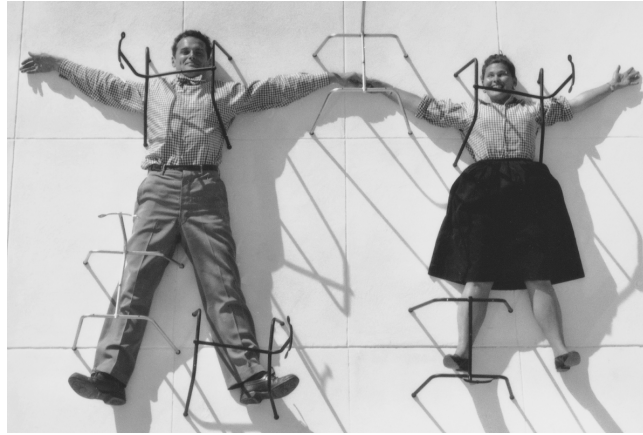


## Ray Eames: The Foremother of Good Design - The Edit | Lumens.com

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Ray + Charles Eames

Anything I can do, Ray can do better.

*Charles Eames*

On screen, Ray Eames often stood slightly behind her partner, Charles, as he introduced the groundbreaking designs that would go on to become mid-century staples, like the Eames Lounge Chair, the Molded Plywood Eames Chair, the Dining Chair and La Chaise. In these archival clips, Ray's hand and foot can often be seen flittering in the corner of the frame until she disappears completely, and the camera zooms in to examine how a design is capable of seamlessly executing mechanical complexity with aesthetic simplicity.

In [interviews later in her life](#), Ray said that she didn't mind being the quieter half of the design dream team, but only because "Charles has a way of putting things which people pay attention to." While she may have been quiet in front of an audience, Ray was as creative as ever and her lack of public speaking in no way impacted her prolific contributions to the Eames oeuvre. In fact, it was Ray's early affinity for and training in abstract expressionist art—with all its push and play between different depths, forms and colors—that heavily inspired the very aesthetics of the couples' furniture designs that are today nearly synonymous with mid-century modernism.

### From Sacramento to New York: Ray's Journey Toward an Artistic Life

Born in Sacramento, California in 1912, Ray grew up surrounded by an appreciation for the arts: Both parents expressed their joy for the performing arts, from popular entertainment to classical ballet. Her father, Alexander Kaiser, owned a vaudeville theatre in Ray's early years, and the young artist-to-be often found herself in the company of artistically-inclined individuals.



Ray Eames Portrait ©Eames Office, LLC. All rights reserved.

It's not much of a surprise, then, that Ray would pursue her artistry as early as she could: first at Sacramento Junior College where she pursued illustration and poster design amongst other classes, and then at the May Friend Bennett School in Millbrook, NY where she continued her artistic studies with an emphasis on fashion design. After her time at the all-girls school, Ray would meet one of the first of many influential characters in her life's cast, Hans Hofmann, who nurtured her interest in abstract expressionist art.

Living alone in New York City and working full-time on her paintings, Ray became a founding member of the American Abstract Artists where she worked alongside her friends Lee Krasner and Mercedes Matter to promote abstract art in a community that was less than apt to take the movement seriously. In 1937, the AAA presented their first group show at the Riverside Museum in Manhattan. Today, Eames and abstract art enthusiasts alike can view one of Ray's only remaining early works, an offset lithograph titled "Untitled," as it resides in The Whitney Museum of American Art's permanent collection.

*Somehow I've always been interested in structure, whatever form it was— . . . in dance and music, and even my interest in literature had that [same] base, I think . . . as structure in architecture.*

*1980 Oral History Interview with Ray Eames, Courtesy of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*

In late 1940, Ray set her sights on California, but a close friend suggested that she might stop first in the Midwest, at the Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Michigan. As she put on her student cap once more, Ray moved beyond painting as her primary medium. At the Academy, she began to study weaving, ceramics and metalwork. She

also met a man named Charles Eames, then head of the department for industrial design. The rest, as they say, was history.

## The Design Dream Team Goes West



Ray + Charles Eames

Shortly after their marriage in 1941, Ray and Charles Eames moved to Los Angeles where they resided in a Richard Neutra-designed apartment. When Ray met Charles at Cranbrook, he was working with fellow designer Eero Saarinen to craft what would be their winning submission to the MoMA Competition for Organic Design in Home Furnishing: the LCW (Lounge Chair Wood).

But while the award-winning chair had been designed, Eames and Saarinen were still having difficulty putting the chair into mass production. As Charles worked days at MGM as a set designer, Ray painted and designed covers for *California Arts and Architecture* magazine—but she was also at home working with [the Kazam!](#), a makeshift machine the couple created that would pave the path to mass-producing the curvy, molded plywood furniture that placed the Eames design duo on the map.

Before the designers could truly get started, though, WWII began and the Eames' were contracted by the U.S. Navy to create molded plywood leg splints due to their innovative techniques with the material. After the production of 150,000 splints for injured men and the end of the war, Ray and Charles Eames returned to their passions of architecture and design, producing some of the most iconic pieces still revered around the world today.

## The Eames Oeuvre

Recognizing the need is the primary condition for design.

*Ray + Charles Eames*

### 1945: Molded Plywood Dining Chair



[Eames Molded Plywood Dining Chair with Wood Legs, Upholstered](#) by [Charles + Ray Eames](#) for [Herman Miller](#)

Declared by *TIME* magazine as the Best Design of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Molded Plywood Dining Chair (DCW) was one of the first Eames creations to be produced using their innovative plywood techniques. Rather than using natural wood, plywood allowed Ray and Charles to manipulate the material without the risk of the chair shrinking, swelling or splitting when exposed to moisture. While the original design was meant to be made from a single-piece shell, the curves—arguably a defining characteristic of the chair—could not be achieved without splitting the piece into a seat and back, resulting in the organic and supremely comfortable 1945 design.

#### 1948: La Chaise



[La Chaise](#) by Charles + Ray Eames for [Vitra](#)



Calling back to Ray's interest in abstract art, La Chaise takes form as a surrealist impression of the design's original inspiration, Gaston Lachaise's modernist sculpture, *The Floating Figure*. Designed in 1948, Ray and Charles used a plastic and rubber composite—continuing their post-WWII use of new technologies and materials—to create La Chaise which was submitted to the International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design. While the design did not win, it did earn a special mention for its “striking, good-looking and inventive” form. Even Herman Miller deemed the design too costly to manufacture, and La Chaise was kept in the Eames' archive until 1990 when it became available to the public through Switzerland-based brand, Vitra.

### 1950: Molded Fiberglass Chair



[Eames Molded Fiberglass Chair – Wire Base](#) by Charles + Ray Eames for Herman Miller

Also designed for the International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design, the Molded Fiberglass Chair was released in 1950. A creation of the economic conditions post-WWII, the chair was the first of its kind with the back and seat crafted completely from one single plastic shell. Practical in design and offered in an array of colors—the latter largely inspired by Ray's art background—the chair was immediately popular with the public, and resonated with the Eames' design philosophy that furniture should be accessible and affordable to the masses.



Ray Eames

Prolific in the fields of architecture, graphic design, textile design, furniture and even film, Ray Eames continued living in the couple's iconic Pacific Palisades home, The Eames House (Case Study 8), until she passed, ten years to the day after her husband Charles. Spending some of her final years cataloguing 750,000 images to create a comprehensive collection of the Eames body of work, she gifted 910,000 objects to the Library of Congress, cementing her—and Charles'—place in the national memory of great design.