

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## THE EAMES ESTHETIC

Charles Eames is an architect and designer as much concerned with the forms of ideas as he is with the forms of objects. Since 1950, he and his wife Ray have been making short films - films rich with formal pleasures, and rigorously designed to convey specific ideas.

The design of artifacts - toys, furniture, buildings - and the communication of ideas are all part of the same enterprise within the Eames office. "I think of myself officially as an architect; I can't help but look at the problems around us as problems of structure - and structure is architecture. A good film needs structure as much as a good front page does."

Each of the films sets out to convey not a personal idiosyncratic message, but something that is part of the experience everybody shares - a familiar object or process, or a recurrent idea. The world of science is made up of such repeatable, shareable ideas; and many of the Eames films present aspects of it - from an "architectural allegory" of the growth of science itself, to a two-minute explication of a single mathematical concept.

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The "educational" purpose of the films has more to do with learning than with teaching. Charles Eames holds that memorizing particular facts is less important than developing a capacity to step back and see the same thing in different ways - and conversely, to pick up analogies between things that are different. "Insight-motivated education is the only way to keep pace with a constantly changing world." But a prerequisite for this is an affection and respect for things in themselves, independent of immediate personal payoff. Some of the Eames films simply look carefully at objects - with an affection and respect that the viewer is enticed into sharing.

The "style" of the films comes directly from the needs of each project and the nature of the material. "The discipline has to be that of the subject itself." In some of the films the strategy is to flood the viewer with a multiplicity of images - and at first this can be disconcerting. But the structure is such that the central idea builds up and is retained; the individual items end up firmly defining the area they have in common. "People are very capable of learning this way and do so every day."

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In fact, this way of putting a concept across is rather like the way concepts are born and grow in the first place - out of our accumulation of particulars. By their breadth of imagery, the films remind us that math, for instance, or biology, or architecture, is not a closed world of its own, but one way of looking at the world we share. They encourage us to trust the range of our own experience as the source of pleasures and of disciplines. Charles Eames maintains - and demonstrates - that there is no problem of "reconciling" science and art.