Serious Fun: The Wild World of Charles and Ray Eames

Description

Ray and Charles Eames

American design duo Charles and Ray Eames are icons of the 20th century, pioneering the streamlined naturalism of Mid-Century Modernism. Their particular brand of Modernist architecture, interiors, furniture and industrial design was both playful and minimal, injecting fun into the po-faced seriousness of the design world. He was the clean minimalist who revolutionised weightless design while she was the artist who brought in colour, eclecticism and fun. Together they projected to the world a vision of blissful coupledom, but the reality was more complex and nuanced; Ray struggled to be taken seriously and had to work twice as hard to earn her place at the table.

Ray and Charles Eames

Charles Eames trained as an architect in Washington and Missouri, while Bernice Kaiser, known as âRayâ, was a painter who had studied with the famous Abstract Expressionist Hans Hoffman. They met in 1940 while both

were working at the esteemed Cranbrook academy, which had an established reputation for fostering modernist design talent. Ray was employed to help Charles and the furniture designer Eeero Saarinen develop a series of designs for the Museum of Modern Artâs Organic Furniture Competition made from moulded plywood â the designs went on to win two first prizes.

Charles and Ray immediately hit it off and by 1941 they had married. Following a move to California, the pair went on to establish their own design house in 1947. The years they shared together were impressively prolific as they moved seamlessly between an array of design work including architecture, interiors, furniture and film. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s furniture was the most widespread and popular strand of their output. Their most timeless and iconic design was the DSR Chair, 1948, with a seat made from moulded fibreglass and base in wooden or metal rods, the ESU storage units, 1954, featuring plywood sliding doors and playful multicoloured panels, and the stackable DSS Eames Plastic Chair, 1955. Another design classic that is still as popular today, as it was in the 1950s, is the Lounge Chair and Ottoman set, which was modelled with the ultimate comfort in mind, following Eamesâ vision for a chair with the âwarm, receptive look of a well-used first basemanâs mitt.â

Ray and Charles sit in the living room of the house they designed together in California in 1958, with the famous Lounge Chair and Ottoman set in the foreground

While it was Charles who received the most credit for their teamwork, he was the first to point out Rayâs integral role in their design process, arguing, âAnything I can do, Ray can do better.â But within wider circles, this attitude has taken decades to filter through â in her day Ray was often pushed to the side, or patronisingly seen as Charlesâ helper. The chauvinistic attitudes of the 1950s were partly to blame, but so, too was the nature of her input, which was, perhaps harder to spot, focusing on the final finishes, colours and details that gave their style its distinctively human touch.

Of all the designs Ray and Charles collaborated on, the home they built together in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles in 1949 was by far the most influential aspect of their design legacy, so much so it is now considered one of the most important design breakthroughs of the post-war era, and has been preserved as a National Historic Landmark in the United States. Their

home became the centre of their life together, a place where they would entertain high-profile friends from the realms of design and film, encouraging them to try out their latest mad-cap furniture designs and inventions.

The eclectic interior of the Eames home in Los Angeles, now recognised as

an iconic emblem of mid-century design

But the home also allowed each partner to express their individual voices clearly â Charles designed the Bauhaus-style framework and exterior with huge panes of glass to bring the outside in, and to give the entire building a weightless quality which a critic in Architectural Forum described as âlife in a Chinese kite.â Ray, on the other hand, focused on the interiors of the building, breathing warmth and life into the austere glass minimalist look with all manner of patterned rugs, plants and artefacts collected from their adventurous travels across the globe. âTake your pleasure seriously,â wrote Charles – it was this combined aesthetic that made the Eames such a monumental force of mid-century design, merging the austere geometry of Modernism with a spirit of joyful, irreverent fun.

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