



## The Eames Splint

INSIDE BACK COVER

By Robert LaPerriere, MD



WHEN DR. JOHN MAHANEY DONATED two transportation splints (along with Edison Dictating Machines and other artifacts) to the Museum of Medical History, I commented that they deserved to be hung in a museum of modern art.

Last fall, we loaned 15 artifacts to the Crocker Art Museum. A staff member noticed the splint hanging on our wall and said it appeared to be an "Eames." Some internet research and other material made it clear: it was indeed.

Charles Eames (1907-1978) and his wife, Ray, (1912-1988) gave "shape" to our last century. They embraced the era's visionary concept of modern design as an agent of social change. Charles was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and as a young man worked for engineers and manufacturers. Ray Kaiser was born in Sacramento and was fascinated with the abstract qualities of ordinary objects; she spent her early years amid New York's modern art movements.

Charles was an architect until the depression. He subsequently studied design and architecture and, in 1940, was appointed to the Cranbrook Academy of Art's industrial design department. There he met Ray Kaiser. Their prize-winning designs for seating incorporated two state-of-the-art manufacturing techniques - the molding of plywood into complex curves and an electronic bonding process, developed by the Chrysler Corporation, to join metal and wood. Charles and Ray moved to California, where they developed a machine for molding plywood into complex curves.

In 1942, the Navy commissioned them to design plywood leg and arm splints as well as litters. They established the Plyformed Wood Company to produce a trial run of 5,000 splints. Financial difficulties forced the company to sell out to Evans Products Company and become its Molded Plywood Products Division. (Evans was later taken over by Herman Miller.) They eventually produced 150,000 splints, the first production item for molded plywood.



The molded plywood chair was their first attempt to create a single shell that could be mass-produced. They developed such techniques as cutting slits and holes into plywood to allow bends without splintering. The initial single-shell design was followed by a stronger two-piece chair, first unveiled in 1946 along with molded plywood tables and wall screens. Subsequent chairs were produced from fiberglass-reinforced plastic, bent and welded wire mesh, and cast aluminum.

**References:** Icons - Design of the 20th Century, by Charlotte & Peter Fiell, copyright 001 by Taschen ([www.taschen.com](http://www.taschen.com)) Charles and Ray Eames, Eames Office, Venice, CA ([www.eamesoffice.com](http://www.eamesoffice.com))

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Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society  
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819  
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: [info@ssvms.org](mailto:info@ssvms.org)

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