

CHARLES AND RAY EAMES PIONEERS IN DESIGN

Celebrating 50 years, the Eames House is remembered fondly by their grandson

written by Lori Rotenberk



■ **Above** The view of the Eames House down a walkway towards their studio. The house is located in Pacific Palisades, California.

Charles and Ray Eames designed just as they had lived. Comfortably and inventively, they pushed forward with a zest for life that is apparent in their furniture, toys, films, and most notably, in the steel and glass frame home the couple built for themselves upon a bluff overlooking the Pacific. Celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, the Eames House was built in a matter of days from kit parts as a post-war turn towards modernism.

With its floor to ceiling glass walls and nature providing a bath of light, its rooms and their contents became like museum exhibits. From Ray's elegant spread on a dining room table or a stack of cardboard boxes repeatedly knocked down by grandchildren swinging from ropes fastened to the trusses, mundane events became celebrated occasions. While Charles and Ray are readily recognized for their furniture design, most notably the Eames Chair, a simple molded plywood chair and later fiberglass that when introduced became an instant classic, the couple's art went much further.

"Designers today are trying to be hybrid people, product designers as well as architects. Charles and Ray were pioneers of that idea," says Donald Albrecht, a curator who produced the international exhibit "Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of The Twentieth Century" that recently opened in St. Louis, Charles' hometown. "Their work is remarkably beautiful and their agenda is awesome. They tried to improve people's lives with design and because of it they had an agenda people today find remarkable." What's more, believers in melding



design and media, the Eames made more than 80 short films that earned the couple awards at festivals in the United States, Australia, and Europe.

The Eames House, which was completed on Christmas Day, 1949, became the headquarters for the couple. Although they ran their design office on its grounds, the home still remained a magical, warm place to visit, recalls Charles and Ray's grandson Eames Demetrios who now runs the Eames Office from this location.

"At 6 years old, I sort of realized not all kids had grandparents, who had a film festival," Demetrios recalls. "They were simply my grandparents, not the icons of design history when I was with them. They were an incredible amount of fun and I have great memories. I have pictures of me with my grandfather out in the meadow where we were trying to find spider webs." Holidays were grand occasions in the household, especially with Ray who collected papers and ribbons from around the world. So carefully was each package wrapped that "the unwrapping

■ **Above** Charles and Ray Eames in the mid-1970s.

■ **Right** A row of dining chairs in production. Designed in 1945 by Charles and Ray, these chairs were part of the molded plywood furniture that brought them into prominence.



of each was recorded in a series with a camera in photographs,” Demetrios says. “Meals were always elaborately presented, with Ray laying out the table the way she would plan a painting. Things were done appropriately and elegantly.”

Buried within the gift wrappings would be the most incredible toys, Demetrios says. “They gave my brother and me one of the first superballs and that was pretty incredible. They bought one of the first slinkys. As you can see, Ray and Charles were very fun.” If not purchasing some of the newer and innovative toys, Ray and Charles would design masks for both adults and children to wear.

As the Eames film, “Power of Ten” depicts, picnics were a mainstay on the property. “Whether it was outside or inside, the place always had a picnic feeling,” Demetrios remembers. “They always had this sense of fun, and they had an expression I liked—‘take your pleasures seriously.’ It was a great line and it was how they approached things. I can remember one of my first trips down to 901 (the Eames House address) by myself. Charles would invent games. I recall a time when he convinced me if we got enough olive pits up on the roof we could get an orchard. He (Charles) had also invented a way for marbles to fall off a roof and hit a xylophone that would in turn make music.”

The Eames’ passion eventually turned into a lucrative business. The plywood chair became the

highest-selling chair, earning Charles and Ray royalties for many years. Today, there is still a market for their work. Albrecht, who has lived the Eames’ career for more than three years while preparing the exhibit (which has already traveled to Germany, Denmark, and London) says “this new look at their work has driven up the market and Eames pieces are increasing in value. I’ve fallen in love with their work,” Albrecht continues. “While theirs was a modernist approach, the home was always filled with Victorian clutter, things each collected from their travels. It made the home warm and unusual.”

Charles Eames liked to think of himself as an architect. Ray’s background was in painting. However, Demetrios says that his grandparents were well suited as a team. “I think they complimented each other very well,” he says. “Everything they did was an extension of architecture and an extension of painting. What this means is that they never considered that they were straying from what each originally did. Rather, they wanted people to see the connection between everything, the seamless connection of things. And an example of that is the 50th anniversary of this house.”
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