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CONSISTENCY OF STRUCTURE: THE CONSERVATION OF CHARLES & RAY EAMES "STUDY FOR A GLIDER NOSE"

Roger Griffith

Abstract

(The full version of this paper can be found on the MOMA website: http://www.moma.org/collection/conservation/)

The 1943 design and construction of the 'blister' for "Study for a Glider Nose" by Charles and Ray Eames represents an important and innovative contribution to the development of the single-shell molded plywood chair. Charles & Ray Eames spent from 1940-1945 perfecting the fabrication of molded plywood with compound curves. Through their home experiments and commissions from the US Navy they began by designing molded plywood leg splints for medical use. The splints were a success and other products they designed included a molded plywood body litter and an arm splint. The litter and arm splint, however, were never mass-produced. When the Eameses set out to construct a one-piece wooden section as large as the 'blister' it was regarded as a nearly impossible task.

In 1943 the glider designer Hawley Bowlus of Airborne Transport, Inc. asked Charles & Ray Eames to assist in the experimental design of a glider, the CG-16 “Flying Flatcar”. The glider was to be used for transportation of military equipment and personnel. One prototype glider was built, and the Molded Plywood Division of Evans Products was contracted to produce part of the nose section and the fuselage formed out of plywood compound curved body units.

The emphasis on control and accuracy in the production of wartime products had a positive effect on the design and construction of later plywood products by the Eameses. The naval commissions also meant that priority materials such as synthetic adhesives were made available to the Eameses that otherwise would have been impossible for them to obtain. These materials were essential in the development of their postwar ventures into mass-produced plywood objects. The goal the Eameses set for themselves was a technique for mass-producing curved plywood shapes that could be used to make low-cost, high-quality furniture. Although the Eameses were not ultimately successful in producing a single-shell chair molded in plywood, their eventual chair designs such as the DCW (Dining Chair Wood) and the DCM (Dining Chair Metal, sometimes referred to as the potato-chip chair) are considered by many to be the most important chair designs of Post-War America.

This paper examines the design and construction of the “Study for a Glider Nose” as well as the use of various materials and industrial technology developed during the war. Recent conservation treatment and examination of the “Glider Nose”, performed at the conservation laboratory at The Museum of Modern Art, revealed the Eameses unique construction techniques and their ultimate
Griffith

success of bending plywood into compound curves. Scientific examination such as adhesive analysis was helpful in determining the actual construction of the “Study for a Glider Nose” providing heretofore non-existent documentation.

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