All things Eames
Charles and Ray Eames
Designers of the twentieth century

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The Eames

timeline

1907 1907 Charles Eames is born on June 17 in St. Louis, Missouri.

1912 Ray Eames (born Bernice Alexandra Kaiser) is born on December 15 in Sacramento, California.

1938 1938 Charles starts fellowship at Cranbrook Academy of Art

1940 Ray studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art and meets Charles

1941 1941 Charles and Ray marry on June 20th. They move to Los Angeles to begin their life and career together

1942 1942 Charles and Ray designed the Eames Splint for the U.S. Navy. An estimated 150,000 units were produced.

1946 They begin experimenting with molded plywood furniture; their work gains attention.

1948 Their molded plywood chair wins a design competition at MoMA.

1949 They design and construct the Eames House (Case Study House No. 8), showcasing modern architecture.

1951 Wire mesh chair, Kwikset House, The Toy were invented and built

1956 The Eames Lounge Chair is introduced, becoming an iconic design.

1964 They design the IBM Pavilion for the New York World's Fair.

1968 The Eameses expand into film and multimedia, creating notable works, including "Powers of Ten."

1970s The Eameses continue to innovate in exhibition design and furniture.

1978 Charles Eames passes away on August 21, leaving a profound legacy.

1988 Ray Eames passes away on August 21, marking the end of their partnership.

Present Day

The duo's collaborative spirit made a lasting impact on their designs and films, which continue to influence and inspire in the fields of design and architecture.

Introduction

Much of the Eameses' work stands in the best tradition of the design reform movement (which argued for making high-quality everyday objects available at reasonable prices), and also in the best tradition of modernism (which, from the 1920s on, offered a vision of harnessing new technologies, industrial production, and relevant design to the service of humankind).

Charles and Ray Eames belonged to a generation of designers who, before, during and immediately after World War II, were determined to make the world a better place in which to live but were not wedded to a narrow or solely stylistic definition of modernism. Without ever losing sight of their serious objectives, the Eameses brought to their products a lightness of spirit that, to a degree, disguised their commitment and dedication. Their furniture, their films, and their exhibitions delighted the eye, the mind, and the spirit; they also worked well. The Eameses' work was often innovative, although they always insisted that

"designers should innovate only as a last resort."

designers should innovate only as a last resort.[1] They revealed in the particular constraints of specific briefs and in the rationalistic search for the best possible solution to the problem at hand, yet they produced work that has been described as poetic. If, as Frank Llyod Wright said, the poetry of architecture is that which touches the heart[2], then it is not difficult to understand why Paul Schrader and others have referred to the work of the Eameses in that way[3]. It was not simply their liberal use of hearts and flowers, their direct appeal to what they perceived as universal truths and inner humanity of people the world over, or even the power of their ideas and the exquisiteness and affectivity of their compositions and imagery that made

1 Charles Eames/Virginia Stith, 1977.
2 Frank Lloyd Wright, An Autobiography (London, 1977), pp. 33–34.
3 Paul Schrader, "Poetry of ideas," Film Quarterly, spring 1970, p. 10

Charles and Ray Eames in their newly built home

Charles and Ray Eames sitting on their mass-produced plastic chairs

many of their products so memorable; as in a symphony, the whole was muchmore than the sum of the parts. In their passion to convey their enthusiasm to others, the Eameses "shaped not only things but the way people think about things."[4] Their films, exhibitions, and multi-screen presentations show them to have been at the forefront of new thinking about the most effective and pleasurable ways of communicating knowledge to large numbers of people. Their exhibitions and multiple-image shows, in particular, reached large and largely appreciative audiences. Their design work was respected by the cognoscenti and, at the same time, popular in the sense of being seen, used, enjoyed, and admired by many. In this they achieved the modernist designer's dream of enriching the lives of ordinary people with quality objects produced by means of the most up-to-date technology.

4 Walter McQuade, "Charles Eames isn't resting on his chair," Fortune, February 1975, p.98

Influence

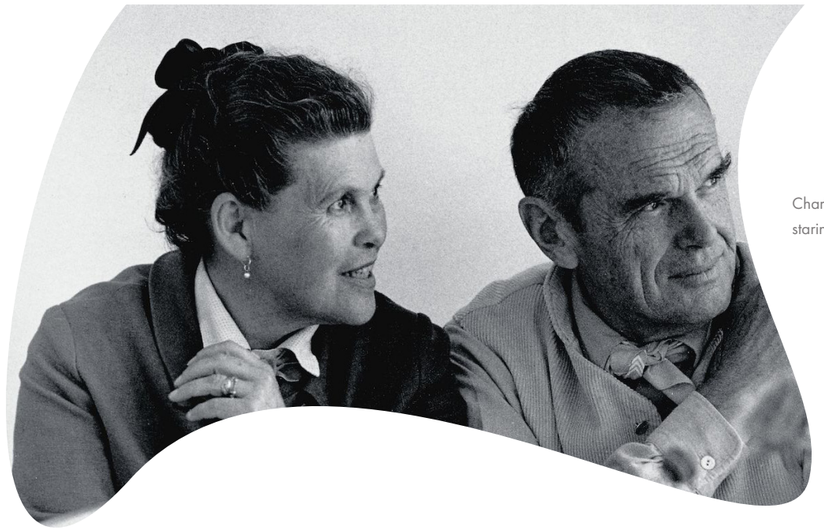
The multifarious influences on the Eameses' work, including ideas drawn from the Arts and Crafts movement, from Frank Lloyd Wright, from European modernism, from Japanese architecture and design from "primitivism" from contemporary fine art, from the "romantic" interior, from Californian modernism, and from a belief in the pleasures of work, have been traced.

No matter what the sources, the end result was invariably distinctive and informed by a concern with structure; for the Eameses, designing a chair, an exhibition, a film or the front page of a newspaper was as much about structure as was designing a building. Despite this, there was not a single aesthetic formula that related to every area of their work; the architecture, for instance, favored geometric forms of International Style modernism, whereas a great deal of the furniture was more plastic in form.

Their building and many of their furniture pieces were minimalist, yet their films, multi-screen presentations, exhibitions, toys, and decorative arrangements of objects drew on addition, juxtaposition, fragmentation, cross-cultural and extra-cultural reference, repetition, and excess. However, as Esther McCoy has pointed out, the interaction between the minimalist frames of the Eameses' buildings and their "varied and rich" contents was similar to that between the structure and the

Poster featuring the low cost and affordable eames chair

1 Esther McCoy, "Charles and Ray Eames," Design Quarterly 98/99 (1974–75), p.29.
2 Ray Eames and Elaine Sewell Jones, interviews with Pat Kirkham, 1983 and 1991 respectively.



Charles and Ray eames staring out into space

Eames products were part of a shift in postwar American taste toward favoring organic over geometric forms, and they found success at a time when modernist design waa broadening from a movement with aspirations toward the monolithic to a pluralism in which alternative aesthetics coexisted more or less happily. The Eameses eschewed exclusive insistence on a machine aesthetic, which they used only when and where it suited them. The Cranbrook experience was crucial to their joint work it validated the eclecticism inherent in Charles's earlier designs while extending his knowledge and understanding of International Style architecture and design, and it tempered Ray's more purist modernism.In Eero Saarinen and in Ray, Charles Eames found empathetic and immensely talented collaborators. The furniture he designed with Saarinen certainly proved seminal to the later work of the Eames Office, but it was with Ray that Charles produced some of the most visually interesting and technologically adventurous furniture in the mid twentieth century.

For every designer who was influenced by the Eameses in terms of style, there were others who drew strength from their commitments to design as a problem-solving exercise, to quality at every level, and to engagement with a wide range of activities, issues, and commercial contexts. They became well known as designers and communicators in the United States, in Western Europe, in Japan and in India. After World War II Japan paid great attention to American design, and from the early 1950s on the Eameses' work was published there by Torao ("Tiger") Saito of Japan Today. In India they became near-celebrities after the release of the Eames Report, which considered the question of design in modern India in relation to small industries and the "rapid deterioration in the design and quality of consumer goods." Insofar as this report led to the establishment of the National Institute of Design, The Eameses had a direct impact on design education in India. Their indirect influence was felt in many other countries through design teachers who took them and their methods as models.

2

Projects

Furniture

The most famous Eames lounge chair

The furniture was particularly influential. Beginning in 1950, the plywood and plastic pieces received considerable publicity in leading Western European design magazines, such as Domus and Bauen und Wohnen and department stores[1]. It inspired many designers, particularly in Italy, West Germany, France, Britain, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia.[2]

Production

Eames furniture was manufactured and distributed by the Herman Miller Furniture Company, or by firms under license to it, all over the world. The management of Herman Miller was horrified at the first imitations of the molded plastic shell furniture but soon realized that this did not stop the upward sweep of the sales curve of their originals. More than 5 million of the chairs were sold in the 25 years after they were first produced[3]. All over the world people experienced these chairs and other pieces of Eames furniture in offices, schools, colleges, and homes.

1 Reyner Banham, "Klarheit, Ehrlichkeit, Einfachheit. . . . and wit too!" in Blueprints, pp. 184–187
2 Holland in Vorm, ed. G. Staal and H. Wolters (Haarlem, 1987).
3 Gingerich, "Conversation with Charles Eames," p. 328.

Architecture

Inside of the Eames design house

The Eames House (their only widely known architectural work) was celebrated in Europe as proving that the purist, rationalistic aesthetic of the International Style could produce habitable buildings[1].The influence of the Eames House on modernist and "high-tech" architects (particularly Norman and Wendy Foster and Richard and Su Rogers) is widely acknowledged, not least by those architects themselves. They, Micheal and Patti Hopkins, and others have paid homage to the work of the Eameses, not only in the concepts and structures of their buildings but also in their use of Eames furniture[2].colleges, and homes.

1 Banham, "Klarheit," pp. 184–187.
2 For example, the Hopkins House, in London (Michael and Patti Hopkins, 1975).

Outside of the Eames design house

Films & Exhibitions

One of the Eames biggest film project, Glimpse of the USA

Their exhibitions, films, and multimedia presentations, particularly those prepared for World's Fairs, were seen by great numbers of people. Several generations of Americans were introduced to scien-tific and mathematical concepts through them—particularly the exhibitions. Charles's "deep understanding of the processes of science and technology" greatly impressed some of the top experts in those fields[1]. This and the role he and Ray played in demystifying and popularizing the computer deserve greater recognition than they have so far been given.

Critics

The exhibitions that were most criticized in their time for being overloaded with text, objects, and ideas suggest that, had they been working in the 1990s, the Eameses would have been fascinated with interactive media and "hyperreality." It seems more than likely, for example, that they would have been involved in developing the communications and educational potential of interactive video, which allows for the differential exploration of images and information.

1 Bernard I. Cohen, "Introduction to the Office of Charles and Ray Eames," in A Computer Perspective (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), p. 5.

Film strips of the Eames molded plywood

Functioning decoration

Eames Plywood Sculpture, 1943

Charles and Ray visited Britain more regularly than other countries and had a dedicated following there. The September 1966 issue of Architectural Designer revealed the extent of the Eamese' influence on British design (particularly on the Independent Group, which in turn influenced Pop Art[1]), articulated a new understanding of their work as offering an additive dimension to a minimalist movement and claimed for it a wit rate in architecture and design and an extensive influence[2]. The authors writing in that journal saw wonderful league of the ordinary, the old, and the exotic represented and rearranged by Peter Blake and others in Britain during the 1960s as a result of the Eameses' liberating aesthetic, which validated "the extravagance of the new purchase," gave "courage to make sense of anything that attracted," and led to interiors decorated with "fresh, pretty, colorful, ephemera." [3]

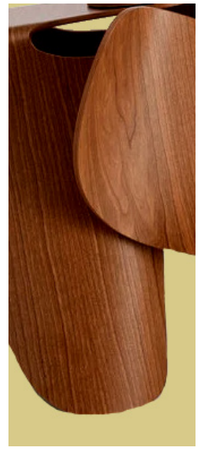
The decorative and apparently lighthearted presentation of serious objects and ideas was characteristic not only of "functioning decoration" but also of the Eameses' exhibitions, films, multimedia presentations, toys, furniture, and buildings; if anything unifies their work; it is this, rather than a single aesthetic. Certain features of the Eameses' work, such as "functioning decoration" and the more general use of juxtaposition, addition, and eclecticism, are not antagonistic to some of those defined as postmodern, and it can be argued that in certain ways these features prefigured some postmodern notions and practices.This is not to say that the Eameses can or should be claimed as postmodernists.

1 "Eames Celebration," Architectural Design, September 1966, pp. 432–471.)
2 Michael Brawne, "The wit of technology," Architectural Design, September 1966, pp. 449–457.
3 Peter Smithson, "Just a few chairs and a house," Architectural Design, September 1966, p. 433.

Innovation

Their words and writings generally privileged technology, structure, materials, and function over aesthetics, but from time to time these elements—as when Charles parried the question of whether function or beauty was more important by asking "Which do you consider more important—a man's heart or a man's head[1]?" They never doubted the basic premise of modernism, yet they added significantly to its vocabulary and its term of reference. Their certainty about their position, their deduction to rigorous research, and their reputation as the people who had finally made low-cost mass-produced modernist furniture widely available enabled them to introduce "prettiness" in the form of flowers, toys, paper kites, and other seemingly frivolous items to a movement that had been known for its overriding seriousness. They combined the seriousness of Enlightenment thought and modernist design principles with the fun of popular entertainment; in the process, they personalized, humanized, popularized, and reshaped modernism.

1 Deborah Sussman/Kirkham, 1991.



Modernist

However, if one accepts that there was much more flexibility within modernism than the narrow and until recently dominant definitions allow, and that many modernisms flourished in the quarter-century after World War II, one can accept both Charles and Ray as modernists. The "prettiness," the information overload, and the decoration overload evident in much of their work alarmed many purists, but at the end of the day the Easmeses were undoubtedly modernists. They were optimists who believed in progress and in a coherent, unified, and rational world, the problems of which were soluble through admittedly immense.

Eames Plywood Elephant

Design Process

Designers who compromised their design ideals by pandering to what they read as public taste took little pleasure in the fact that it was the Eameses who broke down the barriers to popular acceptance of mass-produced modernist furniture in the United States. And even less pleasure in the irony that. In the process, they made a considerable amount of money.

In that they always put design ethics before money or fame, the Eameses were role models for many younger designers. (For example, their refusal of a commission to redesign the Budweiser logo because they liked the existing one became legendary in design circles[1].)

In the opportunistic years of the post-war boom in America, the Eameses offered an alternative to the rather crude money-making ethos of certain sections of design professions and of the business community. Although they held strong liberal views on many issues, they never aligned themselves with any group or movement—artistic, social, or political. Their approach to design never challenged capitalism; indeed, they were held up as proof that it was possible for designers to retain integrity and cut against the grain of the mainstream ideology of postwar America.

1 Eames Design, p. 149.

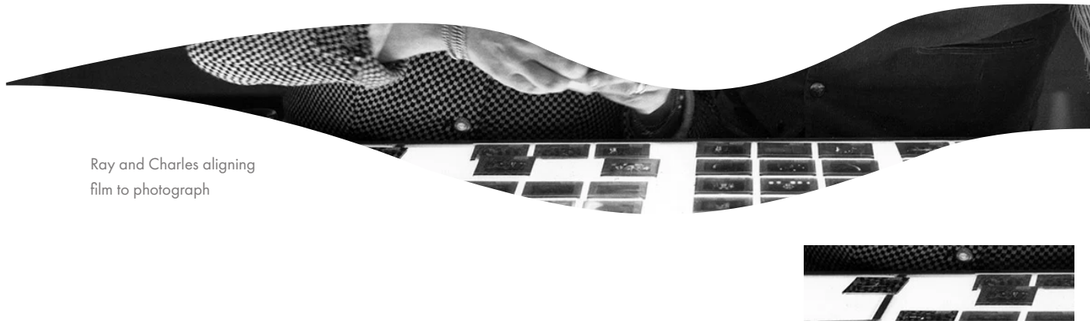
Detail Oriented

To the Eameses, there was no other way to operate; perfection was the goal. They always insisted on quality; it was their watchword. They set standards not only in furniture and exhibition trades but also sponsored filmmaking.

Contemporaries greatly admired their breadth of vision. Besides working in a variety of media and being interested in a wide range of topics, they cared about ideas as well as visuals. Paul Schrader saw the Eames Office as a Renaissance workshop; others used similar terms. Charles was, and is often described as a "Renaissance man" and likened to Leonardo da Vinci[1]. Buckminster Fuller touched on both the Eameses' belief in the parallels between science and art and their particular and unique ways of seeing things when he noted that "a generally great scientist is an artist. Charles is an artist-scientist. He has a beautiful lens[2]."

1 Eames Celebration; Julius Shulman/Kirkham, 1993.
2 Buckminster Fuller, Eames Celebration.

Ray cutting and collaging different materials to craete an image



Ray and Charles aligning film to photograph

3

Lasting Impact

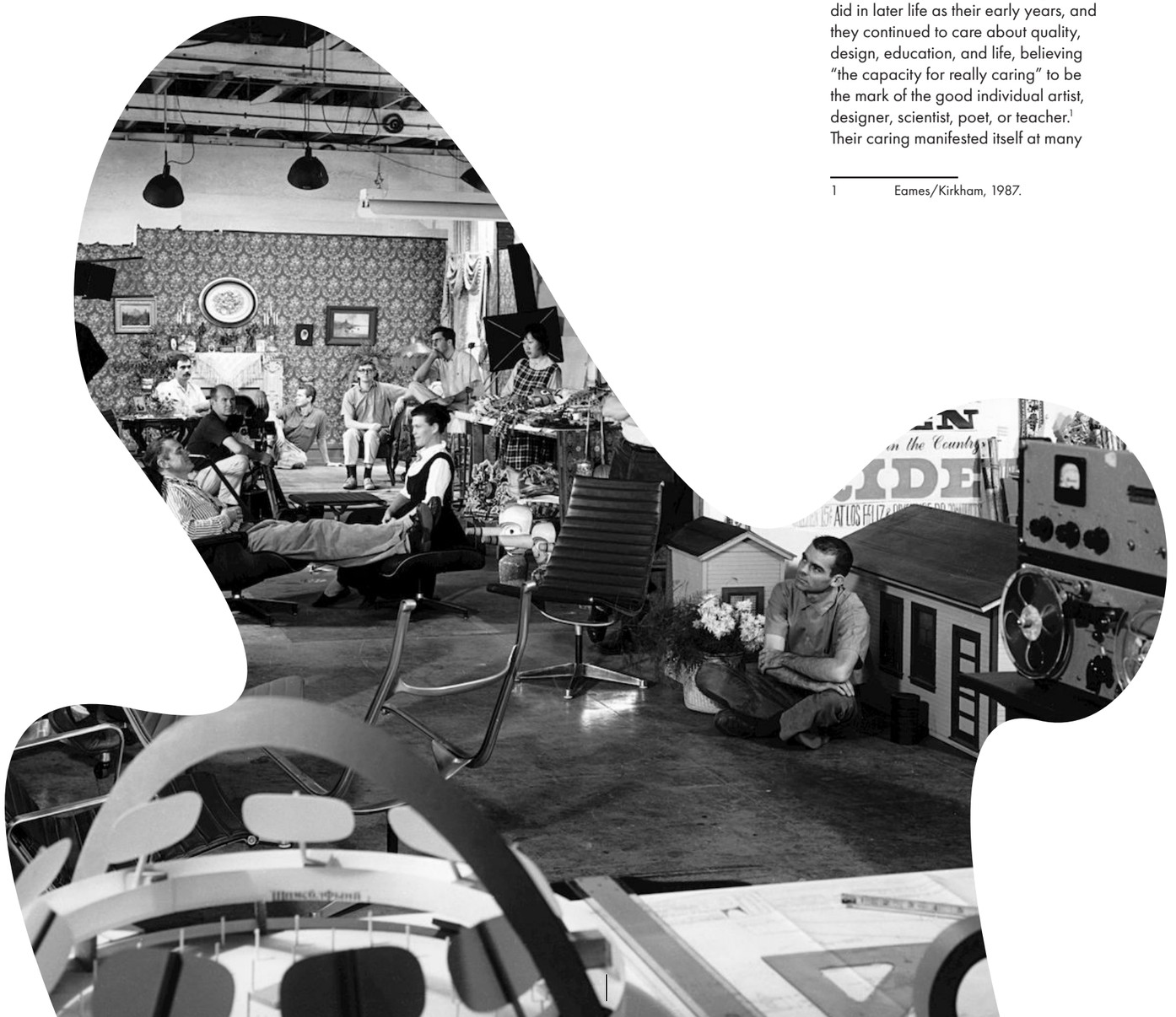
Ray Eames

Fuller was correct, but his viewpoint was partial. The Eameses' special way of designing and looking at things—Their lens, if you like—came from Ray as much as Charles. At the end of the day it was often her "special touch" that determined the final visual form of a chair, an exhibition, a film set, or an arrangement of objects. In the words of the Neuharts, it was Ray who so often made the difference between "good, and very good" and "Eames." There is no doubt that some people, at the time, and since, undervalued Ray's contribution to the partnership. Therefore a considerable emphasis on Ray's contribution to the partnership as former staff members spoke of her as brilliant and an exceptional eye.

In general their partnership was an easy one. Charles was used with working in partnerships; indeed he seemed to flourish in them—as did Ray in her partnership with him. Ray was always the first to give Charles credit, and vice versa. Each had enormous admiration for the other's abilities. Trained as an abstract artist, Ray approached design largely in terms of form, composition, color, and structure; Charles, the architect, saw the design process mainly in terms of structure, technology and the rationale of solving problems. But it was not just in relation to structure that their concerns and abilities overlapped. In terms of interest, it was simple; they had many in common, and what were not Ray's at first soon became hers also. Matters such as the fundamental question of how one sees and understands things interested them both when they met in 1940 and remained a concern throughout their lives.

The Legacy

Like all good teachers, the Eameses remained perpetual students. They had an underlying philosophy relating to contemporary solutions to problems of the modern world, and they were never afraid to enter into new areas of investigation. They had the ability to push forward on more than one front at a time, and in each case there was a complex dialect between past work and present interests. Never concerned with innovation for its own sake, they were interested in solving problems. Because they valued the past (particularly its objects and ideas) for what it could teach us about the present, because they never produced anything without expending an enormous amount of time and energy on research and development, they were the antithesis of the throwaway "Kleenex culture" prevalent in certain aspects of American life in the 1950s and the 1960s. They were prepared to stick to their guns even when their ideas seemed to go against the grain of fashionable thought.



As designers and filmmakers the Eameses grew in stature over the years, learning not only from their own experiences but also from other individuals and other cultures about how people thought, worked, lived, played, and designed. They remained as enthusiastic about everything they did in later life as their early years, and they continued to care about quality, design, education, and life, believing "the capacity for really caring" to be the mark of the good individual artist, designer, scientist, poet, or teacher.[1] Their caring manifested itself at many

1 Eames/Kirkham, 1987.

drive for perfection in everything they did down to the smallest detail. They insisted on trying to keep human concerns central in a world that was becoming increasingly focused on high technology. Hard work and commitment kept them young; it seemed they would never grow old, so enthusiastic were they about everything they did. Above all, the Eameses were educators and communicators. This was why films, exhibitions, and multimedia presentations interested them so much. They believed that most people had talents and gifts within them which would flourish if nurtured. In contrast with the idea of a "gifted few," they believed 'just in people doing things they are really interested in doing."
[1]

They were critical of the American educational system, which encouraged early specialization and failed to produce rounded individuals. In their time, they were the American designers most committed to education in the broadest sense of the word—to a continuous, continuing, pleasurable process of learning—and the ones best able to present serious educational material in apparently unserious ways. Suzanne Muchnic commented on some of these qualities in a tribute published shortly before Charles died: "The couple's commitment to education as a joyful sensuous process is inspiring, and their spirit of boundless creative energy is contagious."
[2]Their boundless energy, their spirit of independent inquiry, their joy in life, and their commitments to education and quality in all things and to exploring the possibilities

1 Lacy, "Warehouse full of ideas," p. 27.
2 Suzanne Muchnic, "A tribute to Charles and Ray Eames," Art Week, January 15, 1977, p.5.