

Pat Kirkham

Humanizing Modernism: the Crafts, 'Functioning Decoration' and the Eameses

This article outlines some of the problems encountered in evaluating the work of Charles and Ray Eames, the husband and wife design partnership flourishing in the USA from 1941 to 1978, including issues related to gender, crafts and Modernism. It focuses on two items of furniture and argues that both gender and pro-Modernist/anti-crafts biases are at work in the attitudes of design critics towards them. It goes on to examine the Eameses' attitudes towards the crafts, before and after they met in 1940, and considers the role played by 'functioning decoration' (their decorative arrangements of objects which encouraged an interplay between craft and machine work) in the humanizing of Modernist design in the post-war years in the USA.

Keywords: crafts—Charles and Ray Eames—furniture—interior design—Modernism—USA

Charles and Ray Eames (fl. 1941–78) are perhaps the most famous of all designers working in the USA in the quarter century or so after the Second World War. A husband and wife partnership, they are best known as Orthodox Modernists; for their 'pre-fabricated' steel and glass home, the Eames House, Pacific Palisades, California 1945–9; and for their furniture which, in the early years at least, met the Modernist ideal—high-quality, low-cost and industrially mass-produced [1–2]. They also designed interiors and toys. From the 1950s they increasingly saw themselves as educators and communicators and their exhibitions, films and multi-media presentations, many of which were about science and technology (including computers), were seen by thousands of people at World's Fairs and exhibition venues all over the USA as well as abroad.¹ At first sight and consideration, therefore, their joint work seems a long way from the world of crafts. But it was not just that the Eameses were crazy about craft and 'folk' work; their own work was strongly influenced by the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Furthermore, their Modernism was inflected with the strong humanism which so marked those who, like them, studied or taught

at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan—itself the outcome of an Arts and Crafts vision to reform design—in the years before the Second World War.²

Some contemporary critics understood better than others the Eameses' 'Modernism of the heart', which was often indicated through objects, many of them craft objects which the Eameses believed revealed the love and care that had gone into making them. By the time I came to research their work in the 1980s, however, I found nothing in the current writings about the Eameses to help explain the crafts elements of their work. Indeed, the terms 'crafts' and 'Eames' appeared to be antithetical. This article outlines some of the problems encountered in my research, evaluates the attitudes of Charles and Ray to the crafts and considers the role their 'functioning decoration', which encouraged interplay between craft and machine work, played in humanizing Modernism. It also raises the interrelated issues of gender, crafts and Modernism and focuses on two particular pieces of furniture in order to explore further these issues during a period in which gender bias and a pro-Modernist/anti-crafts bias combined to blinker the eyes and



1 Front entrance, Eames House, Pacific Palisades, California, 1945–9

distort the reasoning of some of the most articulate and sensitive design commentators of the day, to say nothing of designers.

In the early 1980s I set out to research the work of Charles (1907–78) and Ray Eames (1912–88), a husband–wife partnership whose furniture I admired. Visits to the Eames Office (their workshop cum laboratory of design which was their

base for over thirty years) where I interviewed Ray and to the Eames House (where they had lived since late 1949) proved rewarding in many ways but they also brought me face to face with something I did not understand, namely the extremely carefully composed decorative arrangements of objects which I found therein [3–8, 15–18]. They termed these arrangements of objects



2 Moulded fibreglass chairs, Eames Office. Manufactured by Herman Miller Furniture Company, Michigan, from 1950



3 Interior, Eames House, 1956

'functioning decoration' and Robert Venturi claimed that they had reintroduced 'good old Victorian clutter' to interiors.³ Such things did not fall within the parameters of orthodox Modernist design practice by any stretch of the imagination or intellect and what had at the beginning seemed a relatively straightforward project about Modernist design, the work of one specific firm and the overdue recognition of a woman designer took on new dimensions. My project began to broaden to encompass attitudes towards the crafts in the period c.1941–78 as I increasingly became aware of the continued influence upon their work of the Arts and Crafts Movement—usually believed dead by the Second, if not the First, World War.

Helpful to my own understanding of the more neglected areas of the work of the Eameses were the current debates about 'post-Modernism' and a greater valuation (in every sense of the word) of the crafts. The debates, with their emphasis on addition, accretion, juxtaposition, changing scales, fragmentation, wit and whimsy, cross-cultural references and the de/re-contextualization of objects and images, encouraged me to focus on such aspects in the work of the Eameses.⁴ In the 1960s both the Smithsons and Robert Venturi had applauded the Eameses' 'functioning decoration', which incorporates all the above-mentioned



4 Interior, Eames House, 1976



5 Sofa Compact (1954) and objects in lobby of Eames Office, 1983

elements, seeing it as a major development in design.⁵ Nevertheless, love of crafts and joy in objects was not generally included in accounts of their work thereafter, with the notable exception of the perceptive American critic Esther McCoy.⁶ I do not want to claim the Eameses for post-Modernism but rather to re-offer for serious consideration those areas of their work which were distant from, and sometimes in opposition to, minimalist Modernism which encouraged reduction, removal, and little or no decoration and banished 'clutter'.

As far as the crafts are concerned, it is difficult to find any other major US industrial designer of his generation as firmly embedded as Charles Eames in the Arts and Crafts traditions of 'right making', honesty of construction, truth to materials and joy in labour. Both he and Ray believed that one of life's main objectives was 'to get as many of the rewards of life from the work you do'⁷ and their workshop was very much a 'hands-on' place. A man of many practical skills as well as powerful intellect, Charles stood in the tradition of W. R. Lethaby as much as in Modernist ones. According to those who worked with him, he could turn his hand to almost any practical task and do it as well as, if not better than, anyone else in the Eames Office. He and Ray were both brought up in a school system based on Arts and Crafts ideas in the teaching of art and design but Charles learned much of what he knew about engineering and practical skills on the many jobs he did in his teenage years and early twenties. Ray frequently bemoaned her lack of 'workshop skills', a situation which she blamed on her more genteel 'female' education which left her totally untrained in the sort of technical and workshop skills used in making special tools and prototypes for their furniture, exhibitions and films.⁸ It should be remembered, however, that



6 Sofa Compact (1954) with rugs, blankets and cushions. Living room, Eames House, 1983



7 'Functioning decoration'. Living room, Eames House. Candelabrum and decoy bird

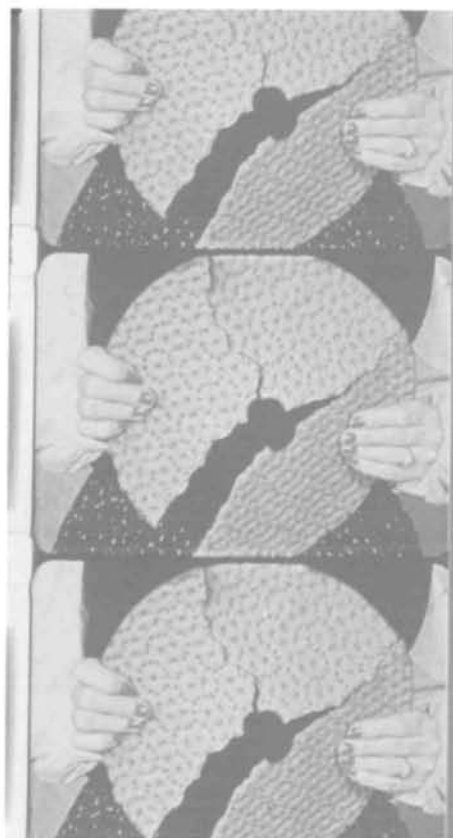
her work as a sculptor and skills in 'femmeage'⁹ meant that she, as well as Charles, was happiest designing in a hands-on way.

They both felt passionately about the importance of seeing beauty in the everyday, in the 'commonplace' and many of their films aimed to convey this idea. This too had its roots in the Arts and Crafts Movement and no two people were more in tune with W. R. Lethaby's dictum that 'art' included the well-laying of a table or the making of a beautifully designed loaf of bread. Indeed, Ray could be said to have perfected the 'art' of table-laying and together they devoted a short film to the topic of bread [9].¹⁰

Charles studied architecture for two years before being asked to leave because of 'a premature enthusiasm for Frank Lloyd Wright'¹¹ and



8 'Functioning decoration'. Living room, Eames House. Display on gold table, 1949



9 Film frame sequence from *Bread*, 1953. Eames Office. Directed by Charles and Ray Eames

later confessed that he was mainly influenced by Wright's attachment to nature, especially the 'schmalzy stuff about the field and the earth . . . and materials'.¹² By then—the late 1920s—he was not only an excellent photographer but was also skilled at several crafts, including pottery, lithography, printmaking and etching. During the Depression he worked when he could as an architect but in 1933–4 he left behind his first wife, his child and his architectural partner and went on an eight-month trip to Mexico.¹³ There his interest in the crafts broadened considerably. He admired the rich craft traditions of Mexico and returned home with a small collection of objects of aesthetic, cultural and archaeological interest, including an ancient Toltec wand. After his second marriage in 1941 to Ray Kaiser, a woman whose passion/obsession for objects matched, if not outstripped, his own, the collection grew enormously and encompassed a wide variety of craft and other objects (see below). Many of the objects 'starred' in Eames films and many more were utilized in their 'functioning decoration'.

His years at the Cranbrook Academy of Art (1938–41), where he went on a fellowship and was later given a teaching post, augmented Charles's already considerable understanding of crafts and craft processes. Those who were at Cranbrook with him remember that Charles spent a lot of time in the ceramics and weaving studios as well as the photography and sculpture studios and the metal shop, preparing himself for a career which was based on a comprehensive understanding of materials and technologies.¹⁴ It was a brick church, St Mary, Helena, Arkansas, 1935–6, designed with Robert Walsh, which brought Charles to the attention of Eliel Saarinen, the Finnish architect and designer, then Director of the Cranbrook Academy. Eames and Walsh were responsible for the interior, from fittings to religious vessels, and some well-known local Missouri artists and craftworkers were involved in the project. So too were the women amateur craftworkers of this Roman Catholic parish (in what Charles called 'redneck Ku Klux Klan Arkansas') who made 'marvellous things', including vestments and hassocks.¹⁵ His next major project was the Meyer House, St Louis, Missouri (1936–8), an impressive brick building which

brought Swedish Modernism to a St Louis suburb.¹⁶ It became a collaborative project between Eames and Walsh, Saarinen, and the craft workshops at Cranbrook (a carpet was made in the studio of Loja Saarinen, wife of Eliel, who also designed the drapes in collaboration with Charles and his partner). A table and chairs designed by Charles show an awareness of eighteenth-century European craft and stylistic traditions. These pieces also referenced the styles of the Vienna Secession and 'Art Deco', suggesting that Charles was neither anti-modern nor anti-craft.

It is interesting to speculate whether Charles Eames would ever have turned to mainstream Modernism if he had not become friends with and been influenced by Eero Saarinen, the child prodigy son of Eliel and Loja who had been trained both as a sculptor and as an architect. By the time he met Ray Kaiser in 1940, Charles had been introduced to and worked with Eero in the orthodox 'rational', 'functionalist' and minimalist Modernism of International Style architecture and design, going on to win first prize in a furniture competition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.¹⁷ It would be more accurate to state that Charles had been reintroduced to Modernism because he had seen such work when he visited Europe in 1929 and visited the Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart.¹⁸ The fact that after that trip he did not work in that manner (neither his buildings of the 1930s, which ranged from Colonial Revival to Modern to Cranbrook-esque Swedish Modern, nor his furniture and other objects embraced International Style Modernism) was forgotten in the subsequent narrative preferred by both Charles and Ray and their admirers. That narrative went seamlessly from Charles's European visit to designing for mass production and the geometric steel-framed Eames House. Also written out of the narrative was his love of and interest in crafts. His interests in technology, materials and quality remained in the story but were restricted to machine production. If only for rounder histories of Modernism, to say nothing of beginning to understand more fully the complex dialectics between crafts and industrial design during the 1930s and 1940s, it is necessary to rewrite histories of post-war design.



10 Moulded plywood chairs for children, 1945. Eames Office. (View of exhibition, 'Connections: The Work of Charles and Ray Eames', at Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 1978)

representing the human aspects of life. But the situation is more complicated. Their work was intensely collaborative and Charles as well as Ray knew an earlier graphic use of the cut-out heart by their friend, graphic designer Alvin Lustig.²⁶ It simply is not known whether it was Charles or Ray who first had the visual audacity to suggest its use on a piece of furniture. When asked Ray would always say that, like all their work, it was such a close collaboration that it was impossible to say that either one had suggested or designed any particular aspect. If it was the idea of Ray, it was certainly adopted with Charles's wholehearted backing. He was described by certain former employees as something of a 'control freak', focused to the point of selfishness in his determination to get what he wanted,²⁷ suggesting that he would never have allowed a design of which he did not approve to go out from the office which bore his name. They worked very closely together on each project, particularly in the early days but most of the time thereafter too, and it seems highly unlikely that they were not both extremely committed to the design which referenced the world of the hand-crafted object and was one of

their first mass-production pieces. Therefore, tempting as it is to suggest that Ray was solely responsible for this wonderfully cross-referential humanizing of a chair to be used by children by means of a well-known folk/craft motif, the closeness with which she and Charles worked and Charles's determination to have things done exactly as he wanted them do not allow this.

The walnut stool of 1960 (more properly 'stools' because four versions were originally made and three continue to be so) provides another example of a contemporary machine-made product with strong craft references [11–12]. It also provides a clearer case of bias against Ray and craft work on the part of critics and curators. Once again, many Modernists who knew of Charles Eames as an industrial designer of furniture and as a champion of new technologies and materials found themselves unable to accept that he would have produced an item with so many craft connotations. Ray was always upset when this piece was attributed solely to her, as was the case at the Museum of Modern Art, New York for many years and even now is the case in the Eames exhibition currently touring Europe.²⁸ She was happy to state that it was her idea to base the multi-functional piece which they were in the process of designing for the lobby of the *Time-Life* build-



11 *Time-Life* chair and stool, 1960. Eames Office

It is somewhat ironical that it was the most avant-garde member of the Eames partnership, Ray, who was regarded as the one pulling the male partner away from Modernism and towards the crafts and decoration. Such blame would, I suspect, have been difficult to place at the feet of a male who happened to be an avant-garde artist. But Ray was both a woman and a wife—doubly subservient and culpable in the mores of mid-century middle America. But by the time she went to Cranbrook in 1940, Ray Kaiser was an out-and-out Modernist.¹⁹ A painter and sculptor trained at the Art Students League in New York in the 1930s under Hans Hoffman, she was part of the AAA (American Abstract Artists), a militant group of avant-garde artists wholeheartedly committed to the cause of abstract art. Clearly, the binary oppositions of female/craft and male/Modernism, which have proved useful tools in feminist critiques, do not apply here.

Had the couple met in 1938 instead of two years later, their pairing might have offered an inversion of how people later liked to categorize them. Then it would have been a case of female/Modernist and male/traditionalist; female/purist and male/eclectic. However, history often works against neat narratives and formulae. At Cranbrook Ray, who had shown an interest in decoration during her school years,²⁰ learned a greater appreciation of the crafts. She wove and designed rugs under the well-known designer and craft-worker Marianne Strengell²¹ and always displayed one of them in the Eames House. However, it is important not to make too much of this craft work because, in the early 1940s during moments when she and Charles were not jointly developing moulded plywood furniture, she chose not to work at crafts and continued in a Modernist vein as sculptor, painter and graphic designer.²² In other words, after her four months at Cranbrook she did not substantially shift her modes or means of artistic expression. What one can say with certainty is that, by the time they married in 1941, they were both well versed in Modernism. Such a situation once again means that the binary oppositions of female/male, traditionalism/Modernism, craft/industrial, hand/machine, do not neatly 'fit' this partnership.

Although the design work of the Eameses was

joint work, Ray, who was trained as an artist, was frequently not given the credit she deserved. She was, however, given more than equal credit when 'credit' was equated with blame for deviations from Modernist orthodoxy. It was she, rather than Charles, trained in architecture and who, from 1941, enjoyed an international reputation as a 'functionalist' industrial designer, who was given credit for those areas of their work, including aspects of the crafts, which were unpalatable to orthodox Modernist taste.

The importance of Ray's input into Eames furniture, especially the early furniture, is now becoming more accepted²³ yet she was given little credit at the time for furniture that was hailed as innovative largely because of its use of industrial production techniques. Two pieces of furniture stand out as different from the others in that they invoked more of a craft ethos and referenced pre-industrial worlds. They were less favourably received by the design *cognoscenti* and it is no coincidence that they were the ones for which Ray was allowed credit.

The complex moulding of the plywood child's chair of 1945 was a triumph of modern machine mass production and was hailed as such [10]. However, such was the fear of anything to do with hand crafts or folk work in products which graced the interiors of the brave new world of 'functionalism' and machine aesthetics, that the cut-out heart motif that humanized the object while serving as a hand-hole was attacked as sentimental and 'absurdly romantic' by Arthur Drexler, the influential US design critic.²⁴ Although little has been written about the chair, some people considered that the cut-out heart was the result of Ray's interference in the otherwise rational and problem-solving design process with which Charles Eames and the Eames Office are associated. Ray insisted that the chair should be a joint attribution and in the 1980s recalled that Charles had been every bit as keen as she on the heart and also on producing furniture and toys for children.²⁵

Today the heart is generally viewed as one of several interesting features of the chair and it is tempting for a feminist historian to play on the gender bias implicit in 'blaming' Ray, to claim it for her. She was certainly skilled in visually



12 Walnut, stool in production 1960 to date

ing, New York on an African stool which in their own home doubled as coffee table and plant stand [13]. But she pointed out that there were many other aspects to the complex process of designing and developing that particular stool and considered that allocating to her sole 'authorship' of the piece made a nonsense of their practice, detracted from Charles's input to the design and denied the joint nature of the rest of their work.²⁹

In the light of earlier remarks about the intense Modernism of Ray's approach and practice and



13. African stool (n.d.). Living room, Eames House

Charles's considerable sympathy with crafts and craft processes, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that there was some gender bias at work in an attribution to Ray of these 'pro-crafts' pieces. It was, and is, a common assumption that crafts were more properly the work of women—and certainly not the business of a man who, in 1960, was regarded as *the* most prominent industrial designer in the world. The machine-turned solid walnut stool appears to have been regarded as more of a craft product than the leather and aluminium machine-made chair which was designed at the same time to go in the same lobby. This suggests a pro-Modernist bias against wood and in favour of the more obviously 'modern' aluminium which was produced by a new casting technique. Leather was by no means a modern material but the combination of black leather and metal was read as more 'modern' than figured walnut. As it was, the smooth finishes, symmetry and geometric forms of the stool could have been praised as fitting a machine aesthetic and the fact that the tops and bottoms were identical, with only the middle sections differing, read as indicating the machine origins of this modular piece. But this recognition did not take place.³⁰ A final irony is that Ray spent a great deal of time working on the development of the leather and metal chair, which the Museum of Modern Art and other institutions for many years attributed to Charles alone (together with much other joint work), while only crediting her with the stool.

That crafts and the crafts 'ethos' were thought of as very proper concerns by both Charles and Ray Eames can be seen at the very broadest level in their attitudes towards objects in general. It was stated that the Eameses not only shaped things but shaped 'the way people think about things.'³¹ This they did by encouraging people to look anew at the simplest and most commonplace of objects, often toys, presenting them in ways which encouraged thinking about their construction and the skills involved in their making, the pleasures they bring, how they are used, design or scientific principles involved or their specificity and/or universality. They used slide shows, with three or more screens and hundreds of images carefully juxtaposed for maximum effect, to reveal

the multi-faceted pleasures to be gained from viewing and contemplating objects. In the 1950s they did similar things with their 'object' films which frequently featured the toys so beloved of Charles (his passion for toy trains and boats went back to his childhood and cannot be blamed on Ray who seems to have favoured dolls, of which there came to be hundreds and hundreds in their collection).

Although the Eameses mainly discussed objects in terms of the ways in which they supposedly demonstrated design principles, craft skills, the appropriate use of materials and 'universal' functions, they were severely limited by the boundaries of Modernist design discourses which regarded the non-functional as non-serious. Films and slide shows, however, allowed for visual rather than verbal explorations of their ideas and it is through these that some of the other aspects of the Eameses' appreciation of objects can be gleaned, particularly in relation to texture, colour, movement, joy, memory, nostalgia and even the desire to have and own items simply because they were pretty, playful, or exotic.³² *Traveling Boy* (1950), *Parade* (1952 [14]), *Toccata for Toy Trains* (1957) and *Tops* (1969) are some of their 'object' films which concentrate on the world of 'ordinary' toys. In *Blacktop* (1952) the object was a school yard, a very commonplace object, and the Eameses took a commonplace moment—the

washing of that playground—as the theme for what is in effect a short 'art' movie full of visual poetry.

Visiting the workshop and especially the house, and thinking about their 'functioning decoration', brought out of the closet vestiges of my own Modernist bias that I had thought outgrown or at least repressed. However, there is, amongst my (immediate post-war) generation, sufficient veneration of particular types of craft work—especially the products of so-called 'primitive' cultures, which fitted the aesthetics and imaginations of the romantic Modernist mind—for those of us educated within a Modernist framework of 'good design' to be able to feel comfortable with the inclusion of craft objects such as Native American dolls, mirrored cushions, painted chairs, decorated boxes, colourful textiles and wooden elephants (all from India), paper ornaments, dolls and pottery from Mexico, masks from China and hand carved combs from Japan [3–8, 15–17]. My love of Pop art and design and of popular culture ensured my appreciation of the inclusion of objects from popular culture, such as Woolworths' Christmas ornaments (a small wooden angel in a box of Christmas toys formerly at the Eames House and currently on show in the Eames touring exhibition has a \$1.50 label underneath), marbles, wrapping paper and seed packets, but I felt disconcerted by the inclusion of everyday items from bourgeois culture—particularly a glass candelabrum [7]. It was far easier to admire items from 'other', 'exotic' and 'primitive' cultures and of popular culture than it was the glass crystal candelabrum placed in an arrangement with other objects and flowers; and I was visiting the home of these world-famous designers to admire, indeed to 'worship' in a building which was on the pilgrimage route of young Modernist architects and designers.³³

The Eameses' decorative talents were revealed in their carefully composed arrangements of disparate objects—mostly craft (from handmade Indian boxes and woven fabrics to Japanese wooden combs and Chinese masks), many found (starfish, driftwood and feathers were particular favourites), many natural (flowers of all sorts, stones and pebbles), and many commonplace (combs, marbles, cheap Christmas decora-



14 Film frame sequence from *Parade, or Here They Come Down Our Street*, 1952. Eames Office. Directed by Charles and Ray Eames

tions, candles, wrapping paper and pencils). They used the term 'functioning decoration' to overcome the pejorative connotations of the term decoration, but decoration it was and Ray was credited with this aesthetic of addition, juxtaposition and 'extra-cultural surprise'. One bold example of cross-cultural surprise was achieved in their own home through the placing of two hand-crafted painted wood 'traditional' Indian chairs in the same living area as their own mass-produced lounge chair and ottoman of 1956 which required some hand labour and was vastly more expensive than the Indian chairs [5]. A 'folk' bell at the front door ordered from a builder's catalogue humanized the entrance to the house and signalled the transformation from house to 'home' [1]. Different objects humanized the industrial spiral staircase that went from the hall to the first floor. It did not matter if it was a piece of 'primitive' wood sculpture, as in 1949, or the contemporary Baroque cherub added later, probably in the late 1950s; the point was, as in the case of a piece of Native American sculpture hung high in the living area



15 Staircase with sculpture, Eames House, c.1950



16 Staircase with cherubs, Eames House

adjacent to the obviously industrially-produced materials of the frame of the house, to personalize the impersonal and to produce contrasts and tensions between the machine and non-machine worlds [16–18]. 'Functioning decoration' owed a great deal to Ray's skills in collage which are part of and rooted in that aspect of women's creative craft culture now known as 'femmage'³⁴ but this aesthetic of what some thought of as excess also related to the 'information overload' that was so central a feature of their exhibitions and multimedia shows for which Charles must be given at least equal credit, if not more.³⁵ It should also be remembered that Ray did not have a monopoly on eclecticism in the partnership and, as Beatriz Colomina has recently pointed out, Charles's work at MGM in the early 1940s involved making entire new sets overnight using a limited range of props and materials already in the studio.³⁶

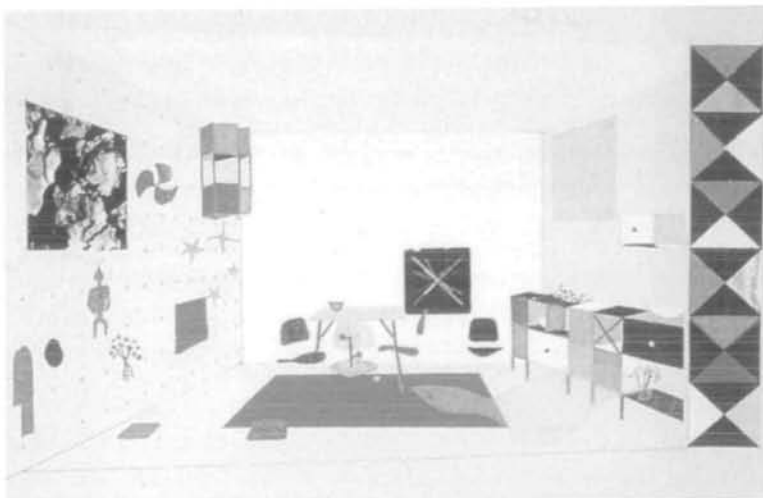
Not all objects had been banished from Modernist interiors, and the fashion for including commonplace objects in interiors dates back at least to the nineteenth century,³⁷ but in the 1950s interiors by leading Modernist architects and designers were generally sparse, if not spartan. What was so wonderful to Venturi about the Eameses was that while 'modern architects wanted everything neat and clean . . . they came along and spread eclectic assemblages over an interior.'³⁸ The Smithsons noted in the work of the Eameses a 'wide-eyed wonder at seeing the culturally disparate together and so happy with each other.'³⁹



17 Native American sculpture suspended from ceiling of Eames House

What blended the disparate for the Eameses was not only the visual compositions of which the objects were part but a belief that the 'made' objects, in one way or another, provided evidence of truth to materials, honesty of construction and joy in labour. In 'functioning decoration' the main effect of the craft and found objects, each torn from their context/habitat, was to personalize and thereby humanize what might otherwise have been found impersonal, be it a larger object such as a staircase, a wall or the interior of a building. A major breakthrough in interior design in the post-war years was the go-ahead for individuals to

personalize their own space. The Eameses pioneered the use of peg boards for personal collages composed of images of objects, people and events [18].⁴⁰ Small personal trinkets and souvenirs were also added. These spread from the pinboards of student architects and designers to influence the ways millions personalized their interiors from the 1960s until the present. I never cease to be amazed at how much Eames-influenced 'functioning decoration' I see in domestic houses—far more than Eames furniture today. Yet that aspect of their work has never received anything like the same attention as their furniture and architecture.



18 Room design, 'An Exhibition for Modern Living', 1949. Eames Office



19 Lota, photographed in India by Charles Eames

traditions outlined and admired by the Eameses and the demands of the modern world.

The Eameses did not have all the answers to humanizing design in industrializing, industrialized and 'post-industrial' worlds, far from it, but, at a period when it seemed as if science and technology held the key to those answers (a point of view held by the Eameses), their own work validated the pre-industrial, personal and the hand-made as well as the industrial, the uniform and the mass-produced. They stressed the importance of quality of manufacture, whether by hand or machine, and of joy in labour as well as the pleasures to be obtained from objects.

I hope that this article has given some insights into the ways in which their concerns for crafts and the values they thought crafts represented interrelated with their concerns as designers, educators and as communicators. A full and deep appreciation of the crafts informed the hearts, minds and eyes of these notable designers of mid-century America and it is clear that the crafts continued to have a considerable role in the post-war period of Modernist hegemony. Despite their histories, briefly recounted above, Charles, who was steeped in Arts and Crafts attitudes, was always regarded as a Modernist even though many aspects of his joint work with Ray, particularly their reconstituting in forms appropriate to Modernist interiors, decorative traditions related to modes of collecting and decorative display of the nineteenth century and earlier. That work was seen by some as 'spoiling' the purism of Moder-

nist interiors because it added alien elements and adopted an aesthetic of addition and sometimes excess. Through an exciting cross-fertilization between a machine aesthetic and the world of small objects, it offered interesting ways of personalizing the industrially built environment and of fusing aspects of craft and machine manufacture with elements of the natural world, and remains relevant today.

PAT KIRKHAM

Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, New York

Notes

- 1 For a fuller study of their work, see my book *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century*, MIT Press, 1995. See also John Neuhart, Marilyn Neuhart, and Ray Eames, *Eames Design: The Work of the Office of Charles and Ray Eames*, New York, 1989, Donald Albrecht (ed.), *The Work of Charles and Ray Eames: A Legacy of Invention*, New York, 1997, and Pat Kirkham, 'The personal, the professional, and partner(ship): exploring the husband/wife collaboration of Charles and Ray Eames, designers and film-makers, USA, 1941-1978', in Beverley Skeggs, *Feminists Produce Cultural Theory*, Manchester, 1995. (NB: all references to 'Kirkham' in this article relate to the MIT Press book of 1995.)
- 2 See R. J. Clark et al. (eds.), *Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision*, New York, 1983.
- 3 Kirkham, p. 167.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 4-5.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 166-7.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 166 and 399-400.
- 7 Ibid., p. 8.
- 8 Ibid., p. 78.
- 9 Ibid., p. 179.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 6, 55, 147, 171 and 175. For the film *Bread*, see p. 144.
- 11 Ibid., p. 12.
- 12 Ibid., p. 56.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 16-18.
- 14 Joseph Giovannini, 'The Office of Charles Eames and Ray Kaiser: the material trail', in Albrecht, op. cit., p. 52.
- 15 Kirkham, p. 18.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 22-30.
- 17 For Saarinen, see Aline Saarinen (ed.), *Eero Saarinen on His Own Work*, New Haven, 1968, Allan Temko, *Eero Saarinen*, New York, 1962, Lamia Doumato, *The*

Liberals with catholic tastes when it came to 'ordinary' objects, the Eameses, like many Modernists who venerated the cultures of the ordinary 'man', could be ecstatic about tools in a hardware store or mass-produced moulded glass dishes. That fascination with everyday products of the industrial world went side by side with a fascination for the 'primitive'. Although in comparison to many 'First' world designers, the Eameses stressed the need to understand objects of 'Third' world countries in their cultural and historical contexts, in their own work, particularly 'functioning decoration', objects were taken out of context and used as exotic 'other' to add visual effect and 'extra-cultural surprise'.⁴¹ The Eameses' approach to the design and culture of India showed a considerable understanding of the relationship between these two categories of goods but there were occasions on which Indian objects were used as exotic elements in unproblematic 'melting pot' interior decorative schemes featuring cross-cultural references. Such cross-referencing is something we take for granted today but in the 1950s and 1960s it constituted a new, exciting and object-oriented approach to interior design, one which appeared liberal and humanistic and not the product of cultural imperialism which it so clearly is.⁴²

The Eameses' love affair with India and Indian craft work began in 1955 when they made a film of the 'Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India' exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.⁴³ Curated by Alexander Girard, an underrated but key figure in the mid-century dialectic between Modernism and the crafts, the exhibition triggered a cultural exchange of ideas and designers between India and the USA. Although in the years following independence in 1947, there was a massive drive to create the industrial infrastructure that Britain had failed to establish, the artistic intelligentsia favoured design solutions which took cognizance of the past while utilizing the benefits of modern technology. Pupul Jayakar, a disciple of Gandhi and an authority on handicrafts who promoted rural handwork and small industries, admired Charles Eames more than any other designer. To her he was something of a guru. Steeped in her country's history, craft traditions and mythologies and sym-

bols, she recognized that the Eameses' work blended the human, the symbolic and the fantastic with rationalism, functionalism and new technologies.

It was she who suggested Charles read the *Bhagwad Gita*, a text he was fond of quoting thereafter ('Work done with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done without such anxiety, in the calm of self-surrender' was a favourite)⁴⁴—much to the consternation of Prime Minister Nehru who expected a leading industrial designer to follow a harder line. What he heard was philosophy and what he saw was short films about toy trains and tops intended to make points about quality, function and the need to put care and love into production.

On behalf of himself and Ray, Charles Eames accepted a commission to report on design in India to the Indian government. In 1957 they spent several months in India (Ray was there longer than Charles) and became familiar with 'the actuality of India', especially design traditions related to everyday objects.⁴⁵ The report had a typical Eames duality to it. On the one hand, it revered the *lota*, a 'simple vessel of everyday use' used to carry water, as the perfect solution to a design brief—one which paid attention to factors such as the gendered nature of the hands carrying it, the amounts of liquid to be carried, fluid dynamics, size, texture, heat transfer, feel and 'how it felt to possess it, to sell it, to give it'—and called for a self-conscious continuation of this hitherto unconscious design tradition [19]. On the other hand, it suggested using similar problem-solving techniques but in relation to new materials and technologies—not at first to create new products but to educate the population for what they saw as the inevitable and beneficial changes ahead. The report leapt from the objects of the past which the Eameses loved to the communications paraphernalia of the 'post-industrial' society which Charles in particular saw as the way to provide 'security in change', a concept borrowed from Buckminster Fuller. The new National Institute of Design, which the report recommended be established, and which was already on the agenda of the people who canvassed for Eames to get the commission, was left to solve the gaps between those craft and design

- Work of Eero Saarinen*, Monticello, Illinois, 1980, and Eric Larrabee and Massimo Vignelli, *Knoll Design*, New York, 1981. For Eames and Saarinen, see Eliot Noyes, *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*, New York, 1941.
- 18 Kirkham, p. 13.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 31–44.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 38–41.
 - 23 Giovannini, *op. cit.*, is the first major article since the publication of my book on the Eameses to argue the importance of Ray, especially in the early years of the partnership.
 - 24 Kirkham, pp. 216–18.
 - 25 Ray Eames in conversation with Pat Kirkham, New York, 1987.
 - 26 Kirkham, pp. 41–2.
 - 27 See Neuhart *et al.*, p. 8 and Kirkham, p. 423, note 50.
 - 28 The stool is not currently (October 1997) on display in the Museum of Modern Art galleries. Contemporary production versions are on display in the Eames exhibition currently travelling in Europe (Vitra Design Museum, Weil-am-Rhein, Germany, until 4 January 1998, and at other venues thereafter. Contact Interpretive Programs Office, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, USA for further details). For the stool, see also Neuhart *et al.*, p. 249.
 - 29 Kirkham, pp. 250–2.
 - 30 Neuhart *et al.*, p. 249.
 - 31 Quoted in Bill N. Lacey, 'Warehouse full of ideas', *Horizon*, September 1980, p. 22. See Kirkham, p. 143.
 - 32 For films and multi-media work, see Kirkham, Chapter 7.
 - 33 Kirkham, p. 183.
 - 34 For a discussion of 'femmage', see Kirkham, p. 177.
 - 35 See Kirkham, Chapters 6 and 7.
 - 36 Beatriz Colomina, 'Reflections on the Eames House', in Albrecht, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
 - 37 Kirkham, pp. 168–79.
 - 38 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 - 40 *Ibid.*, p. 193 and colour illustration section for sketch for a room design, 'An Exhibition for Modern Living', 1949. See also pp. 193–5.
 - 41 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 - 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5 and 184.
 - 43 For the Eameses and India, see Kirkham, pp. 278–88.
 - 44 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
 - 45 The Eames Report, 1958, is often referred to in the USA as the India Report.