

birth of the COOL

CALIFORNIA ART, DESIGN,
AND CULTURE AT MIDCENTURY

Pre-Visit Activities for Elementary School Students



orange

COUNTY
MUSEUM
OF ART

850 San Clemente Drive Newport Beach CA 92660 949-759-1122 www.ocma.net



This pre-visit activity will help prepare your students for their museum visit to see the exhibition *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury*. This exhibition focuses on art, design, architecture, and music created in Southern California during the 1950s years, and the relationships among these disciplines. During this era, jazz musicians popularized the use of the term “cool” to connote excellence or sophistication. Taking its title from Miles Davis’ seminal album of the same name, *Birth of the Cool* explores art and culture from the 1950s that share stylistic similarities and reflect a “cool” sensibility. When you visit the museum, your students will see “cool” objects, hear cool jazz, and think about what cool means today. Your museum visit and pre-visit activity support interdisciplinary learning by connecting Visual Art, Language Arts, and Social Studies content areas, and address the California State Content Standards in the Visual Arts.

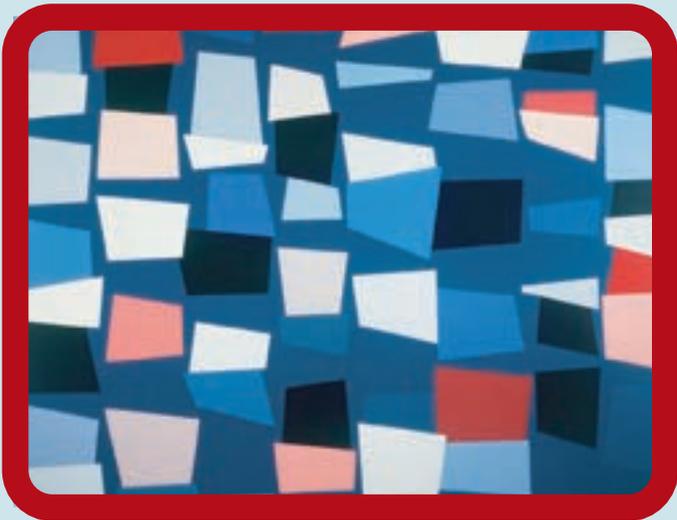
- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 2.0 Creative Expression
- 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
- 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
- 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

Please adapt these activities according to your classroom needs.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will prepare for their visit of *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury* by investigating featured artworks in the exhibition including music, painting, and furniture design. Students will employ the language of the elements of art to describe each artwork, and make connections between the art disciplines of visual art, design, and music. They will learn what to expect when they visit the museum.

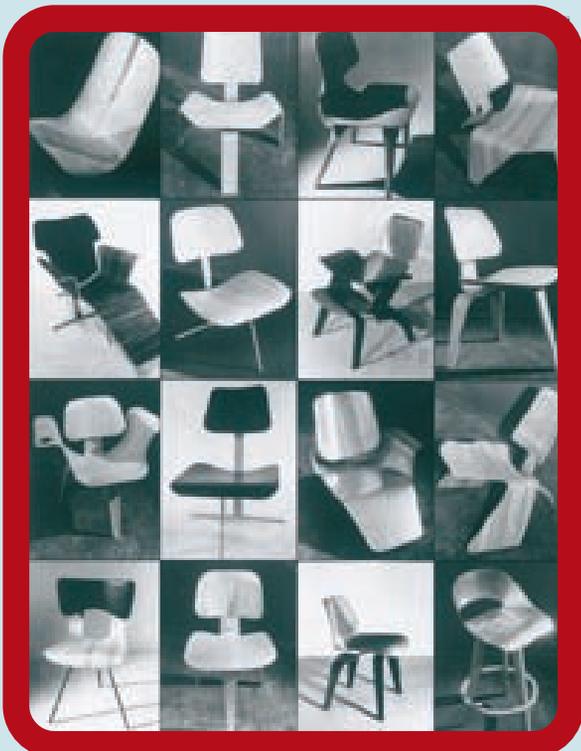
FEATURED ARTISTS:



PAINTING:

Karl Benjamin,
Small Planes:
White, Blue and Pink, 1957

MUSIC:
Miles Davis,
Birth of the Cool album
1949-50



FURNITURE DESIGN:

Charles and Ray Eames,
prototype plywood chairs
(photograph by Charles Eames, c. 1950)

MATERIALS:

- Two overhead transparencies, provided with this packet
- Overhead projector
- Music CD, provided with this packet
- CD player
- Colored pencils
- Sketch paper
- Template, provided with this packet
- Cardstock in any color
- Glue sticks (used for gluing two parts of chair together)
- White or tacky glue (used for heavier decorating elements)
- Scotch tape
- Scissors
- Decorating materials for embellishing the chairs; colored construction paper; miscellaneous papers with prints; metallic papers; pipe cleaners; buttons; plastic straws; colored sharpies or water based markers; yarn; glitter; fabric scraps; plastic straws; etc.

PREPARE:

- For the **“Create”** activity, take the original template provided in this Pre-Visit Packet and make one photocopy on cardstock for each student.
- Create an example before the **“Create”** activity, based on the instructions provided in this Pre-Visit Packet.
- Make photocopies of the Vocabulary page and Biography page if you wish to distribute these to students.





REVIEW:

You may feel it is necessary to review the **elements of art** with students. Familiarity with these terms will help students discuss the artworks presented in these pre-visit activities, and at the museum.

- **Line:** What different kinds of line you can think of? Draw students' responses on the board. Lines can be zigzag; straight; horizontal; vertical; etc. What emotion do you connect with wavy lines? With diagonal lines? Students may associate calm with horizontal lines, or excitement with zigzag lines, for example.
- **Color:** Review complementary colors: colors that are opposites on the color wheel like blue and orange or purple and yellow. Discuss primary and secondary colors. What are warm colors and cool colors? What feelings do you associate with cool colors? Warm colors? For example, people often associate tranquility with cool colors and excitement with warm colors.
- **Shape or form:** Ask students to list some shapes. There are organic shapes and geometric shapes. Do any of the shapes remind you of certain emotions? Some consider curvy shapes to be "friendlier" than those with straight lines and sharp angles, or corners.
- **Texture:** Ask students to describe different textures. What textures are pleasing to the touch? Which ones are unpleasant?
- **Value:** Lightness or darkness. Why would an artist use light hues? Dark hues? Does an artist use dark hues or light hues to depict a light source? What about a shadow?
- **Space:** The emptiness or area around, above, below, or within objects. What feeling do you associate with crowded objects? How about with objects with a lot of space between them?

Artists use the elements of art in different ways for a variety of effects. We will use the language of the elements of art to discuss works we will see at the museum.

DISCUSS:

Ask your students if they have ever borrowed anything from a friend or relative. What have you borrowed? Why did you borrow it? How do you care for an object that you are borrowing? How do you want people to treat objects that they borrow from you? Why do you think a museum would borrow certain objects? Ask your students why it is important not to touch anything at the museum.

Explain that a museum exhibits beautiful, valuable, fragile, historical, and thought-provoking objects, such as artworks like painting and sculpture. Museums also borrow things from other art collectors, museums, and artists so that they can share these objects with their own local communities.

Tell students they will visit the Orange County Museum of Art to view an exhibition called *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury*. The curator of the museum has borrowed over 150 paintings, photographs, pieces of furniture, and other precious objects made in Southern California. She brought these objects together in the museum to tell a fascinating story about a time in California's history, the 1950s, when people were defining what it means to be "cool."

What does cool mean today? What else can cool mean? Write student responses on the board. Think of literal definitions as well as slang definitions. Is cool easy to define? Why or why not?

Tell students that the original meaning of the term cool is "neither very warm nor very cold; moderately cold," but after World War II, it became slang for "excellent," "fashionable," or "classy." This new meaning was popularized by jazz musicians in the 1950s. Believe it or not, the term cool has been used as slang for over 50 years, while other terms such as "keen" or "groovy" are no longer popular. Why does "cool" continue to stay cool?

Do you think what was considered cool in the 1950s is still considered cool today? Tell students that the term cool, as used in the title of this exhibition, refers to a common style, evident in 1950s **modern** art, architecture, film, design, music, and **popular culture**. Cool is often described as effortless style, mellow emotions, or simple elegance. Cool things lacked overly complex details and exuded a sense of calm, uncomplicated classiness.

When you visit *Birth of the Cool*, you will see paintings, photographs, architectural models, album covers, and a variety of other cultural objects that defined the cool look of 1950s California. We are going to listen to and look at the work of four of these artists, Miles Davis, Karl Benjamin, and Charles and Ray Eames, as examples of what we might see when we visit the museum.

LISTEN:

Tell students that the title of this exhibition comes from a jazz album called *Birth of the Cool* that was recorded by the very important musician Miles Davis in 1949-50. Jazz is a modern form of music, with a fusion of African origins and contemporary American sounds. The way Davis played jazz was different from what was then popular on the east coast. His style was mellow and smooth with pleasing melodies. It became known as **cool jazz**, and grew very popular on the West Coast.



Distribute colored pencils and sketch paper. Tell students to sketch lines, shapes and colors as they listen to a track from *Birth of the Cool*.

Play Miles Davis' "Venus De Milo."

After students have listened to the song, ask them why they think this music was labeled "cool". What is the mood or feeling you get while listening to this track? How would they describe the rhythm? They may identify the mellow sound or smooth rhythm of this track.

Discuss student drawings. Are the lines horizontal or vertical, smooth or jagged? Are shapes repeated? Did they hear any sounds repeated in the music?



Visual art was inspired by the popular culture of the 1950s. The California artist Karl Benjamin has said that he listened to his Miles Davis "Birth of the Cool" album so many times, he almost wore it out!

LOOK AT A PAINTING:

Project Karl Benjamin's *Small Planes: White, Blue and Pink*. Tell students that people thought paintings like this one were cool in the 1950s because of their bold color combinations and refined shapes that seemed to vibrate right off the painting surface.



Ask students to describe what they see. How would you describe the colors? Are warm colors or cool colors dominant? Are the shapes geometric or organic? How would you describe the lines? Do they look like they were drawn with a ruler or freestyle? Do you see any repeated elements? Describe them. Compare these elements to the shapes, lines and colors that you envisioned while listening to Miles Davis. Are they similar? Different? How so?

What emotions do you feel when you look at Benjamin's painting? Would you call this a "cool" emotion? Why or why not?

Tell students that this style of art is called **hard-edge painting**. Ask students how they think this style got its name. Students may identify the crisp hard edges of the lines and shapes in this work. Hard-edge painting is a type of **abstract** art, in that it does not look like anything realistic and the forms are reduced or simplified. Does it remind you of anything from real life? Benjamin titled this work, *Small Planes: White, Blue and Pink*. Is

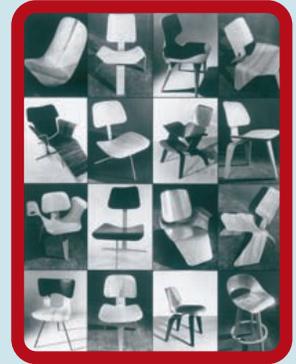
this a good title? If you were to rename it, what would you call it? Would you describe this painting as "cool?" Why or why not?



Designers of the time were inspired by hard-edge painters like Benjamin, who painted flat shapes of bright colors with clean lines. Designers like the husband-and-wife team Charles and Ray Eames made furniture with sloping shapes, vivid colors and smooth textures which people still consider cool today.

LOOK AT FURNITURE:

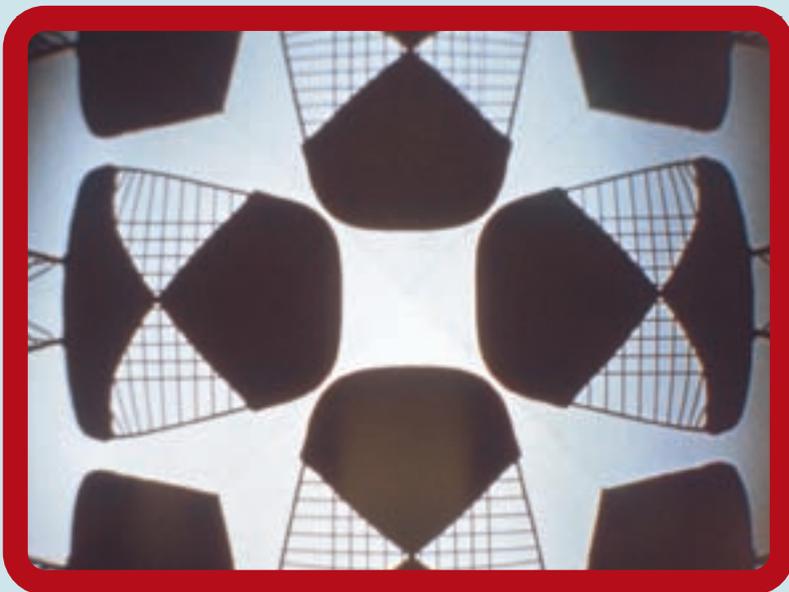
Project Charles and Ray Eames, *prototype plywood chairs* (photograph by Charles Eames, c. 1950), provided in this Pre-Visit Packet. Tell students that Charles and Ray Eames were a husband and wife team of furniture designers in Southern California. In the 1950s their furniture designs could be found in department stores and magazine advertisements nationwide, and were accessible and affordable. People loved the simple, sloping shapes of the Eames' designs, and still do to this day.



Ask students to describe the shapes and lines that they see. Do you see any similarities between the elements of art in this photograph and those used in Benjamin's paintings? What are they? What does it appear that these chairs are made of? Would you like to sit in these chairs, or put them in your room? Why or why not?

Do you think a chair can be art? Why or why not? Would you characterize this furniture as "cool," according to the 1950s definition (effortless style, mellow emotions, simple elegance, lacking overly complex details)? Why or why not?

Ask students to reflect on the three artworks you experienced. What connections did you see between music, painting, and furniture from the 1950s? What differences did you see? Consider the music, painting, and architecture of today. Do you see any similarities in the early twenty-first century? Do you see any differences?



CREATE:

Brainstorm with students what a “cool” chair today would look like. What shape would it be? What color? Explain to students that they will now design their own piece of cool furniture based on their personal criteria of what is cool.

Show students your sample chair. Tell students they will start with a template to construct a chair, but then can alter the design to make it “cool.” Ask students for ideas about how they might change the legs, seat, back, and arms.

Distribute the cardstock templates and scissors to each student. If the students want to color their chair this should be done before assembly. Instruct the class on how to cut out the two parts of the template. Suggest to your students that they can cut out a different shape than what is outlined on the template. For instance, students can draw a different chair outline on the template, and cut that shape out instead.

Demonstrate where to fold on the seat section of the chair. Show the students where and how to glue the two parts together using the glue stick. There are 2 leg reinforcements on the template, and should be used if the front and back legs begin to separate (see photos for completed example). Once glued together, they can add other elements to the chair to decorate it and make their own unique and “cool” design. After they are complete, display the chairs in class and have an art exhibition. Discuss each student’s use of the elements of art. Compare student designs to the chairs designed by the Eameses. Identify any similarities to 1950s cool, and cool styles today.

WRITE:

Like trends, the meaning of cool has changed over time. What was considered cool in the 1950s may no longer be popular today. Ask students to choose a popular culture commodity that they feel enthusiastic about such as cars, clothes, furniture, or music. Tell them to write a multiple paragraph composition on the subject, “What Makes ____ Cool Today.” Have students research current trends in their chosen commodity. You may direct student research to newspaper articles; magazines; web resources; and photographs. In the composition, have students:

- a. Provide an introductory paragraph.
- b. Establish and support a central idea with a topic sentence at or near the beginning of the first paragraph.
- c. Include supporting paragraphs with simple facts, details, and explanations.
- d. Conclude with a paragraph that summarizes the points.

VOCABULARY:

Abstract:

Artwork in which the subject matter is depicted in a simplified or reduced way.

Cool:

The original meaning of the term cool is “neither very warm nor very cold; moderately cold”, but after World War II, it became slang for “excellent,” “popular,” or “classy.” Cool is often described as effortless style, mellow emotions, or simple elegance.

Cool jazz:

A style of mellow jazz that emerged in the late 1940s and became very popular on the West Coast.

Curator:

Museum staff who arrange exhibitions.

Elements of art:

The building blocks of art: line, color, shape or form, texture, value and space.

Hard-edge painting:

A movement in abstract painting of the 1950s that featured bright colors, crisp lines and geometric shapes.

Modern:

A category of the fine arts created from the mid-1800s to the 1960s.

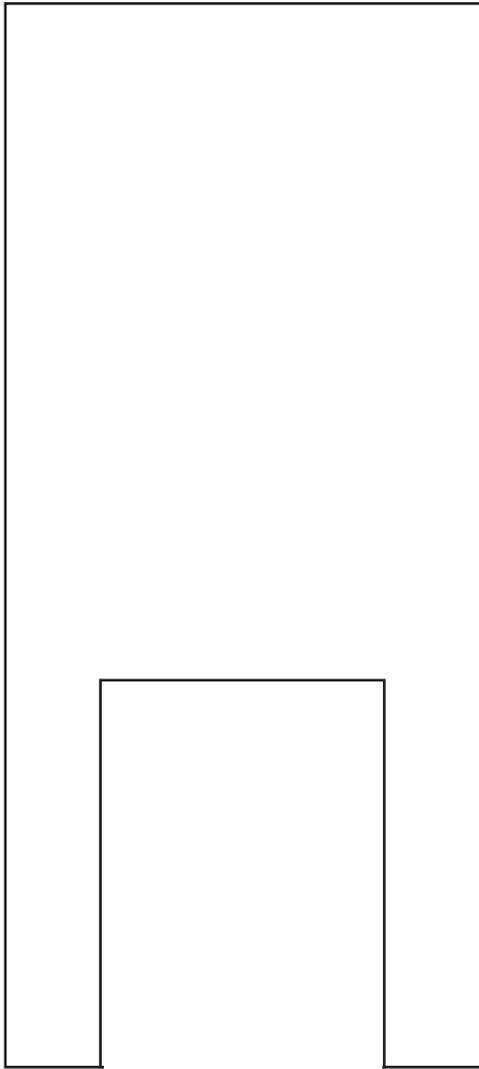
Birth of the Cool focuses on modernism from the 1950s. Modern can also mean the present.

Popular culture:

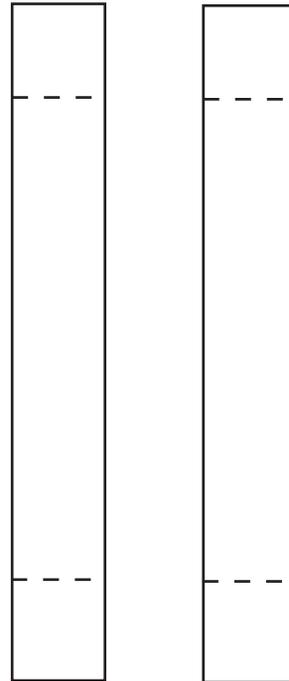
Aspects of society that are widely liked by many people like movies and music. Also called pop culture.

MY "COOL" CHAIR

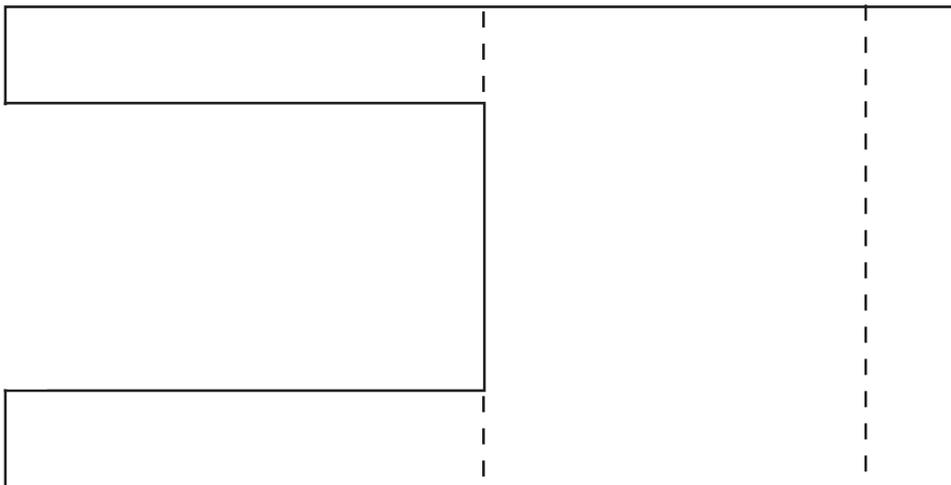
CHAIR BACK

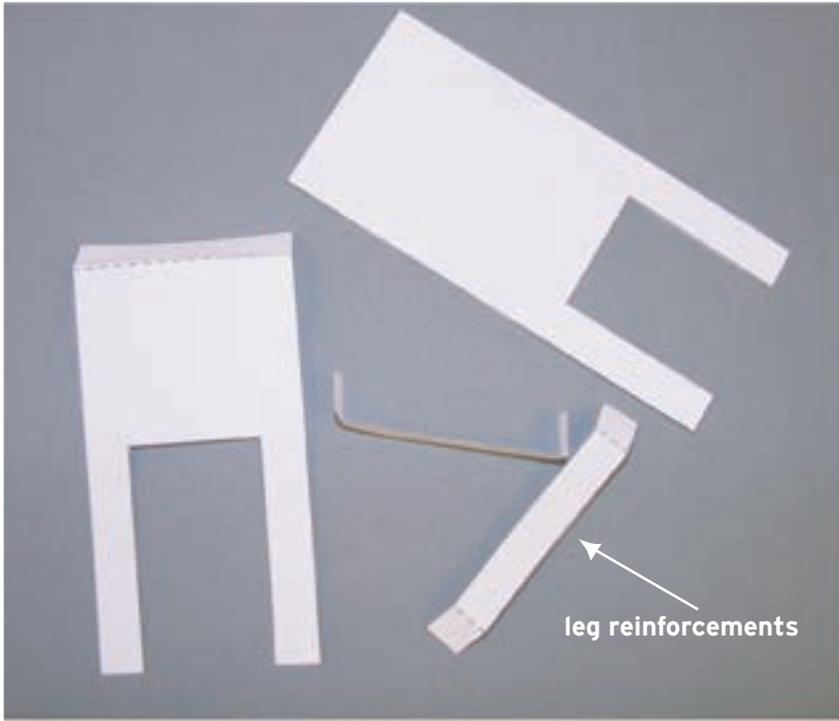


LEG REINFORCEMENTS



CHAIR SEAT





Cut out stencil



Assembled chair



Embellished chairs!

My "Cool" Chair is inspired by the fantastic projects by Carla Hartman of the Eames Office.
www.eamesoffice.com

WHO IS MILES DAVIS?

Miles Davis, was born in 1926 and became one of the most influential American jazz musicians of the 20th century. A trumpeter, bandleader and composer, Davis was a leader in almost every major development in jazz from World War II to the 1990s. He recorded one of the first cool jazz records. Birth of the Cool is an album which collects twelve songs recorded by the Miles Davis nonet (nine musicians) in 1949 and 1950.



WHO IS KARL BENJAMIN?:

Supporting his young family as a schoolteacher, Karl Benjamin began painting in the early 1950s. In 1952 Benjamin moved to Claremont, California, a college town east of Los Angeles with an active art scene. In the 1980s and 1990s Benjamin taught art at the Claremont Graduate School, where he influenced a generation of California artists. He has said that he listened to his Miles Davis “Birth of the Cool” album so many times he almost wore it out!



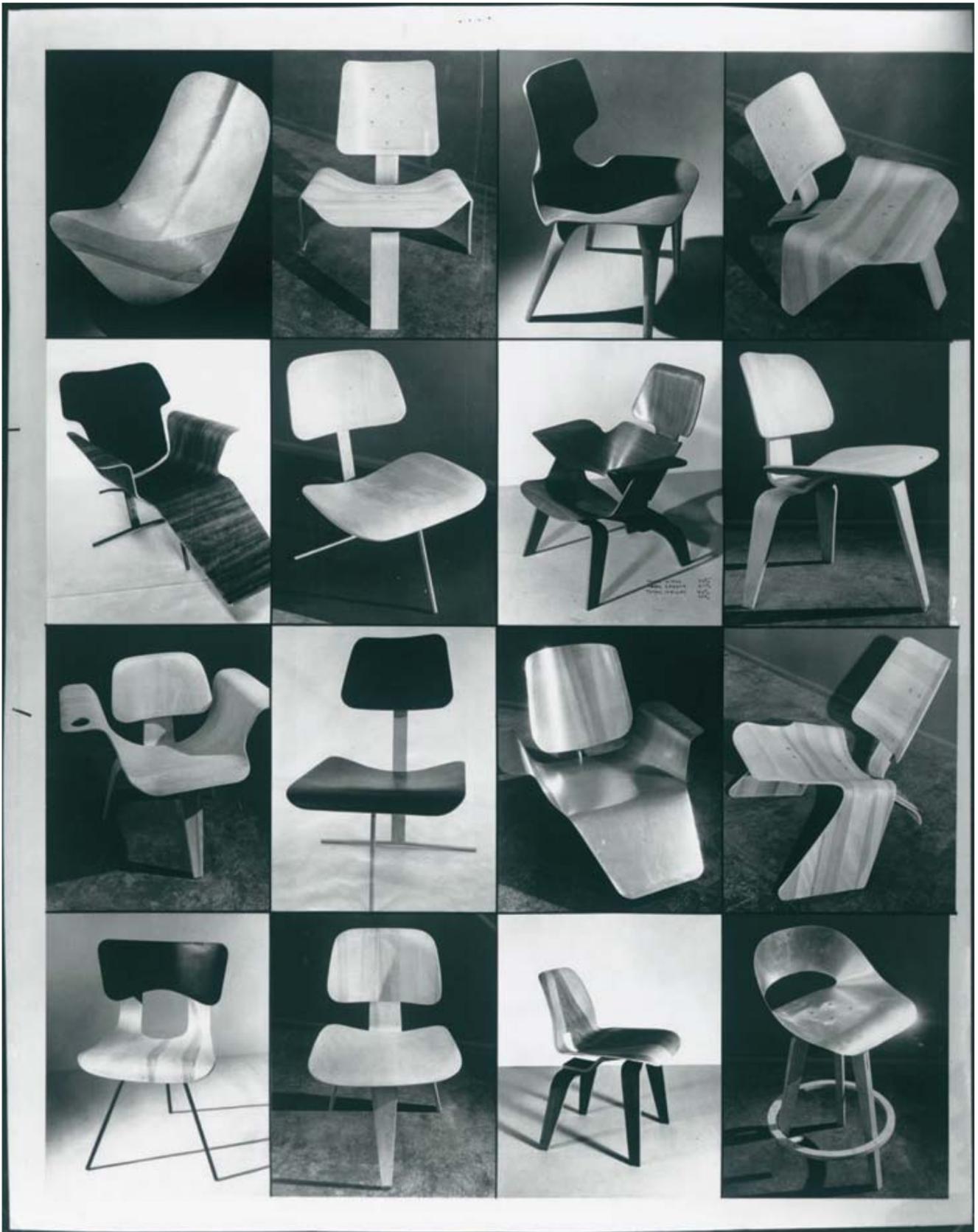
WHO ARE CHARLES AND RAY EAMES?:

Charles Eames was born in 1907 in Saint Louis, Missouri. While he was in high school, Charles worked part time at a steel company where he learned about engineering, drawing, and architecture. This was when he first thought he would become an architect. Ray Kaiser Eames was born in Sacramento, California in the 1910s. She studied painting and design at the Cranbrook Academy in Michigan, where she met Charles. They married in 1941. The Eameses designed furniture with simple, smooth shapes that was accessible and affordable. In the 1950s their innovative furniture designs, introduced in California, could be found in department stores and magazine advertisements nationwide. People loved the simple, sloping shapes of the Eames’ designs, and still do to this day.





Karl Benjamin, *Small Planes: White, Blue and Pink*, 1957, oil on linen, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm), The Buck Collection, Laguna Beach, California . © Karl Benjamin



Charles and Ray Eames, prototype plywood chairs
(photograph by Charles Eames, c. 1950), Boyd Collection