



THE COUPLE WHO SHAPED THE WAY WE LIVE

Charles & Ray Eames

BY WILLIAM COOK

Charles and Ray Eames are most famous for their iconic chairs, which transformed our idea of modern furniture, but this was merely one facet of their work. They were graphic and textile designers, architects and film-makers. If they'd confined their efforts to just one of these genres, we'd still be talking about them today. Yet they spread their talents far and wide, becoming two of the greatest designers of the 20th Century.

In 2018, it'll be 40 years since Charles died, and 30 years since his beloved wife and creative partner Ray (born Bernice Kaiser) passed away. And their groundbreaking work remains as influential as ever, with a new exhibition at the Vitra Museum exploring the careers of this dynamic couple.

Charles was born in 1907, in St Louis, Missouri. He studied architecture at Washington University but dropped out after two years to start his own architectural firm. He married his college sweetheart and had a daughter, but it was meeting two brilliant Finnish architects, father and son Eliel and Eero Saarinen, which changed the trajectory of his life. Eliel encouraged him to resume his studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. It was here that he met Ray, who became his second wife in 1941.



In Michigan, Charles and his good friend Eero had built a new type of chair from a new material called plywood. Now, in LA with Ray, he started to refine this process, but their plans were interrupted by World War Two.

With so many wounded soldiers, there was an urgent need for a new type of splint. Charles and Ray made one out of plywood. It was supremely practical, but its practicality gave it an accidental beauty. That splint became a template for their work. "We don't do 'art' – we solve problems," explained Charles. "How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?"

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Eames Molded Plastic
Side Chair, recycled
plastic chromed steel,
31 ½" H 17 ¾" W 20" D

CHARLES &

The Couple Who Shaped the Way We Live



RAY EAMES

By William Cook



After the war, a new generation of suburbanites wanted a new kind of décor, and Charles and Ray provided it. Their mission statement was bold and very simple: "We want to make the best for the most for the least." Charles likened a good designer to a good host, anticipating the needs of his guests. The furniture they made was stylish and, above all, fit for purpose. No wonder it became the house style of America's new moneyed middle class. In 1947 they established their own studio, the Eames Office, in Venice, LA. For 40 years, it set the standard for every avenue of design. "We think of ourselves as tradesmen," said Charles. "People come to us for things."

"What works good is better than what looks good because what works good lasts," said Ray. In fact, the two things went hand in hand. This was not a new concept. The Bauhaus had pioneered this functional approach before the war. However Charles and Ray made it mainstream. Their designs were pleasing and accessible, attractive to young executives, not just artists and intellectuals. Charles introduced modernist design to middle America, but it was Ray who softened its hard edges, and gave it mass appeal.

Eames Lounge Chair Molded Plywood & Leather, 1956:
Standard Chair: 31½" H 33½"
W 35" D, Ottoman: 17¼" H
20¾" W 21½" D



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Born in 1912, in Sacramento, California, Ray had trained as an artist, learning to paint in New York under the German Expressionist émigré Hans Hofmann. She didn’t feel that her eventual career strayed far from her initial studies, saying: “I never gave up painting, I just changed my palette.”

Charles understood that Ray was an equal partner in their creations, and he was always eager to acknowledge her integral role. “Anything I can do, Ray can do better,” he said. But the wider world was slow to recognise her talents. This was the era of Mad Men, when even the most gifted women were often regarded as mere wives or secretaries. Ray was frequently forgotten, or dismissed as her husband’s little helpmate.

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