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Charles Eames

by Eliot Noyes

There is no need to qualify the statement. Charles Eames has designed and produced the most important group of furniture ever developed in this country. His achievement is a compound of aesthetic brilliance and technical inventiveness. He has not only produced the finest chairs of modern design, but through borrowing, improvising, and inventing techniques, he has for the first time exploited the possibilities of mass production methods for the manufacture of furniture. With one stroke he has underlined the design decadence and the technical obsolescence of Grand Rapids.

When you stop and try to analyze how he approached the problem, it sounds very easy and obvious. Whatever good modern furniture we have had in this country has always been expensive. Eames wanted to produce a good set of designs and "take them out of the carriage trade" by designing them so that they could be manufactured economically in quantity and sold cheaply. This meant that he must be able to use the best ways of doing things that the 20th Century could offer. Naturally he wanted his furniture to be as comfortable and useful as possible, because he never forgot that he was making his designs for use. This very direct approach made it comparatively simple. He never worried much (as many designers do) about "what the public wants," or "what the public will accept," because he had a profound belief in the public, and the conviction that if they didn't want or wouldn't accept the furniture which he was designing for their use, the fault lay in his designs, not in the public. He knew very well the absurdity of trying to design to an assumed public taste. It is important to realize that the furniture is an expression of this direct approach; each piece is composed as much of the personal ingredients of Charles Eames as of wood and metal. If you examine this furniture you will find sincerity, honesty, conviction, affection, imagination, and humor. You will not grasp how this furniture came into being or what it really means unless you understand this also about Charles Eames.

The collection includes a wide variety of pieces, using wood and metal as basic materials. There are many types of chairs both for indoors and outdoors, for dining and for conversation, for reading or relaxing. There is also a complete system of unit cases which, with the tables of various heights and sizes, fills out the complete set of furniture needed for living rooms, dining rooms, studies, and so forth. Of the whole group, the chairs are without question the most revolutionary designs.

Two of the most striking features of these continued on page 30

chairs in a design sense are their articulation and their sculptural quality. With the exception of the Windsor chair and a few classic pieces of modern furniture, it is hard to think of any pieces in which there is such a clear indication of the nature and function of each part. The success with which lightness and elegance have been combined with strength enhances this articulation. The marvellously clean details of the connections have made it possible for chair frames to be clearly expressed as distinct elements to which seats and backs are neatly and simply attached. To this revealed structure, Eames has added sensitive seat and back forms which give each chair the quality of a brilliant piece of abstract sculpture. On some, the thin metal members are linear elements of a composition in which the seat and back become subtle forms whose shapes and relationship change constantly and delightfully as one walks around the chair. This effect is intensified by the use of a broad range of wood textures, colors, and metal finishes, which also provide a great variation of mood in the pieces. Modern furniture has never before had such a range of woods so well finished. One extremely sculptural piece has seat and back of wood impregnated with a dull jet black, and a thin black metal frame making an elegant line through the composition. The mood ranges from the austere and somber through the broadly comfortable to the gay and even humorous. Some chairs have seats and backs covered in leather or calf hide. Others have bright red, yellow, or blue parts which introduce a new cheery note into modern furniture. There is an unmistakable quality of humor in the tilt-back chair, a completely new type which emerged from Eames' experiments. This design grew out of lunch hour activity in the workshop. During the processes of trying out new leg arrangements, and more as a joke than a serious idea, a chair was assembled with the four legs rearranged so that one leg extended to the rear and another to the front, with only three touching the ground at any time. This made it possible to sit down in a normal upright position, then tilt back and be supported by the rear leg, instead of leaning against the wall or teetering unsteadily in space, or worse. This model sat in the workshop along with other chairs under development and when the lunch hour came around, the carpenters and shop workers all made a dive for this tilt-back chair to sit in. Such spontaneous appreciation was impressive, and the chair was given further study. It has now become one of the most interesting and important features of the group. Great oaks from little acorns. . . .

Since the first showing of this furniture to the public at the Museum of Modern Art in New York last March, there have been many wide-eyed articles written about it. The structural innovations and technical solutions in these designs are so startling that it seemed at times that they were receiving more than their share of attention. It is not possible to overstate their importance, and I shall discuss them all in detail later on.

It will be useful first to review the circumstances which led Eames into making furniture.

Eames is basically an architect. His first excursion into furniture design was with Eero Saarinen when they jointly entered the Organic Design Competition conducted by the Museum of Modern Art in 1940-41, receiving two first prizes. Their designs proposed for the first time the use of molded plywood forms for chairs to fit the human body. The jury, in awarding the prizes, decided that these designs were possible to construct, although nobody, including the technical experts present, had any very exact idea of just how it might be done.

By the terms of the competition, winning designs were to be produced and offered for sale. The next step, therefore, was to search out the means for producing continued on page 36

