

Charles Eames: A Biography

By: Stephen Leet

Eames, Charles (17 June 1907-21 Aug. 1978), architect, furniture designer, and filmmaker, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the son of Charles Ormond Eames, a Pinkerton security officer, and Marie Celine Adele Pauline Lambert. In 1921 Eames's discovery of photographic equipment belonging to his father, who had died that year, initiated his lifelong interest in photography. He began his formal architectural education at Washington University in St. Louis on a scholarship in 1925. Prior to his enrollment, Eames had worked as a laborer with the LaClede Steel Company and as a designer of electrical lighting fixtures with the Edwin F. Guth Fixture Company, and while attending the university he worked summers as a draftsman in a St. Louis architectural office, Trueblood and Graf. He left school in 1928, his sophomore year. Despite his lack of a formal degree in architecture, other jobs and contacts in St. Louis substantially contributed to his education and to the development of his interests and skills in all aspects of design.

Eames married Catherine Dewey Woermann, a Washington University student, in 1929. His first contact with European modern architecture soon followed as Eames and his wife traveled to Europe on their honeymoon and visited the work of the European modernists, including the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, the German architect Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus.

In 1930 Eames and his wife returned to St. Louis, where their only child, a daughter, was born. Eames began his architectural practice that year and for seven years designed projects in the city and its suburbs. His first partnership in 1930 was with Charles M. Gray, and later they were joined by a third partner, Walter E. Pauley. In 1933 Eames designed sets for the St. Louis Municipal Opera and stained glass and mosaics for the stained-glass firm of Emil Frei. In 1934, after visiting Mexico, Eames formed a new practice in St. Louis with Robert T. Walsh. Eames's work from this period includes several houses and the reflecting pool for the controversial sculptures by Carl Milles, *Meeting of the Rivers* (1940), as well as two churches.

In 1935 Eames was discovered by the architect Eliel Saarinen, who published in the *Architectural Forum* a design of St. Mary's Church in Helena, Arkansas (1935), which Eames and his partners had created. This marked a decisive point in Eames's career and eventually led to his experience at the Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and his contacts with architects and designers there, most notably Ray Kaiser, who in June 1941 became Eames's wife and design collaborator after his divorce from his first wife in May of the same year. Eames and Kaiser had no children. Saarinen's admiration for Eames grew after the completion of Eames and Walsh's design for the Meyer house in St. Louis (1936-1937), which included sculptures by Milles, then a member of the Cranbrook faculty, as well as tapestries by Loja Saarinen.

In 1938 Eames began studies in architecture and design at Cranbrook after receiving a fellowship from Eliel Saarinen, the architect of the academy. While there Eames built on his diverse design interests and took advantage of the multiple programs and facilities offered at the academy, involving himself in aspects of design and media, particularly photography and industrial design. In 1940, after being appointed instructor of design, he began working part-time in Saarinen's architectural firm. At this time Eames became interested in the problems of mass-produced furniture design and innovative manufacturing techniques. A design created with the architect Eero Saarinen submitted to the Museum of Modern Art's Organic Design in Home Furnishings in 1940 won first prize in two categories of domestic furnishings. Eames and Saarinen's design experiments with complicated wood-molding and rubber-to-wood bonding techniques anticipated both architects' interests in complex forming methods.

Charles and Ray Eames left Cranbrook in July 1941 and moved to Los Angeles, where they began a 37-year collaborative career as designers. They worked with John Entenza, the editor and publisher of the influential architecture and design magazine *Arts & Architecture*. Entenza promoted their work in his magazine, and Ray Eames and her assistants frequently designed covers for it.

Charles and Ray Eames's experiments with complicated wood-molding techniques, which after World War II became the basis for their most innovative chair designs, were begun and refined during the war years with commissions from the U.S. Navy for molded plywood splints and designs for plywood gliders and aircraft components for the growing southern California aircraft industry. Charles Eames's ingenious designs and technical solutions to complex molding problems represented one of the most significant technology transfers from wartime to peacetime products. Numerous furniture designs for the Herman Miller Company--in plywood, fiberglass, and cast aluminum--established his international reputation as the foremost furniture designer of the 1950s and 1960s.

Although the majority of Eames's architectural work was done in St. Louis in the 1930s, it was the design of his own house and studio in Santa Monica, California, in 1949 that established his reputation internationally as an architect. The house became the best known of the Case Study Houses--a program created by Entenza to promote modern residential design. The house also became a pilgrimage spot for architects worldwide. Famous for its unique and clever use of standardized elements, the house became equally famous for Charles and Ray Eames's precisely and beautifully arranged collections and still lifes of found objects displayed in the house's interior. It effectively served as a summation of the Eameses' design philosophy--a built symbol of their material aesthetic, resourcefulness, common sense, and inventiveness within limits.

While Charles Eames is best known as furniture designer, it is the medium of film and photography that became the nexus of his diverse design activities, all done in collaboration with his wife. Photography and film allowed the couple to combine complex narrative structures with their formidable visual and formal skills to create

didactic and educational films for corporations and exhibits. The films and photographic experiments became a transformative medium-- cataloging, arranging, and recombining prosaic objects such as toys, storage tins, flowers, stamps, and rocks into evocative still lifes, montages, and landscapes. Their innovations in filmmaking and multimedia exhibit presentations continue to be viewed as historically significant examples of exploratory work with evolving media technologies. Together Charles and Ray Eames produced more than eighty films, including *House--After Five Years of Living* (1955), *Glimpses of the USA* (1959), and *Powers of Ten* (1968 and 1977), as well as numerous exhibits using multimedia.

Charles Eames is considered to be one of the most innovative industrial designers of the twentieth century. His talents in furniture and industrial design, exhibit design, and filmmaking are widely recognized as unique contributions. His furniture designs following World War II are the most successful examples of formally and technically sophisticated designs for mass-produced furniture utilizing new materials and inventive manufacturing techniques. The Eameses' own house and studio, with its clever system of off-the-shelf, industrially-made components, quickly became an icon of their work and methods. Charles Eames's ability to combine a midwesterner's pragmatic approach to problem solving with a provocative and imaginative inventiveness and his skill in redefining parameters of any design problem characterized his work throughout his career. He always recognized the importance of both utility and beauty. Eames died in St. Louis.

[Source](#)