EXHIBITIONS

see Alphonse Legros’s interpretation (no.82; c.1885–90; Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh) of Raphael’s Heads of the Virgin and Child (no.55; British Museum). Even today past models continue to inspire artists, as in the case of Carol Prusa, who took up metalpoint after studying Leonardo’s Study for the setting of the ‘Adoration of the Magi’ in the Uffizi and which led to her make Limina of 2011 (p.235, fig.7).

Hugo Chapman writes that ‘Metalpoint, more than any other graphic technique, honed the mental and practical skills required in disegno as it demanded careful calculation how to realize an artistic conception within its structures’ (p.105). It is interesting to ask why this, the most linear of techniques, did not have a revival in Florence in the 1560s, when the theory of disegno as lineamentum was developed, above all in Alessandro Allori’s Il primo libro de’ ragionamenti delle regole del disegno, as well as in Vasari (book I, chapter 15 of the Giuntina edition of the Lives). When discussing drawing techniques in the following chapter, Vasari does not mention metalpoint. By this date, both in Florence and elsewhere in Italy, the technique had been virtually abandoned (after 1515 even Raphael seems to have stopped using it), and Chapman suggests that Michelangelo’s use of black and red chalk and pen led to their widespread use by Florentine artists (p.114). It is true that it was easier to express the dynamism of creative thought by means of more rapid and flexible techniques (it is enough to think of Leonardo’s use of pen and ink) in a new vision of the artist’s work that combined the intellect, the idea, the hand and experience, all under the aegis of disegno, defined by Vasari as the father of the three arts (painting, sculpture and architecture). The fact that silverpoint appears on two rare pages of Vasari’s Libro de’ Disegni (nos.43–44; Fig.65) which also includes lead point, shows that as a collector he still appreciated techniques that were virtually obsolete.

In discussing the Master of the Housebook (fl. c.1470–1500), Giulia Bartrum writes: ‘It seems very probable that the artist developed his lightly scratched drypoint technique as a means of replicating images of the type portrayed in his silverpoint drawings’ (p.69). The relationship of metalpoint with engraving would seem to have been close for other artists too.

Mantegna did not use silverpoint, as Chapman remarks (p.106). Instead, working in pen, the artist achieved an amazing refinement in indicating light and shade by using parallel lines characteristic of late-quattrocento Florentine prints in the so-called Maniera Fine and Maniera Larga, also found in certain German engravings. In his drawing technique, Parmigianino was Mantegna’s true heir, also capable of creating subtle luministic effects. Both demonstrated the profound interrelationship between technical experimentation in the fields of drawing and printmaking. It is worth adding that in telling the history of metalpoint one cannot leave out the parallel technical innovations in printmaking.

One of the many merits of this exhibition was the opportunity it provided to study the development of a drawing medium and the various challenges it set the artists to overcome its limitations, ranging, as it did, over a wide cultural and geographic area and different epochs. One can but hope that such an exhibition will encourage a revival of metalpoint, producing genuinely original art quite independent of the medium’s traditional use.

65. Risen Christ and studies of hands, by Raffaellino del Garbo, c.1495–97, album sheet by Giorgio Vasari, from his Libro di Disegni. Silverpoint heightened with white over blind stylus on paper, 37.8 by 25.5 cm. (British Museum, London).

Charles and Ray Eames

London

by TANYA HARRIOD

THE LAST MAJOR show devoted to the design work of Charles and Ray Eames was jointly hosted by the Library of Congress, Washington, and the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, some seventeen years ago, in 1997–98. This was an exciting time for Eames studies. Pat Kirkham’s double biography Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century (1995) had appeared two years previously, offering a brilliant analysis of the creative dynamics of the husband-and-wife team and a substantial re-evaluation of the role of Ray Eames, whose career, until then, had largely been subsumed under her husband’s name and that of the Eames Office. The catalogue of the 1997–98 exhibition, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames: A Legacy of Invention, edited by Donald Albrecht, contained a provocative essay by Joseph Giovannini which went further than Pat Kirkham in adjusting Charles Eames’s achievements, not only in favour of contributions made by his wife, but also those of Erno Saarinen (in the context of the first furniture designs) and such figures as Harry Bertoia, who worked in the
Eames Office in the crucial early days. Other essays included Beatriz Colomina’s penetrating study of the Eames House and Helène Lipstadt’s analysis of the Eames Office’s interaction with government agencies and corporate America against the backdrop of the Cold War. Both the show and the catalogue were widely acclaimed.1

So what can The World of Charles and Ray Eames, on view at the Barbican Art Gallery, London (to 14th February), and curated by Catharine Ince, add to its distinguished predecessor? The answer must be: a great deal. There is, of course, the sheer visual pleasure of engaging with such a varied design practice, encompassing furniture, toys, a pair of remarkable houses and exhibition-making (Fig.66), as well as a substantial body of film and multimedia work that forms an especially important part of this show. The World of Charles and Ray Eames is accompanied by a magnificent book (although not, sadly, a catalogue), which has been designed by the John Morgan Studio.2 An Eames Anthology, edited by Daniel Ostroff,3 is a useful companion publication in which the Eameses emerge as persuasive writers on public issues. By contrast, their more personal communications, some of which are on display at the Barbican, appear artless in the extreme.

The Barbican exhibition opens with Charles’s wartime experiments with moulded plywood and Ray’s employment of them to make curvilinear organic sculptural forms. These playful moves between function and art are further explored in a wall of moulded leg splints, successfully used by the military, and a plywood stretcher. Further examples of Ray’s sculpture are accompanied by a generous selection of her 1942–47 cover designs for the West Coast magazine Art & Architecture and a set of jewel-like ink, collaged and painted abstract works, which make clear Ray’s painterly and sculptural sophistication and her vital contribution to the partnership. A display of photographs of Ray and Charles surrounded by members of their studio makes another point (Fig.67). Charles may have been a latecomer to Modernism and less sensitive than Ray to organic and curvilinear design, but he had sufficient confidence and charisma to create and project an extraordinarily versatile and professional design office.

Part of this projection centred on Charles and Ray’s carefully calibrated dress and demeanour.4 An amusing contrast can be drawn with other twentieth-century images of architects and designers: Mies van de Rohe pictured gazing grumpily at his Farnsworth House in 1951, and Peter and Alison Smithson (great fans of the Eameses), Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi posing grimly with a pair of Eames chairs in a foggy Chelsea street.
duty, while some of their finest works, *Powers of ten* and *Think*, were made to hone the public image of corporations like IBM.

Yet when Eisenhower spoke in his speech of the demise of ‘the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop’, now ‘overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields’, he was overlooking the unusual contribution of the Eameses. They were tinkerers, completely hands-on designer-makers who brought humanity to Cold War propaganda – perhaps most brilliantly in the seven-screen presentation Charles and Ray Eames’s rich and complex practice is one of the strengths of this fine exhibition.

Yet when Eisenhower spoke in his speech of the demise of ‘the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop’, now ‘overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields’, he was overlooking the unusual contribution of the Eameses. They were tinkerers, completely hands-on designer-makers who brought humanity to Cold War propaganda – perhaps most brilliantly in the seven-screen presentation *Glimpses of America* made for the USIA to show at the America National Exhibition held in Moscow in 1959 (Fig.68). Soviet Russians saw 2,200 images in twelve minutes, from cornfields to steel mills, from Marilyn Monroe to baseball games, from lawn-mowing to children’s bedtimes. With an urgent, jazzy score by Elmer Bernstein, America was presented as productive and inclusive, rich in consumer goods and in intellectual, pastoral and sporting pleasures.

Coercion is not an aspect of the Eameses’ work that immediately comes across in this exhibition. The ambivalence of the Eames Office’s role was inevitably more powerfully conveyed in the Victoria & Albert Museum’s 2008 exhibition *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*. At the Barbican we are mostly prompted to admire their particular brand of Modernism, which offered the public so much, and so generously. For instance, the Eameses’ appreciation of objects from around the world was transmitted to all of us through delightful films like *Toccata for toy trains* (1957) and *Tops* (1960). The interior of their house at Pacific Palisades (Fig.69) showed how the humblest things can interact and produce beauty. ‘Less is more’ was not an option.

The Eameses combined with a positively Victorian love of taxonomies. Their libraries of images and objects recalled John Ruskin’s educational collections and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi’s even earlier ‘Object Lessons’. Charles aligned himself with W.R. Lethaby and Eric Gill in his fondness for darned socks and belief that effective design meant that ‘Beauty will look after herself’. In addition, the ways in which both Eameses worked to provide a blueprint for design education in post-independence India is retrospectively moving and poignant, a demonstration of neo-colonialism at its least offensive. Sometimes, however, the soft power exerted through the Eames Office appears disturbing. For example, *Think was* a multi-screen presentation made for the IBM pavilion at the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair. It is shown in slightly abbreviated form at the Barbican. Its purpose was to naturalise computing by demonstrating the similarities between the electronic brain and our own. Not even Charles’s soothing voice-over and Elmer Bernstein’s crackerjack soundtrack can disguise the fact that this particular ‘blast on the senses’ was, quite simply, beguiling. Duty, while some of their finest works, *Powers of ten* and *Think*, were made to hone the public image of corporations like IBM.