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Source: *The American Scholar*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 1977), pp. 326-337

Published by: [Phi Beta Kappa Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41207497>

Accessed: 05-03-2016 22:12 UTC

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A Conversation with Charles Eames

OWEN GINGERICH

FROM THE SHOP OF CHARLES AND RAY EAMES have flowed some of the most influential ideas in modern design. These include prize-winning chairs that are part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art; the original concept and development of multimedia shows; and a series of exhibitions that have culminated in "The World of Franklin and Jefferson," which opened at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1976.

For some years the Eames's shop has been a converted automotive garage in Venice, California. Unpretentious and anonymous on the outside, it still proclaims "24-hour Towing Service" and "Fenders and Body Work." Inside, the shop has been likened to "the Whole Earth Catalog in three dimensions." In cluttered surroundings—antique toys, avant-garde posters, exhibition models, moviolas, and peepshows—Charles Eames, his wife Ray, and their staff of about twenty craftsmen simultaneously juggle a dozen or so projects. Pinups from the recent Eames retrospective at UCLA vie for wall space with ancient memorabilia and scenes from the current refilming of Powers of Ten. In the comparative isolation of the projection room, where I had just viewed a triple-screen slide show on the Tall Ships, I captured Charles for a rambling, uninterrupted conversation.

OWEN GINGERICH: Most people, I believe, think of you in terms of chairs. I remember so well how, when we were starting on the Copernicus show, we arrived at the Arlanda Airport in Sweden and you looked around and said, "These are all my chairs."

CHARLES EAMES: I probably said, "These are all *our* chairs."

GINGERICH: Never mind.

EAMES: But it's unlike me to say "*my* chairs."

GINGERICH: But nevertheless they were from your designs. Were they Scandinavian copies, or were they really imported?

● OWEN GINGERICH, professor of astronomy and the history of science at Harvard University, has been a consultant on Eames exhibitions off and on for roughly a decade.

EAMES: By that time there were licensed manufacturers in Europe. But honestly, it's a disappointment to walk into a Swedish airport and not see good Swedish chairs. It's sort of like walking into a European restaurant and being offered a Kansas City steak. Particularly in Scandinavia, as a traveler you should be allowed to enjoy some indigenous quality and some exotic experience.

GINGERICH: Most people would call you a designer, but I know you prefer to think of yourself as an architect. How do the chairs fit into that?

EAMES: I think I've mentioned to you that we consider this all as architecture: the chairs are architecture, the films—they have structure just as the front page of a newspaper has structure. The chairs are literally like architecture in miniature. For an architect who has difficulty controlling a building because of the contractor and the various forces brought to bear on anything that costs that much money, a chair is almost handleable on a human scale, and so you find great architects turning to chairs: Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Aalto, Eero Saarinen—any number of them doing it, because this is architecture you can get your hands on.

GINGERICH: Do you have an objection to the word "designer"?

EAMES: It is not that I'm embarrassed about "designer" so much as the degree to which I prefer the word "architect" and what it implies. It implies structure, a kind of analysis, as well as a kind of tradition behind it. I was put on the spot by some students at Oxford because of things I had said about the world of painting and sculpture, and they said, "How do you think of yourself?" I said I really think of myself as a tradesman. The question was whether or not I thought of myself as an artist, and I'm a little taken aback by anyone calling himself an artist because of my feeling that that's the kind of designation other people should give. You can *be* an artist in any field, but getting a degree to *call* yourself an artist would be like getting a diploma to call yourself a genius.

I call myself a tradesman, but any good tradesman should work only on problems that come within his genuine interest, and you solve a problem for your client where your two interests overlap. You would do an injustice to both yourself and your client to work on a problem of interest to the client but not to you—it just wouldn't work. In that spirit we are tradesmen. If your work is good enough, it can be art, but art isn't a product. It's a quality. Sometimes that's lost sight of. Quality can be in anything.

GINGERICH: Concerning the chairs, I've heard that you've never patented any of them. Is that correct?

EAMES: No, it's not. In the late thirties and early forties we were working on molded plywood techniques, and this was a very expensive procedure that could be used only for airplanes. We were terribly

concerned about being able to make compound curves in a way that would be less expensive. Because of the general state of affairs, we had to take out patents on six or eight things related to the technology, and along with them, as demonstrations, were some of the early chairs. One of the things we had committed ourselves to was trying to do a chair with a hard surface that was as comfortable as it could be in relation to the human body and also that would be self-explanatory as you looked at it—no mysteries, so that the techniques of how it was made would be part of the aesthetics. We felt very strongly about this, because at the time there were so many things made with the opposite idea in mind, that is, to disguise a thing as if it were made at the Gobelin factories in Paris, when in fact it had been manufactured by modern techniques.

So we had these things in mind. We had patents, and at first the patents turned out to be valuable assets in terms of protection. But pretty soon we found that if we worked with a patent in mind—well, you know certain things are patentable and certain things not patentable. Now what divides the patentable from the non-patentable is entirely different from what divides the good and appropriate from the bad and the inappropriate. If one has bitten the apple and been seduced into the idea of having a patentable item and royalties, there is always the temptation to make the design such as to be patentable rather than to be good.

There is a passage from the *Gita* that comes to mind: “Work done with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done in the calm of self-surrender.” Anxiety about getting the approval of friends or the community, or about whether it will be patentable, always leads to inferior work.

GINGERICH: So you just stopped patenting chairs?

EAMES: It’s unfair to the client if you say, “Don’t patent them,” so we arrived at the following principle: If the client wants to patent them, that’s his problem. If it’s to his interest, let him do it, but we will not put any of our effort into twisting the thing so that it’s patentable. There are some surprising corollaries. When some of the blatant copies arrived, patent or no patent, they were refused by the government official at the pier just because they *were* detailed copies.

The original chair, the first called “the Eames chair,” was molded plywood with very thin metal legs. If you look at any history of modern furniture, it is presented as a classic. It is probably the only chair we ever did that got the amount of attention, from us, that it deserved. The first imitations of the molded plastic shell that appeared in this country horrified the Herman Miller Furniture Company. They soon found it in their hearts not to be completely outraged, because each time a copy appeared, the sales of the original went up!

GINGERICH: Your most famous chair is very widely copied.

EAMES: The chair of which you speak, the black leather, down-stuffed lounge chair, I have never considered as good a solution as the other one, although it has apparently given a lot of pleasure to people. It has a sort of ugliness to it. I take a certain comfort in the fact that Picasso pointed out through Gertrude Stein (in the Alice B. Toklas book) that anything that is truly original must have a touch of ugliness because it has not had a chance to be honed to the elegance that comes with refinement. About ten years ago a German publication published pictures of the original lounge chair and seventy-five different manufactured copies.

GINGERICH: But don't you have to worry about plagiarism?

EAMES: What you really worry about in the design of furniture or in architecture are the *bad* copies, when your idea is used in a kind of booby way. You don't mind if someone carries your idea further in a better way, although at first your nose may be a bit out of joint.

GINGERICH: I suppose that people whose opinions matter to you will recognize imitations for what they are. But how can you protect ideas that are still in an embryonic stage?

EAMES: There is a kind of moral patent that is taken out all over the world, within the circles of workers themselves. As you know, Eero Saarinen and I worked very closely together, especially when we were younger. (He died about ten years ago.) In 1939 we won the Organic Competition at the Museum of Modern Art by working on furniture together. As an architect he was known to be very competitive. He was a joy to compete along with, and a terror to compete against. Then Eero continued to design some furniture, and it was distributed by Hans Knoll, while our furniture was distributed by Herman Miller.

It was a healthy situation between us, but Eero would call me up in the middle of the night and would start telling me about a design for a chair he had in mind. He would be very explicit about the design, and then he would go down the list of all possible uses that this design could be put to, anything he could get in verbally to me—and I would be saying, "Don't tell me, I don't want to hear anything about it, I'm hanging up!"—and he would go on reciting this litany of uses, because if he told them to me, that was his moral patent. It's the kind of thing architects still practice. They throw an idea immediately to their friends, especially those who would be their greatest competitors.

GINGERICH: You were mentioning your earlier collaboration with Eero Saarinen. . . .

EAMES: It used to be this way. In the middle of the night, at three o'clock in the morning—and this has something to do with what is known as the creative process—out of despair I would say something like, "If we can't do anything else, let's paint it brown." And then Eero

would say, "What? Of course we'll make it round. It's obvious that's the solution. Why is it that I'm an idiot? I never thought of it. You take it and see it should be round."

And I say, "Wait a minute, you're mistaken. I just said a dumb thing about it being brown."

"You're always trying to make me feel good. I never have any ideas, you have all the ideas. Why didn't I think of it?"

"But I said 'brown.' "

"Don't give me that crap."

It reminds me of the fellow who reviews books so well that he pulls them up to another level. Then an author reads a review of his book and says, "Did I say that?"

GINGERICH: You said something earlier about the honesty of materials when you were discussing the molding of plywood for chairs. That is the same theme mentioned at the beginning of *Toccata for Toy Trains*, your marvelous film that has many of your antique toys in it.

EAMES: The *Toy Trains* describes the unself-conscious use of materials in making an honest toy: "Tin is tin, what is wood is really wood, and what is cast is often beautifully cast." A toy tin train representing a complex locomotive does not try to make the tin look as though it were wrought iron or riveted plate or whatever. The material speaks for itself.

GINGERICH: From considering yourself an architect to being creative in designing toys—that's quite a wide step. Can you justify toys as miniature architecture?

EAMES: Rather than looking at toys as miniature architecture, I would look at them as miniature science. Much of hydraulics found its way into toys, displays, and tricks before it became a mechanical science. Static electricity went a long way in toys before being developed much as a science.

GINGERICH: Have you ever thought of an exhibit on toys as protoscience?

EAMES: Yes, especially of certain logical and mathematical games. We actually made an exhibit of that nature, although it was not seen by the public—we did it for an IBM training center. We have about thirty mathematical games here—many old, even ancient games.

An exhibit of toys and games can have important uses. Suppose, for example, we were to have an exhibition of sophisticated Japanese painting: the most sophisticated things are, in practice, removed from the primitive and are often exotic to our experience. At the beginning of such an exhibition, we have often thought of having a sort of decompression chamber that would show such toys as we've just described, or other games or ceremonies that are common to our experience. Our view is that if such things were seen before viewing the sophisticated art, and if

indeed spectators did relate to them, that would be one very important step toward embracing the more sophisticated art.

The conversation thus led to a discussion of the series of exhibitions that the Eames office has designed over the past twenty years, many on mathematical or scientific topics sponsored by IBM. The art and motivation for exhibit making are akin to multimedia productions, a concept invented and pioneered by the Eameses.

GINGERICH: Multimedia seems to have mushroomed everywhere, like fast food establishments. Do you sometimes think you have opened a Pandora's box?

EAMES: In a word, yes. It's something like the situation about twenty years ago when we thought of using wire technology to create a piece of furniture—wire technology had gone pretty far in terms of shopping center carts and that kind of thing—and so we did some wire furniture. It came back to haunt us, because afterward there was a rash of the kitschiest stuff, and we had to think, "Oh, my God, what have we done?" In some respects this is true of the multimedia.

GINGERICH: Isn't the term "multimedia" something of a misnomer?

EAMES: Yes. In most cases what they're talking about is the production of multiple images; by the same terms, any motion picture would be multimedia because it has both sound and images. The first thing that we did, which was entitled *A Rough Sketch for a Sample Lesson for a Hypothetical Course*, was indeed multimedia. This was in 1950 or 1951. It had not only multiple images, including the relationship between still and motion pictures, but also sensory things—smell and music. We used a lot of sound, sometimes carried to a very high volume so you would actually feel the vibrations. So in the sense that we were introducing sounds, smells, and a different kind of imagery, we were introducing multimedia. We did it because we wanted to heighten awareness.

GINGERICH: Did you introduce the word at that time?

EAMES: No, we were anxious to treat multimedia as a tool and not as a show. The smells were quite effective. They did two things: they came on cue, and they heightened the illusion. It was quite interesting because in some scenes that didn't have smell cues, but only smell suggestions in the script, a few people felt they had smelled things—for example, the oil in the machinery.

GINGERICH: What induced you to try such a show? Were your motivations any different from those of the multiplicity of multimedia we've got now?

EAMES: What has bothered us, if "bothered" is the word, is the frantic use of changing images and an abundance of images for psych-

edelic effect. The thing that separates our shows from some of the others is that we use multimedia for a very specific reason. In the case of the *Sample Lesson*, we were trying to cram into a short time, a class hour, the most background material possible. George Nelson, Alexander Girard, Ray, and I had been asked by the University of Georgia to make a study of some of the problems of the schools where the students weren't getting a broad enough background for things having to do with a particular discipline. Instead of writing a report, we decided we would pool our fees and put together a show for a typical class. It would supply a very broad range of material upon which the teacher could then base his arguments; in other words, what happened in those fifty minutes would replace a certain amount of deficiency in background, but would leave the teacher free to make the connections.

GINGERICH: What subject did you pick?

EAMES: That's an interesting question. We made it clear that this was just the lesson for this particular day, and for this lesson we picked communications. Later we took out of it the *Communications Primer* for IBM, but that was just one little aspect.

For example, we asked ourselves whether indeed the Chartres Cathedral, as you see it now, a work of art from the past, is really communicating today the same kind of emotional reactions that it did in its time. We tried to evoke—with sound and smells and imagery—the interior of Chartres, what it might have been for an instant during the 1300s, but with the thought of letting the teacher develop the points. The Chartres thing was appropriate because we first presented this show down in Southern Baptist country where the people hadn't ever gotten close to what a fourteenth-century Catholic cathedral might have been.

GINGERICH: I remember very vividly your multi-screen show in the IBM pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair. That can't have been your first public multimedia show, because there were already quite a few other multiple-screen productions at the fair.

EAMES: The first large, broadly seen show was the one we did in Moscow in 1959, at the time of the Nixon kitchen debate. There our purpose for the multimedia was quite different. We had the very difficult problem of making the first statement from this country to the Soviet Union since the Russian Revolution. There had been no major statement from people to people until that time. We had to be very careful of what we did. We knew that words had their limitations; they could be used to the point of being almost without effect, certainly without the effect that we would intend to provide. We knew that some images were well known to the Russians. If, for example, we were to show a freeway interchange, somebody would look at it and say, "We have one at

Smolensk and one at Minsk; we have two, they have one"—that kind of thing. So we conceived the idea of having the imagery come on in multiple forms, as in the *Rough Sketch for a Sample Lesson*.

GINGERICH: But it wasn't so much for information as for credibility?

EAMES: We wanted to have a credible number of images, but not so many that they couldn't be scanned in the time allotted. At the same time, the number of images had to be large enough so that people wouldn't be exactly sure how many they had seen. We arrived at the number seven. With four images, you always knew there were four, but by the time you got up to eight images you weren't quite sure. They were very big images—the width across four of them was half the length of a football field.

GINGERICH: There is something so ephemeral about such a show. If someone had seven projectors and a wide wall, would it be possible to put it on again?

EAMES: We salvaged one set of prints, and we have a very crude composite. Elmer Bernstein wrote a marvelous musical score for it, and it was quite an emotional thing. Theoretically, it was a statement made by our State Department, and yet we did it entirely here and it was never seen by anyone from our government until they saw it in Moscow. It was a little touchy, but one of those things. If you ask for criticism, you get it. If you don't, there is a chance everyone will be too busy to worry about it.

GINGERICH: There is something intrinsically different about how your chairs are preserved compared to the multimedia shows. Someone can see your chairs in the Museum of Modern Art or the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, for example, but the IBM show from the New York Fair can't be reexperienced with any ease.

EAMES: That's true. The fair itself falls into the category of the temporary triumphal arch, which is burned after it is used.

GINGERICH: Like Christo's art. . .

EAMES: The Christo experience, or a good birthday cake. There is great value in how the thing disappears and can't be reproduced; it can't deteriorate and grow passé.

GINGERICH: Nowadays the multimedia techniques have been so widely copied and developed that it's impossible to think of a world without multiple projections in it.

EAMES: After you have made one multiple-image show, you're like a little boy who has been given a hammer—everything he encounters needs hammering! There is a tendency to apply your new system everywhere. But initially the multiple imagery had to perform very specific functions. In the IBM pavilion, for example, it was simultaneity. I think this is a very valuable device: to use multiple images to relate simultane-

ous happenings to the main theme. You get a feeling about relationships you didn't have previously. In thinking about decision making in the future—whether it be recombinant DNA or what have you—we believe some attention should be given to honing the techniques of showing critical things simultaneously. We had hoped that by now this might be a rather general procedure. I still think it's a good idea.

GINGERICH: I gather you feel that a lot of multimedia has lost sight of honest goals.

EAMES: In certain cases you don't mind that, if the thing has unity. Someone can switch goals and still do a good thing. But there are gray areas: shows may take on the trappings of information but not be really informative. These are the things that are disturbing. When information is not the goal, you often get an arbitrary cutting from image to image. In planning the Moscow show, we tried out various tricks and rhythms in changing the images. We discovered that if you had seven images and changed one of them, this put an enormously wasteful, noninformative burden on the brain, because with every change the eye had to check every image to see which one had changed. When you're busy checking, you don't absorb information. Franticness of cutting tends to degenerate the information quality. We have always been committed to information; it's not a psychedelic scene in any way.

Like their multimedia shows, the Eames's exhibitions have been committed to information. A series of exhibits made originally for the IBM display room on Madison Avenue has included the "Computer Wall," "Copernicus," "On the Shoulders of Giants," and "Newton." A much larger exhibition, made in connection with the American bicentennial, is "The World of Franklin and Jefferson." Originally installed in Paris, it has subsequently been seen in Warsaw, London, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Mexico City. It combines a certain number of original artifacts and art objects with an immense number of photographs and extensive captions.

GINGERICH: Am I correct in thinking that much of the criticism of the "Franklin and Jefferson" show in the Metropolitan Museum arose from the fact that critics and some museum people are just unfamiliar with the idea of high information content in a museum setting?

EAMES: That may be true, but the reaction came as a surprise because the reception at the Louvre was so different—we opened at the Grand Palais, but it is under the same jurisdiction as the Louvre. There they recognized that they had both the material and the whole world of scholarship surrounding the material. Curators have access to complicated information about their objects, but often they have resisted

including information with the material or showing any view of the setting from which the objects have been taken. I think it's still difficult for them to take that step, but at the Louvre they were terribly interested and a whole group of curators was brought to the exhibition. I went back later and talked with them again because of their seeing this as a real problem: the commitment of the scholarly community to the visitors at large. In any event, they were not thrown by it; but, much to our surprise, in New York the art community as well as some of the curators *were* completely thrown.

GINGERICH: Do you feel that the intentions of the "Franklin and Jefferson" show were somehow misinterpreted?

EAMES: To avoid this very thing, we advertised the exhibition not as a show for historians (even though we owed very much to the historians) but as a citizens' exhibition. Actually it was not an art exhibition, but more like a colored walk-through tabloid. We tried to make this purpose clear.

We used the captions to deal with problems and circumstances; that's why there were so many words. Had we been dealing with accomplishments, we could have done it in very few words. However, it is true that we set out originally to be quite critical and hard about the main characters, but as we went on, we were so impressed by how much someone like James Madison was able to pull off time and again that we came out pretty much all admiration.

We could, for example, have talked about Franklin's seemingly ribald verse or his essay on farting. In a sense, Franklin was doing the same thing as Jonathan Swift, except that Swift did it a hell of a lot better. Franklin was trying everything—it was part of his lifelong experimenting—but in these writings he tried something that wasn't very good. It seemed rather pointless to dwell on it when there was so much new we hadn't seen before, and so much we wanted to tell—for example, about Madison and Washington. Quite frankly, we swung over to what they managed to accomplish, not in an attempt to cover anything up but to show the importance of some of their ideas.

GINGERICH: Wasn't there criticism that the show was too "beautiful" to represent a wartime revolutionary movement?

EAMES: Yes, and we found this a little surprising, too, in light of the way the show was received in Paris. They saw it as a *celebration*, which was what we intended. We meant it to be colorful, but not garish. In Paris they perceived it as a celebration of that time when the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment was meeting up with American immediacy.

GINGERICH: They were prepared to think of the American Revolution in philosophical terms?

EAMES: Yes, absolutely. Then when the exhibit came back to the United States in 1976, we still thought of it as a celebration; but now what was uppermost as a quality that needed to be celebrated was the robust *continuity* in these people's lives—Franklin, Jefferson, and their whole circle. No discontinuity between their personal interests, their work, their public actions, their pleasures, and their passions.

GINGERICH: But what was the reaction of the American critics to all this?

EAMES: They didn't attack the content: that was almost disappointing to us, in a way. What was attacked—by the *New York Times* art critic, and then by a Chicago art critic quoting him—was the nature of the show itself, because it wasn't a real art exhibition. It was an architectural arrangement of words and photographs, with pockets of real things from the eighteenth century, chosen to reinforce the story. And apparently there's a fairly strong school of thought which says that only original, authentic art works have any business in the Met.

Then I believe also that it was seen as an intrusion on the museum by the sponsor—more than, say, a show of paintings sponsored by a big corporation would be. Maybe they felt that because there was a story, and IBM had paid for it, it must somehow be IBM talking—which was not at all the case, as you know.

I really don't know *why* a critic would be so defensive of the sacred enclosure around Art—I don't believe most good practicing artists would worry about this. We've always thought of the Met as a cultural history establishment, at least as much as an art museum. Think of all that great Egyptian stuff they have; it's not all fine art, or even applied art; some of it is just the equipment of everyday life. Also the Met, by its charter, has a commitment to offer information, not just to confront the visitor with objects. Certainly Charles Willson Peale in *his* museum didn't separate these two functions. He used his own paintings to give information: this is what Mr. So-and-so looked like; this is how the mastodon was dug up.

GINGERICH: Was there an objection to your using photographs rather than real objects?

EAMES: Naturally, there's never been any question for us of *substituting* photographs or words or film for the experience of real things. I don't think anybody who's visited the office could suspect us of that. In a ten-minute film we made for the Metropolitan we talked, among other things, about a small show of close-up photographs "that may help the eye to slow down when it comes to, say, a small sculpture at its real scale in the gallery." And we showed as an example the Rospigliosi cup, which at first glance is kind of uncongenial, I suppose, to many people's taste today. But if you're first exposed to enlarged details of that fine goldsmith's work and enameling, and the elegant profile of the statuette on

top—her face is no bigger than my thumbnail—and if those images go by quite fast, then, when you come to the real thing, you're liable to think "now I can *really* see that." It's also true, though, that you can get satiated from too many juicy color pictures, especially if they just sit there.

I think it's easy to forget that art historians, in practice, are working with reproductions most of the time, in their research and in teaching. An art historian or a curator, comparing a drawing that's in the Louvre with another in New York, is not thinking all the time about the unique aesthetic impact of the original, he's counting dentils or something. If his photograph is sharp enough for that, he's content. But the layman, or the freshman, attending that scholar's lecture, hasn't seen so many original drawings. He has to take a lot on trust, very often. Unless the teacher really tries to see that his slides are as good as possible, he's letting down his own discipline as well as his audience.

Maybe I'm jaundiced, but I find that many people whose subject has to do with visual aesthetics aren't visually literate when it comes to presentation. They don't extend their critical training to their own work as communicators. As long as audiences are looking at things through other means, what they get ought to be as informative as possible. And informative includes good-looking.

GINGERICH: I'm afraid we've grown accustomed to the idea that art museums are just repositories for aesthetic objects.

EAMES: I think that today our growing institutions have a growing commitment to give cogent information. I feel that anything that can be done to put art objects in their context without detracting from their rich qualities is helpful. Unlike Keats, who said that knowing about the rainbow shatters its beauty, I feel that knowledge about an object can only enrich your feeling for the object itself.

As far as I'm concerned, the ultimate use of any of these experiences is to plow them back into the business of life itself. What I find frustrating in some cases is that the presentation of exhibition material perpetuates and widens the gap between what is in the museum and what is the business of life for the viewer. To me this discontinuity is an outrageous thing; it is what we would like to dispel.