with him and one of their first collaborations was alongside Eero Saarinen when they designed a chair for MOMA's "Organic Design in Home Furnishings" competition. The armchair had a seat and a back, both formed from a single piece of plywood that was molded in three different parts. Although it won a prize, it was not sent for mass production because of its complexity.



Ray Eames, 1912–1988

WORKING TOGETHER

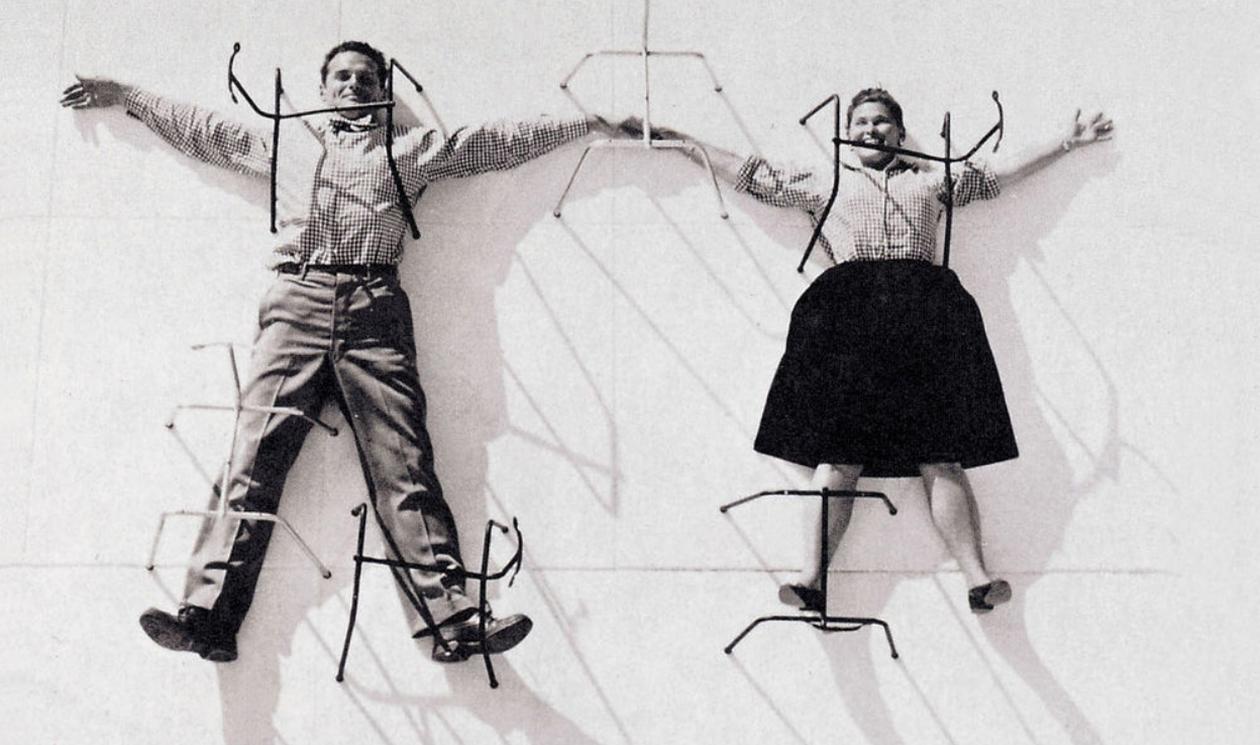
In 1941, soon after Charles and Ray got married, the couple moved to Los Angeles where Charles started designing sets for MGM Studios and Ray became involved as a graphic designer with the Arts & Architecture Magazine. During that time, they collaborated on a lot of projects and worked side by side in their "laboratory."

By 1942, the Eames had established their first company, the Plyformed Wood Company, which designed splints and stretches of molded plywood for the US Navy. However, because of financial issues, they eventually sold their business to the Evans Product Company. Charles continued as the Head of Research and Development, while she stayed involved in the development of furniture.



left & right: Charles and Ray Eames

the intelligent masters of the art



AN EAMES ANTHOLOGY

The book, *An Eames Anthology* written by Ray and Charles Eames, edited by Daniel Ostroff, shows a lot of their work and their life. Ostroff, who wrote the introduction, admires the couple and describes them as hardworking and energetic “intelligent masters of the art world” and talks about them with idolizing words.

Not only were they often photographed in matching clothes or poses and created some of the most iconic furniture of the 20th century, but they were also very passionate and ambitious about their productions. Ostroff says that their work was not only astounding, but that their notions were even better and they “contributed to the world of ideas.” He writes that their beliefs, values, and ideas are clear and evident in all of their productions. Their work is more than just materials put together, but rather thoughts they wanted to share with the world.

Ostroff also says that Ray and Charles did not think of their design as a creative self-expression, but instead, a process of problem solving. They even described their work ethic as “nuts and bolts” meaning that even when producing furniture or designing exhibitions, they involved themselves in the entire production process: developed the techniques, products, and

machines they would need. The couple didn’t think of themselves as having a particular style, they just wanted to make art that functioned and served with a purpose; they preferred to be known as “evolutionary rather than revolutionary.” With that said, they also wanted to be mass producers because producing a single item was useless to their audience.



Charles and Ray Eames working on the Mathematica exhibit in 1960



1912–1988

Ray Eames sitting on one of their chairs

Ray Eames continued to work on her textiles, designs, and furniture until she passed away in Los Angeles on August 21, 1988, exactly 10 years after Charles' death.

“The problem of designing anything is in a sense the problem of designing a tool. And as in designing a tool it is usually wise to have a pretty clear idea of what you want the thing to do. The need it is to fill, its particular objective.”

Charles & Ray Eames

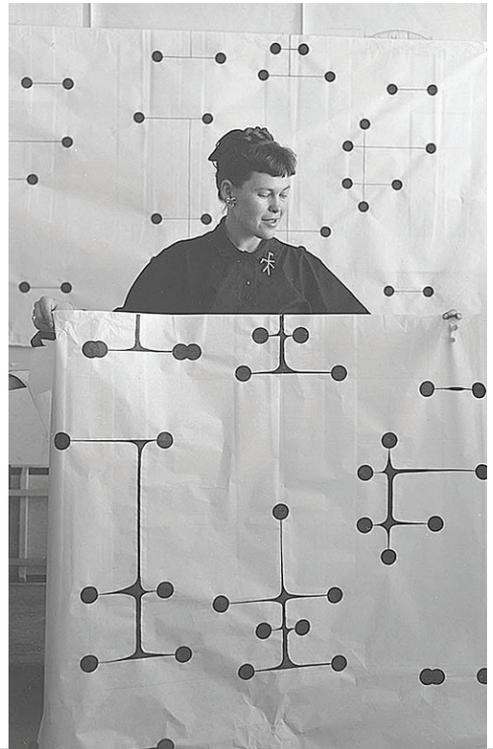
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*Ray Eames holding her Dot Pattern
Fabric Design around 1947*

CHILDHOOD

Ray Eames worked on different art mediums and techniques throughout her career, all from different influences and with varied purposes.

As mentioned earlier, her parents taught her the organic quality of nature and the environment. Both of these attributes led to a lot of her inspiration for building furniture and toys because she always thought of purpose and one's surroundings.



When she was a young girl, she used to make paper dolls with different accessories and outfits. This, apparently, influenced the way the couple displayed their catalogs. In some pieces, they would photograph models in various outfits and cut them up to

be displayed just like her dolls. In her graphic design work, Ray used the same technique. Although a lot of her final pieces did not show it, her thought process always began by cutting things out on paper and testing them out like she did at a young age.



left: Paper dolls and dresses from her childhood

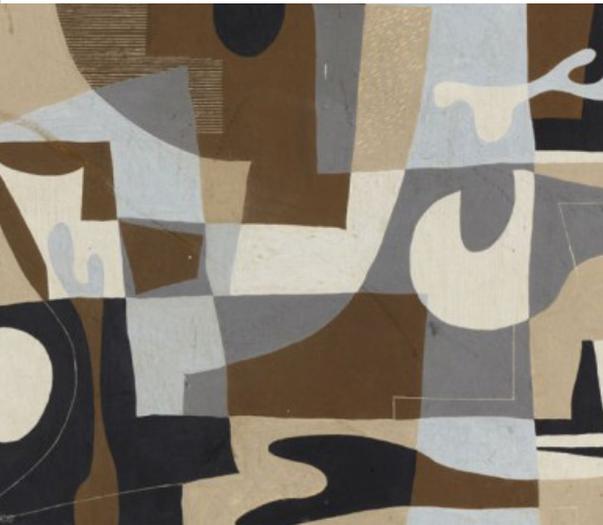
bottom: Set of chairs made from different materials such as molded plywood, metal, and fabric



EARLY YEARS

Ray began her studies alongside Hans Hoffmann, the German painter. While she worked with him, she joined the American Abstract Artists group, which was an organization that picketed and fought for artists whose work was never shown. They created exhibitions between 1937 and 1941 to represent the unnoticed artists.

Through Hoffmann, she was able to meet artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Clement Greenberg, which led her to become a part of the art movement that contributed to the American Abstract Expression, which eventually conquered the international art world in the 1950's. At the time, Ray was heavily influenced by these artists and the modern art creations she produced became very popular.



left: Painting by Ray Eames

right: Charles and Ray Eames' house in California



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MONDRIAN

Another one of her big influences was Piet Mondrian and this is seen in two of her works: the ESU Storage Unit from 1950 and the front façade of their own house in California. Both pieces are based on geometric shapes and lines, filled in with the primary colors Mondrian is known for.



Eames Storage Unit



INFLUENCING

On the other hand, Ray Eames, along with her husband, helped shape and influence a new way of thinking for artists when it came to furniture, architecture, interior design, exhibitions, films, and multi media shows. Stores such as Ikea, Crate & Barrel, and Target are full of furniture that derived from the Eames' original designs. The couple's innovative and practical creations still influence mass productions, furniture design, the way information is delivered, and filmmaking nowadays.



top: Windsor chair

bottom: Chair inspired by Eames techniques sold at IKEA

HISTORY

Charles believed that art history shaped a lot of your work style and that it was an important aspect to an artist's vision. The Eames were heavily influenced by Paul Revere's silverware, Native American Kachina dolls, Mayan temples, Chartres Cathedral, the hand ax, and the Windsor chair.





top: Cover by Herbert Matter for the Arts & Architecture magazine using Eames furniture

bottom: Eames chairs covered in Alexander Girard fabric



INFLUENCES

There were a lot of inspiring artists at the time who were exploring the same fields as the Eames and were meeting in Los Angeles. Those involved with furniture design ended up meeting at Herman Miller, the furniture manufacturer. Both Alexander Girard and George Nelson worked with Charles Eames and were influenced by one another. They even collaborated on the creation of a design curriculum.

Another designer who worked closely with the Eames was Herbert Matter, the Swiss designer who joined the Arts & Architecture Magazine at the time that Ray was producing many covers. Louis Danziger and Saul Bass also knew both Charles and Ray Eames and worked in similar fields within LA.

Hans and Florence Knoll, from the furniture company Knoll, also had a huge connection with Ray and her husband through their common passion of furniture design. Finally, Alvin Lustig, who had a short but inspirational career, was both influenced by and influenced Ray Eames.

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*Interior of Charles and Ray Eames' house
in California*



DECORATION

Ray and Charles Eames were fascinated by innovation and technology and were the first to experiment with a lot of unique materials. Ray also worked with a lot of different mediums throughout several decades. However, she never created barriers between techniques, but rather, let one mode influence the other.

One of their first experiments as a couple was their own house. The Arts & Architecture magazine hired many architects to work on the Case House series, which was a collection of simple houses. They ended up living in the one they built for the rest of their lives and also contributed to the production of John Entenza's house.

pieces

Inside, their house was filled with their personality and decorated according to her aesthetic. Ray carefully arranged all of the objects she collected juxtaposing one against the other. Although she did a lot of modern and clean pieces, she was also passionate about excessive decoration.

CHAIRS

One of their most famous pieces was the "Eames Chair": a *fauteuil*, or an armchair, with a footstool, which has been used in many films and fashion photographs since. The idea sparked when they were working with plywood sculptures, splints, and stretchers. These artists also experimented with different materials when constructing various types of chairs such as fiberglass shells on metal rod bases, padded wire mesh chairs, and bent metal and molded plywood ones.





One of their most common productions was originally created for Chicago's airport in 1962 and those chairs can now be found everywhere. Their technique was to make playful but reliable and practical pieces, which made their creations become so popular.

left: Fiberglass chairs with wood base

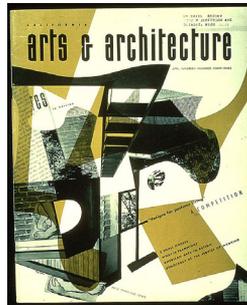
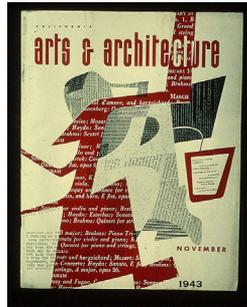
bottom: Lounge chair and ottoman



TEXTILES & COVERS

Ray Eames also worked as a graphic designer and on textiles, but focused a lot of her time alongside her husband working on their mass-producing, low-costing furniture made of different materials, which included plastic, metal, and plywood.

Ray created most of the graphic and commercial artwork for their products, and most of the advertisements for their furniture, which appeared at Herman Miller. She also designed more than twenty covers for the Arts & Architecture magazine. One of her other specialties was designing textiles. In the late 1940's, she created two textile designs, "Crosspatch" and "Sea Things" which were then produced by Schiffer Prints (a company that also worked with Salvador Dalí and Frank Lloyd Wright). They were not only reproduced, but were also recognized with awards by the MOMA. Her textile creations can still be found nowadays in museums and exhibitions.



left: Arts & Architecture magazines covers designed by Ray Eames around 1942–1944

right: Crosspatch fabric design by Ray Eames in 1945



WORK ETHIC

In the 1950's however, the couple focused more on communications rather than products, working on films, multi media slide shows, and exhibitions. Their media work, like their house, was known to have an "information overload". The Eames strongly believed that the viewer could handle and negotiate the amount of information they were receiving, which is why all of their presentations were so complex.

They believed in solving problems. They understood design as a simple solution and wanted everyone to have the best, no matter how challenging the problem was. The couple was practical and knew that technological advances happened constantly, so they were always prepared for more innovations. The Eames also added human dimensions and density to a lot of their work, for example, when they helped to popularize the computer, in their puppet shows, interactive games, animations, exhibitions, and furniture.



Ray Eames playing with lights and shadows in 1940

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