

Charles Eames

American, 1907–78

Ray Eames

American, 1912–88

“LCW” chair (Lounge Chair Wood), 1950–55

Molded plywood and rubber

Manufactured by Herman Miller Furniture Company, Zeeland, Michigan, established 1923

Gift of Don and Bev Smith 87.33.1.1

How does one apply “masterpiece” criteria to a mass-produced object? That is the discussion I hoped to start by choosing a famous modern chair by the husband-and-wife team Charles and Ray Eames.

An overarching philosophy of the Eameses was that good design should be available at affordable prices, especially given the needs of young families after World War II. In 1941, the couple had developed plywood-molding technology that resulted in a wartime leg-splint contract with the U.S. Navy. Their process consisted of shaping plywood in a mold, by means of heat and pressure.

They continued to perfect this technology to create biomorphic, sculptural chairs such as the LCW, perhaps the most celebrated example. The ergonomic seat and back are set at an angle, to follow the contours of the body, and are joined to the tapering supports by black rubber shock-mounts.

The Museum of Modern Art introduced the LCW with other new Eames furniture designs in 1946, and the Walker Art Center featured it in Idea House II the following year. The Eameses created what can be considered a mass-produced masterpiece—a functional and affordable chair that was also sensuously sculptural and unabashedly modern. Consumers continue to be captivated by it, and its popularity for over fifty years has secured its status as a design icon.

Jennifer Komar Olivarez

Associate Curator

Decorative Arts, Textiles, and Sculpture

Sesson Shūkei

Japanese, 1504–89

Egrets and Swallows amid Willows and Plums, ca. 1575

Ink on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard P. Gale 65.7.1,2

I'm persistently struck by the mysterious quality of these folding screens in which gnarled trees partially emerge from thick mists and the ghostly plumage of egrets shimmers in the moonlight. The artist, Sesson Shūkei, wrote a painting manual for his students and attracted the patronage of high-ranking warlords and Zen abbots while he was still a young man.

The seemingly casual touch of Sesson's brush produced softly modeled forms reminiscent of the great masters of ink painting in China. However, unlike his Chinese models, Sesson did not attempt to create pictorial depth for the viewer. Instead,

he rendered his motifs in the foreground and middle ground and sealed off the deep distance with pervasive mists. This resulted in works of great immediacy and high decorative impact—characteristics that became hallmarks of Japanese pictorial design. Sesson's unique artistic vision—well represented by this pair of screens—thus helped changed the course of Japanese painting.

Matthew Welch

*Assistant Director of Curatorial Affairs
and Curator of Japanese and Korean Art*