



**Thinking**

**Willy Guhl**

**with Your**

**Museum für Gestaltung Zürich  
Lars Müller Publishers**

**Hands**



# Cross Currents: Willy Guhl and the International Furniture Scene

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In August 1947, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York announced a worldwide competition calling for designers to develop new ideas for "good, inexpensive and attractive" furniture,<sup>1</sup> adaptable to modern living standards and specifically suited to small apartments and modest new housing being built in the postwar period. America embraced the tenets of European modernism in the interwar period and by the end of World War II powerhouse institutions like MoMA were important places where material, aesthetic, and technological innovations in design and architecture were studied, supported, and promoted to the public. Postwar privation and the need for economic stimulus led nations to look toward design and architecture for answers: "Governments and industry the world over are making every effort to find a solution for the housing problem but have yet paid only scant attention to the design and the production of good inexpensive furniture," said René d'Harnoncourt, MoMA's director of curatorial affairs, at a 1947 dinner given to announce the International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design.

MoMA was a natural partner for industry following the museum's successful campaigns to promote "good design" and generate consumer interest. Exhibitions such as *Useful Household Objects Under \$5*, staged in 1938 and organized by Alfred H. Barr Jr., MoMA's first director and foremost proponent of the Bauhaus and its approach to art, design, and practical life, were hugely popular. In 1940 Eliot Noyes, the newly appointed head of the Department of Industrial Design, established independently from MoMA's Department of Architecture that same year,<sup>2</sup> organized the Organic Design in Home Furnishings competition, an important precedent for the Low-Cost Furniture competition – to great critical and public success. In 1946 Edgar Kaufmann Jr. replaced Noyes and began a program of displays that sought to introduce a broader range of new products with wider public appeal.<sup>3</sup> Connections were forged across America through MoMA's traveling exhibition program and institutional collaborations. Museums and galleries similarly committed to the scholarship and showcasing of modern design exerted their influence over consumer taste and the direction of industry. In 1946 the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis opened its Everyday Art Gallery, one of the first in the United States dedicated to design, and realized as part public resource (materials, information), part international shop (commercial wares from around the world). With the curatorial guidance of Kaufmann, the Detroit Institute of Arts staged *For Modern Living* in 1949, an influential exhibition curated by Alexander Girard that



1 Jurors Catherine Bauer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (seated with his face hidden in the front row) assessing entries to the International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1948–49.

2 Pages from the *Prize Designs for Modern Furniture* catalogue, 1950. The pairing of chair designs by Willy and Emil Guhl and Charles and Ray Eames was intentional to underline the common thinking across continents.

explored the lineages of modern furniture and commissioned leading designers to create modern “model rooms,” a popular mode of display in Europe and the United States, and increasingly used in furniture showrooms (→ *Model Homes*, p. 219).

It is no surprise that the Low-Cost Furniture competition was conceived by a cohort of American retailers who formed the Museum Design Project, Inc., and invited MoMA to co-sponsor and present the project. Under the directorship of Kaufmann, the International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design launched on January 5, 1948, and closed on October 31 that same year. Nearly three thousand entries were received from thirty-one countries.<sup>4</sup> Individual designers and invited research teams were required to submit concept boards, with applicants from the United States additionally submitting full- or quarter-scale models of their furniture designs not required of their international competitors (fig. 1).

The competition attracted the leading figures in the design world including Marcel Breuer, Harry M. Weese, Xavier and Clara Porset Guerrero, and Hans J. Wegner. Jurors included the housing expert Catherine Bauer; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect and then director of the Department of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology; and Gordon Russell, designer and director of Britain’s Council of Industrial Design. Prizes were awarded in the seating category to Don Knorr (chair manufactured by Knoll), Georg Leowald from Berlin, Charles Eames<sup>5</sup> with UCLA (chair manufactured by Herman Miller Furniture Company), and the art director Alexey Brodovitch; British designers Robin Day and Clive Latimer took first prize for their storage unit design. The winning entries were unified by innovations in structure, material, and form that yielded lightness and flexibility, modularity for ease of ship-

ping and adaptability of use, elegant lines suited to the human form, and methods of construction evolved from other areas of industrial application.

Following a year of development and manufacturing support to make some of the designs available for public purchase, an exhibition of the prizewinning and notable “striking, good-looking and inventive”<sup>6</sup> design ideas opened at the Museum of Modern Art in the late spring of 1950. Kaufmann hoped the project would become the “first stage on the road, an early moment in a chain reaction which will lead to the simpler constructions, the greater comforts and the more varied expressions of good living which seem predicted by the good work presented here.”<sup>7</sup> In the catalogue produced to accompany the exhibition Kaufmann drew attention to the “parallel thinking” between designs by Charles Eames and Willy and Emil Guhl. Their respective designs for reclining chairs were shown on facing pages, underlining shared approaches to methods of construction and the human figure in repose, which characterized the sculptural forms (fig. 2). This was an additional entry for the newly established Eames Office that was presented separately to the prize-winning molded plastic and stamped aluminum seating entry made with UCLA.<sup>8</sup>

Photographs of the exhibition installation show the variety of approaches to the competition brief in a simple display typical of the time: wall-mounted boards alongside maquettes on plinths or groupings of furniture – some arranged with potted plants – either set on the floor or behind barriers and elevated so visitors could examine the design and production details (fig. 3). Several of the Guhls’ competition entry boards made it into the display: their minimal, fluid section line drawings and photographs of the shell

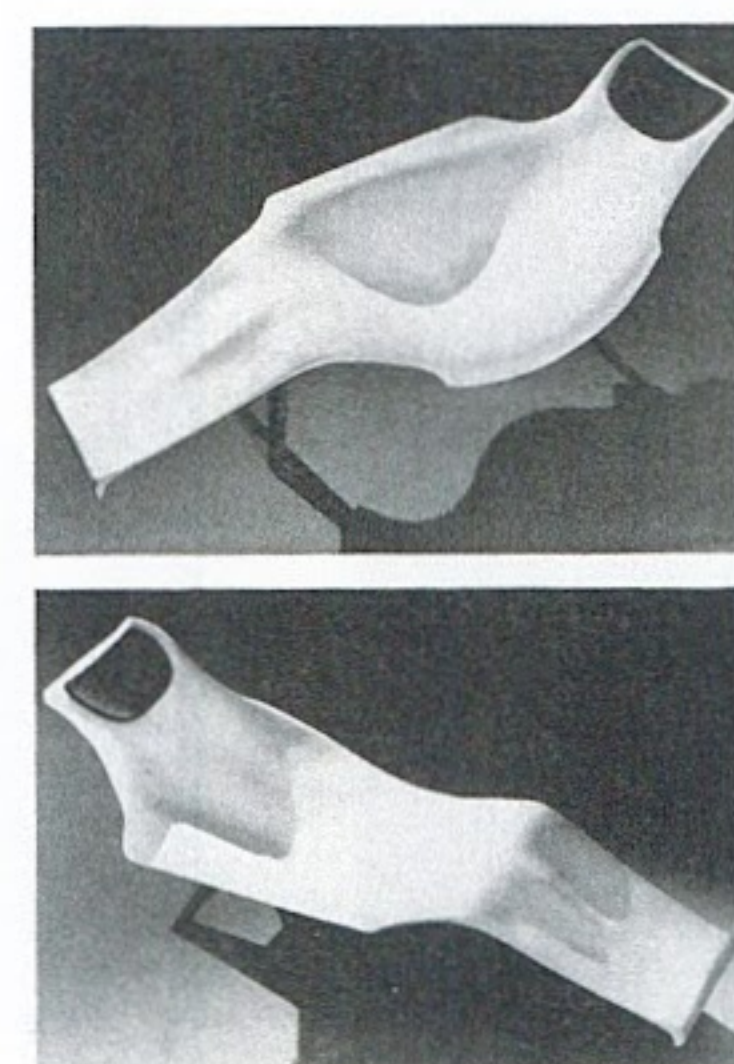


#### Other Entries

In addition to the prize-winning and team entries already described, many interesting entries by competitors from this country and abroad are striking, good-looking and inventive. Among these drawings, many represent an extraordinary skill and freedom of draftsmanship, introducing human figures in lively fashion to demonstrate the utility and adaptability of their concepts. Many techniques were employed, from strict mechanical drawing to brilliant Kodachromes.

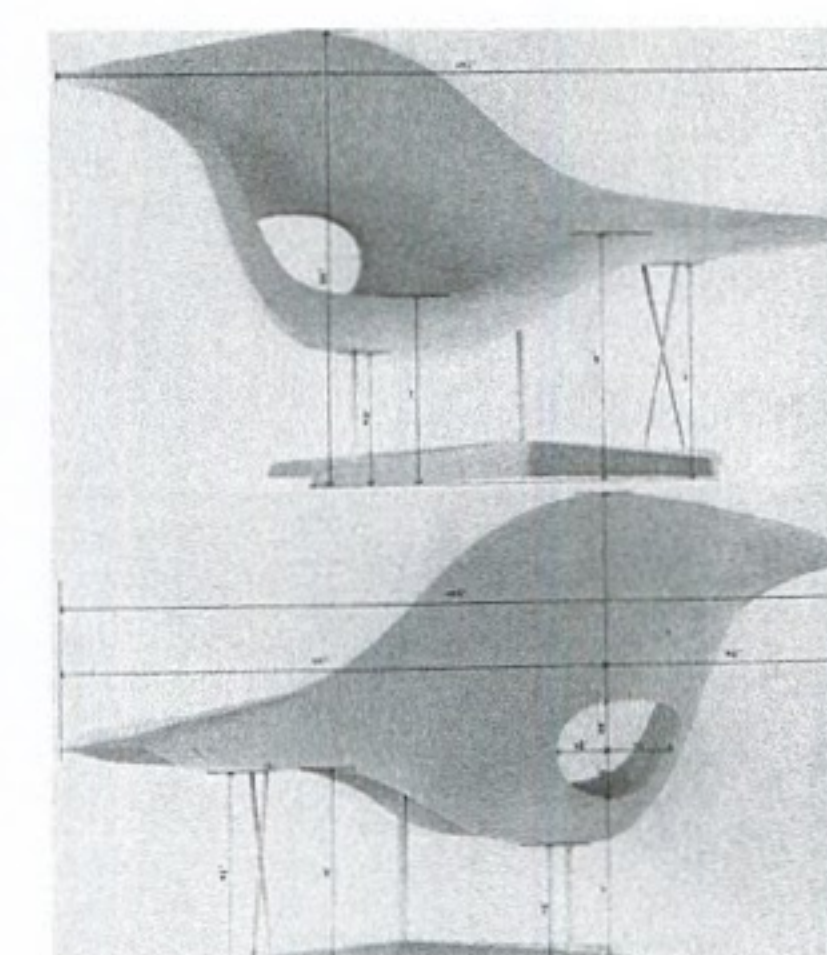
Chair Designed by Willy and Emil Guhl, Zurich, Switzerland

An interesting example of parallel thinking on both sides of the Atlantic is presented by the reclining chair by Willy and Emil Guhl of Switzerland and that by Charles Eames, both developing the theme of a large molded shell.



Chair Designed by Charles Eames, Venice, California

Although specialized in use, this lounge chair was admired for its elegant shape and most interesting construction. Two extremely thin molded glass meet in a further edge but are separated by as much as an inch of space in the central portions of the form. The cavity is filled by bent-expanded veneer which gives great rigidity and strength, yet preserves an exceptional lack of weight.





3 Installation view of the 1950 exhibition showing the Eameses' "La Chaise," competition entry 13721. The exhibition featured entry panels and 1:1 models of designs from US-based teams and was planned to coincide with the launch of those furniture pieces realized for mass production.

4 Three Low-Cost Furniture Competition entry panels (top row) by Willy and Emil Guhl, displayed at the *Prize Designs for Modern Furniture* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition was open to the public between May 16 and July 16, 1950.

models of the armchair and reclining "deck" chair stand out against the more detailed technical entry hung below (fig. 4). Although the panel text describes the Guhls' intention to achieve comfortable seating by adapting to the human form and through their methods of modeling, the exhibition and catalogue images do not depict the fuller story of these experimental "seating studies." In surviving documentation of the project boards and archival photography we see an illustrated account of testing and modeling the human form in clay before making a plaster cast of the finished model (→ pp. 102, 114).

"Is it possible to determine a chair form that represents a sum of many individual seat types?" asks Willy Guhl in *Werk* in 1950.<sup>9</sup> This is the question he and Emil set out to answer through their form and material tests. They made frames for three types of sitting (dining and working, armchair, and reclining or deck chair) and invited "helpers" to sit on the clay bodies for between thirty and sixty minutes. It was important for the designers to capture the variety of imprints made as the body shifted around in the seat for comfort. These "collective impressions"<sup>10</sup> yielded not a precise or singular anatomically correct form, but a plastic form that corresponded to the ways in which a body naturally, perhaps unconsciously, moves when sitting. When turning their attention to strong points of contact such as the armrests, Guhl notes the shape is not visually determined but must come from an active sense of touch and is "seen" by the hands.<sup>11</sup>

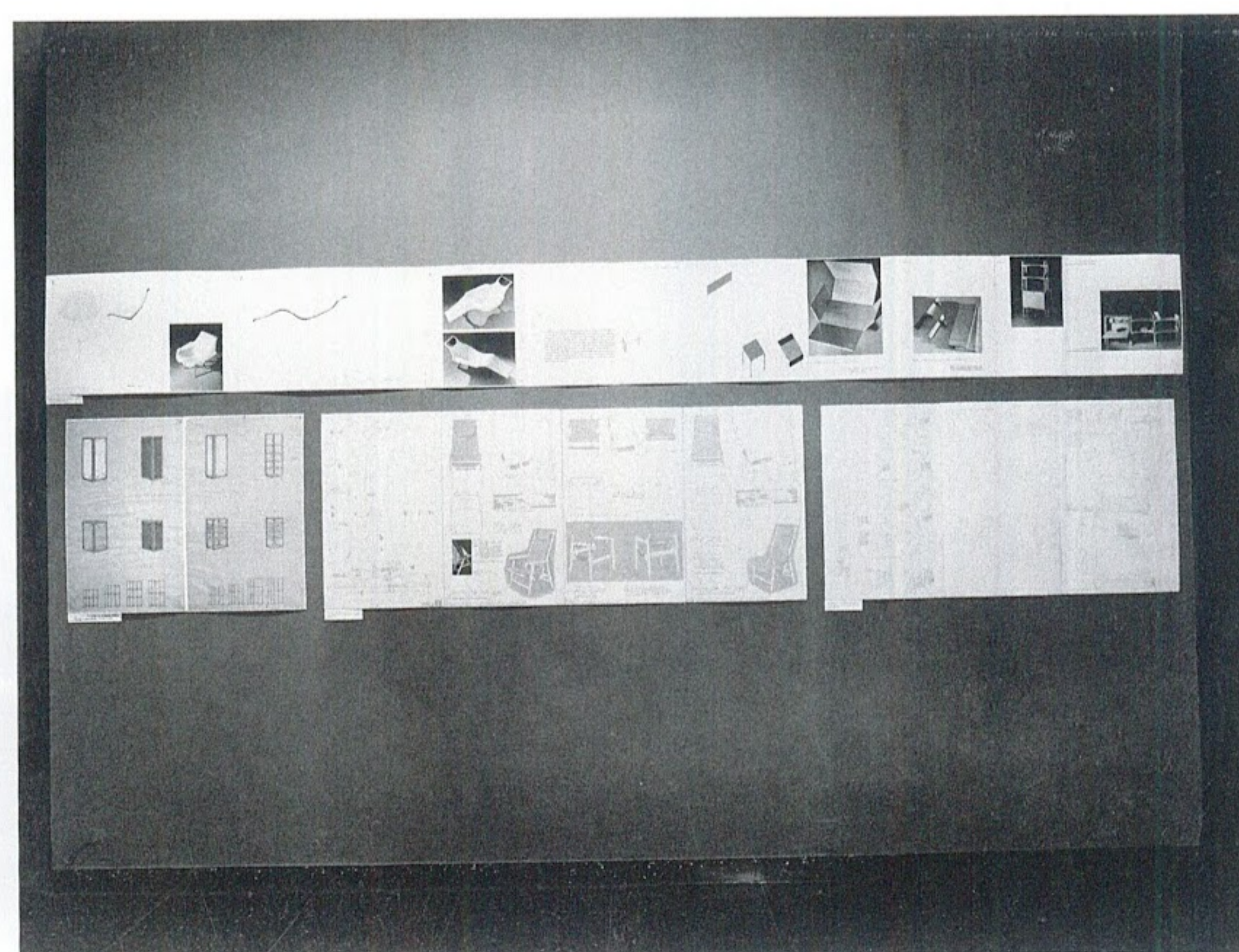
Ray and Charles Eames' reclining chair, or chaise longue, is similarly sensuously shaped and possesses a formal intuitiveness to which the Guhls' allude; its contours and sweeping lines are "seen" and made sense of by the hands as much as the eyes (fig. 5). The Eameses' design was nicknamed

"La Chaise," after French sculptor Gaston Lachaise, whose *Floating Figure* (1927) the duo imagined nestling perfectly in the scale model. A small reproduction photograph of the bronze sculpture sits playfully balanced on the letter y in the title of the first of two competition panels (fig. 6). Like Willy and Emil Guhl's interest in chair forms that suit a variety of activities – in contrast to the strictness of traditional seating – "La Chaise" is a support to "conversation, rest and play." The text at the top of the competition panel states:

The form of this chair does not pretend to clearly anticipate the variety of needs it is to fill. These needs are as yet indefinite, and the solution of the form is to a large degree intuitive. The form can only suggest a freer adaption of material to need and stimulate inquiry as to what these needs may be.

The second "La Chaise" competition panel shows photographs of potential different uses and interactions as well as some cut-out photographs of shells, nodding to the organic form and, perhaps, playing on its molded "shell" construction.

In the lead-up to the display of the furniture at the *Prize Designs for Modern Furniture* exhibition, the Eames Office and Herman Miller Furniture Company were racing toward a production model of the molded and stamped aluminum side and armchair from their entry group 7990 (fig. 7). Manufacturing in this way proved prohibitively expensive and production in molded fiberglass was quickly explored with the California-based company Zenith Plastics working with Herman Miller. By the late spring of 1950 the first semi-mass-produced Eames fiberglass armchair was ready for display at MoMA and concurrently offered for sale in Herman Miller showrooms.





5 Photography was central to Eames Office culture, as document, communication tool, and to aid the design process. This image from 1948 of the "La Chaise" mold plays with light and shadow to emphasize the sculptural quality of the design and its anthropomorphic form.

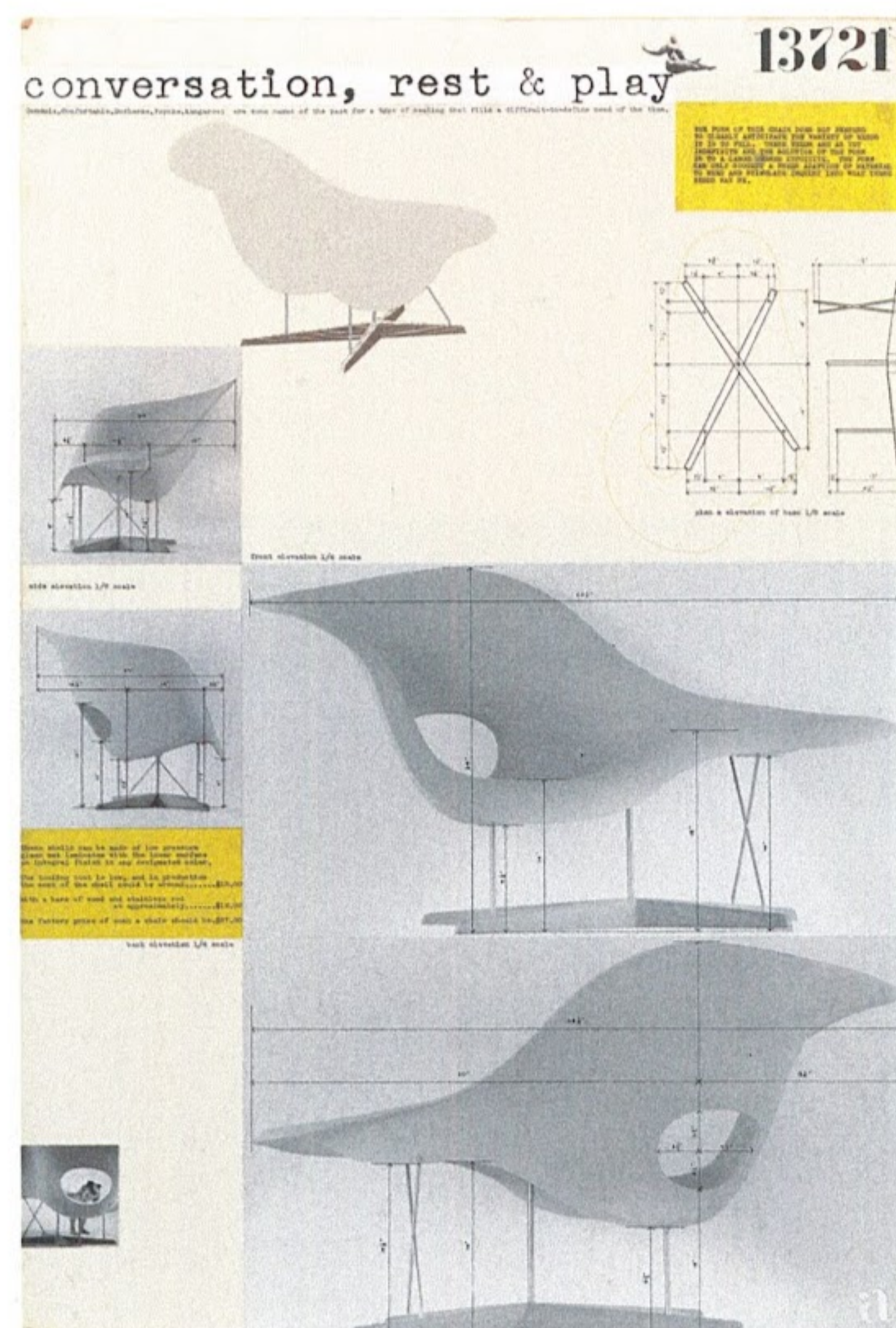
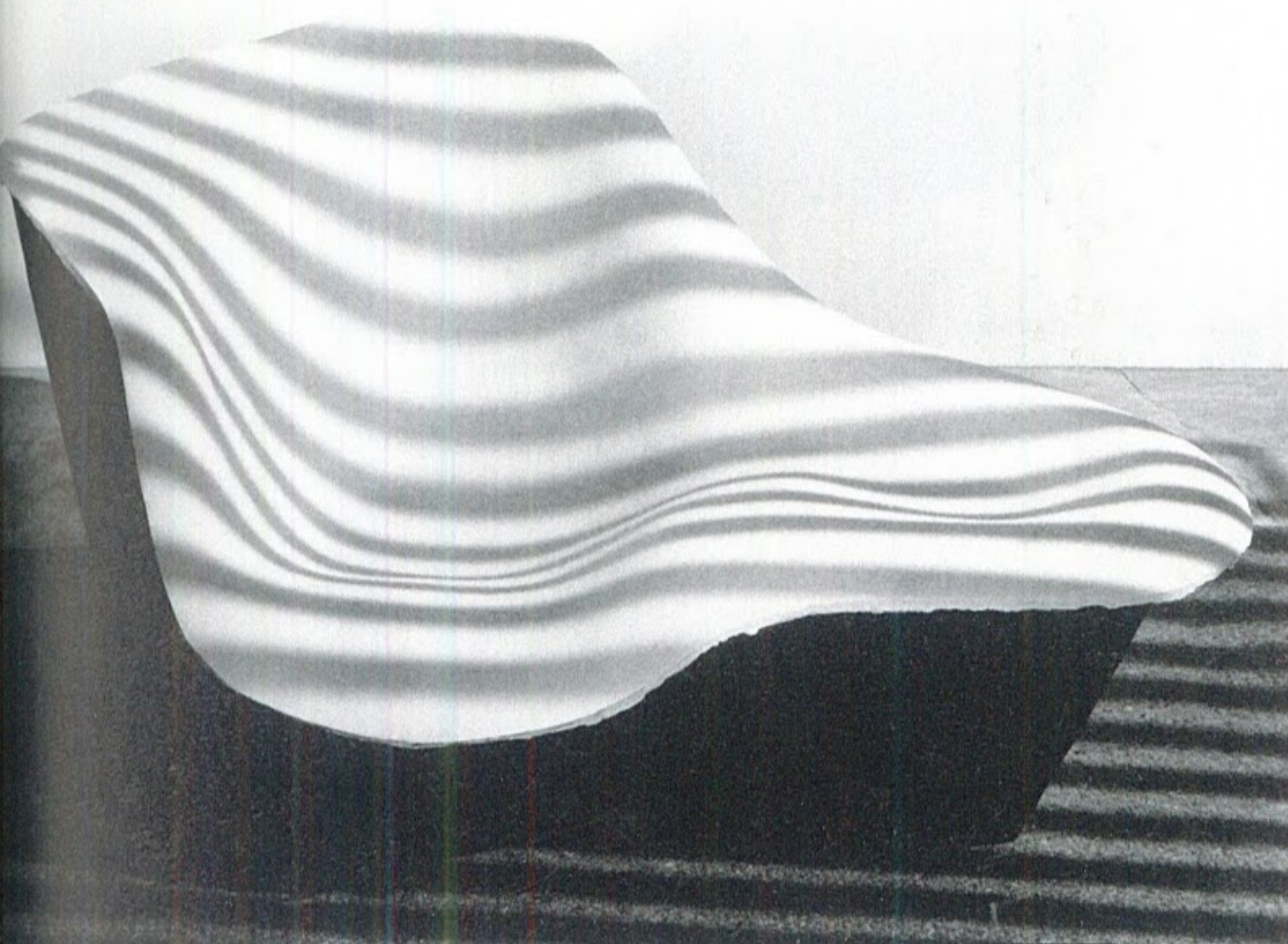
6 Charles and Ray Eames submitted the panel and prototype of "La Chaise" separately to their furniture group entry number 7990. Before being shown in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "La Chaise" was included as part of the Eameses' model living room at the *For Modern Living* exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1949.

7 This panel shows the range of low-cost seating designed by Charles Eames and the University of California, Los Angeles Campus, 1949. They co-won second prize for Seating Units alongside an inflatable, upholstered design by Davis J. Pratt of Chicago.

Between 1947 and 1950 Willy Guhl continued to work on the research and development of his sculptural shell seating, which he envisaged pressed or cast in "plastic, bakelite or artificial resin."<sup>12</sup> In 1950 the plaster model shell "seating studies" he submitted to the MoMA competition went on display at the Swiss Werkbund exhibition at the Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich. Although the Guhls had photographed their models with bases, the display invited visitors to focus on the form of the seating shells by placing them directly on a bed of pebbles in front of beautiful line drawings of a human figure in different seating positions (→ Seating Studies, p. 100). With such clear visual expression, one is reminded of the 1950 *Life* magazine photo shoot of Charles and Ray Eames by Peter Stackpole, which includes an image of Charles sitting on the beach in a baseless plastic armchair (fig. 8). That same year Willy Guhl was approached by Heinz Bader of Scobalit manufacturing to realize his seating studies in glass-fiber-reinforced polyester, which the company used to produce building elements such as cladding and roofing. The side chairs were more formally refined and less anthropomorphized than the plaster studies but still expressed the posterior imprint on the seat. Although the Scobalit chair (→ Scobalit Shell Chair, p. 101) did not go into mass production, the connections and synchronicity of thinking between centers of research and production as distant as Los Angeles and Zurich tell us much about the shared motivations and common concerns of the international design scene in the postwar period. Writing in *Werk* in 1950, Guhl captures this fervor driving designers the world over:

Serious further work on all forms of furniture can never come to a standstill. If appearances are not deceptive, the problem of the design, construction, and manufacturing methods of the various forms of seating furniture is currently in the foreground. News is reaching us from all countries that work is being done with feverish zeal on the development of new forms of chairs, whether new purposes, new materials, new methods of production, new ideas of form, or else new investigations into the fundamentals of seating furniture are leading to new forms. The results of the furniture competition of the Museum of Modern Art in New York ... showed this in all clarity. The current Werkbund exhibition at the Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich also presents the visitor with a whole series of new chair forms that have been created by various designers under a wide variety of conditions. Our time demands differentiated chair forms that correspond to differentiated seating forms.<sup>13</sup> (fig. 9)

We can clearly observe the anthropomorphic antecedent for the reclining chairs and the single-shell plastic chairs developed from the original Low-Cost competition entries when looking back at Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen's entries for the 1940 Competition for Organic Design in Home Furnishings. The group of upholstered furniture designs and models proposed by the Cranbrook Academy of Art colleagues included a side chair, conversation chair (low-back armchair), a relaxation chair (high-back armchair), and sectional sofa;<sup>14</sup> although not visually documented





8 In 1950, *Life* magazine commissioned Peter Stackpole to photograph Charles and Ray Eames at work and at home. The photo-essay was published in the September issue of the magazine and captured the essence of their all-encompassing creativity and the duo's inventive approach to designing for everyday life.

9 The simple, fluid, and fine lines of Willy and Emil Guhl's chaise longue published in 1950 encapsulate the modernist ideal of lightness of material and form; their drawing reveals their intent and recalls Marcel Breuer's Bauhaus-era attempts to make modern furniture with a floating quality, to create a feeling in the user that one is sitting "on a resilient column of air."

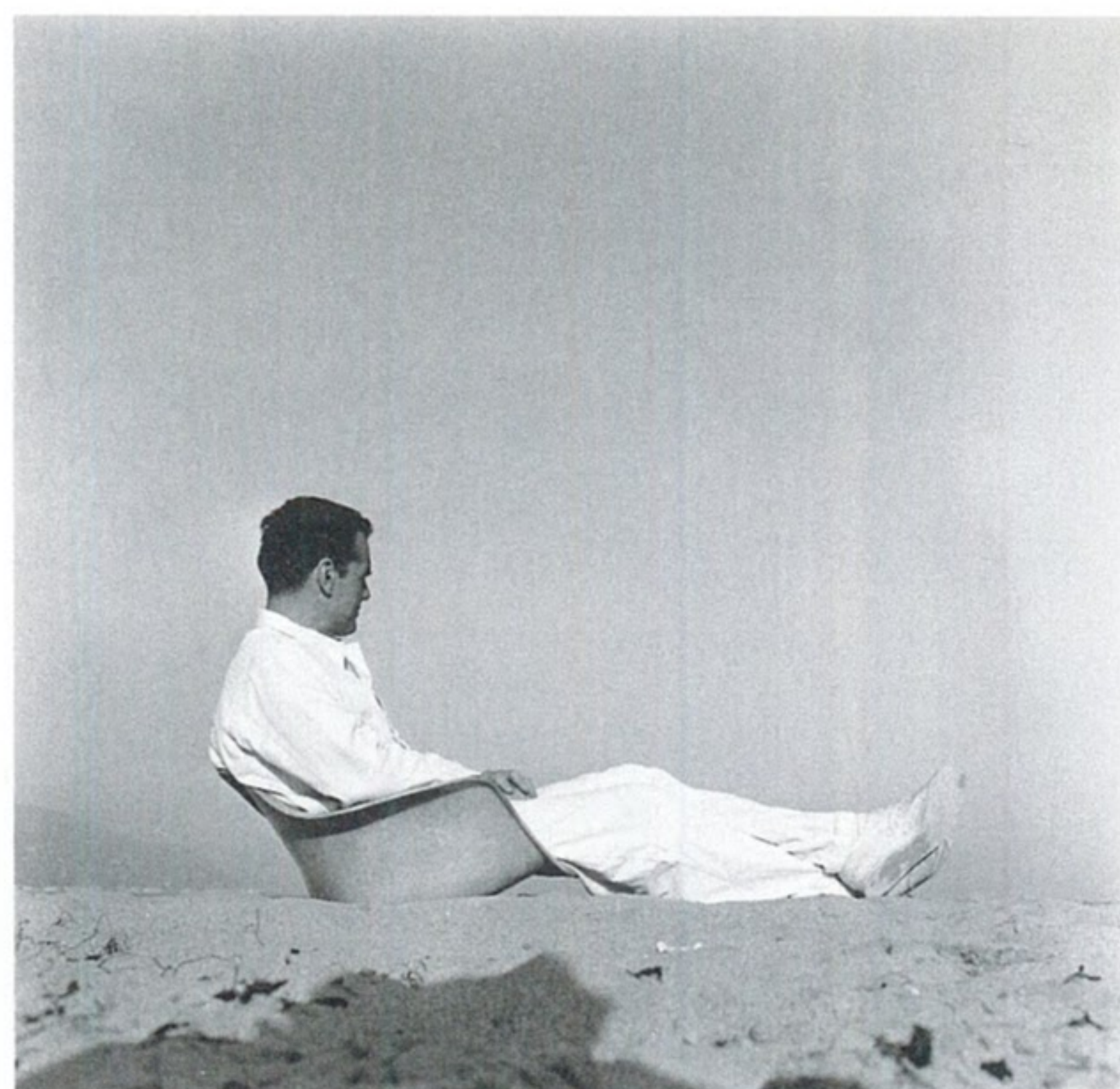
10 The "lounging shape" was part of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen's 1940 competition entry to the Museum of Modern Art's competitive exhibition *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*. Like later chair designs, and the Guhls' own chaise, the "lounging shape" is an attempt to create ultimate support and comfort for lounging by mimicking the human form in repose.

in the catalogue, the entry also included a "lounging shape" (fig. 10).<sup>15</sup> The pursuit of refined organic lines and simplified anthropomorphic forms preoccupied many artists and designers throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Writing in the influential magazine *California Arts & Architecture*, Ray Eames published a poetic illustrated statement about line and color. "For the past many years," she writes in 1943, "the western world has been working back through the maze of surface decoration and meaningless gloss to the fundamentals of form."<sup>16</sup> These ideas and investigations were an important context for Charles and Ray Eames as their design work and sophisticated aesthetic experiments evolved. Willy Guhl's writing of the period attests to his knowledge and interest in these fundamental concerns applied to designs addressing modern needs and methods of construction and manufacture. While less internationally connected and well-traveled as the Eameses, Guhl kept up with the shifting currents of contemporary design through publications and coverage in journals such as *Bauen + Wohnen*, *Werk*, and *Domus*; and he is likely to have seen exhibitions at the Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich on modern building from the United States (1935), leading figures such as the Finnish designers Alvar and Aino Aalto (1948), or Swedish design (1948–49). In 1944, *Domus* – the seminal design journal founded in 1928 by architect and designer Gio Ponti – published Bruno Munari's playful photo-essay about "searching for comfort in an uncomfortable chair." Munari's accompanying provocation was a strident assault on bourgeois taste and the superficial ideals driv-

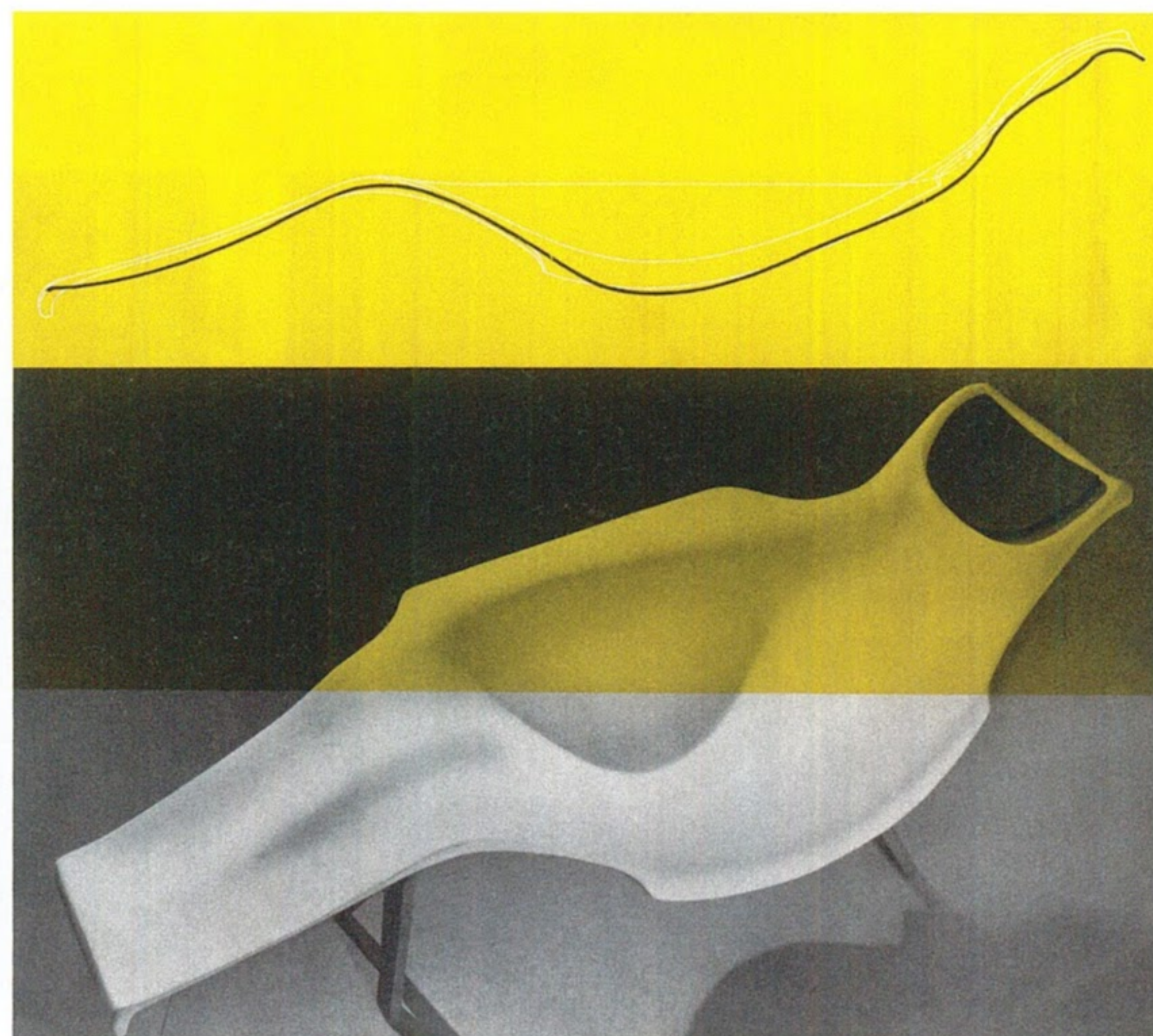
ing the pursuit of new forms – but, according to the Italian designer, in the wrong direction. His plea was for, as the Eameses might term it, a certain "rightness" in terms of form and function:

Let's go back to our homes and think about getting together to study an *improved model* of a piece of furniture – a chair, a doorknob, a... (tools all have a characteristic shape, it's true, resulting from the suggestions dictated by their use, but they also have their own aesthetics; a hammer is not made with artistic intent but every part of it responds to a purpose ...).<sup>17</sup>

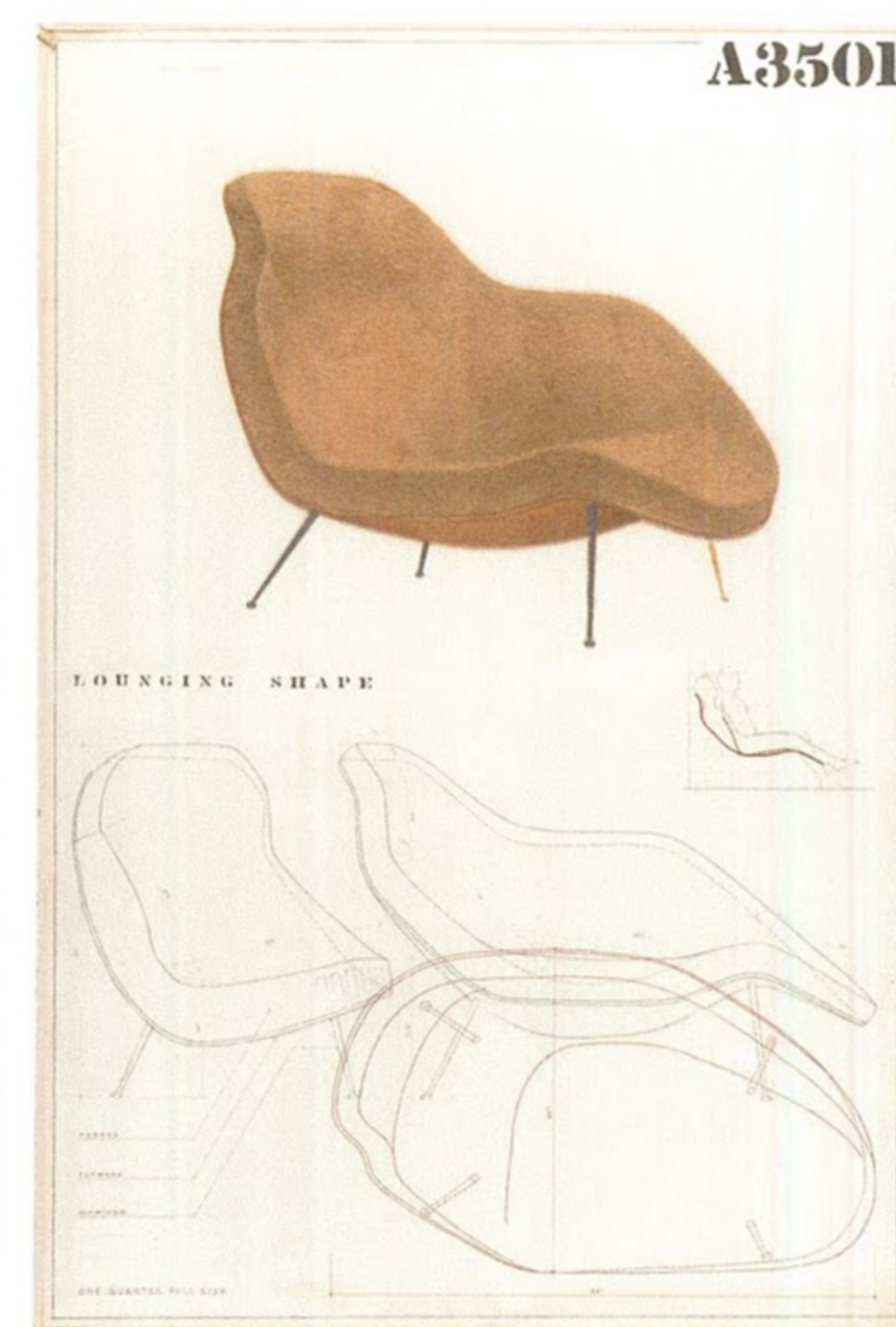
Willy Guhl's archive at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich contains photographs amassed by the designer and assembled as a "chair history" (→ pp. 69–73). What is most interesting about this pictorial survey is not the inclusion of familiar "heroes" of modernist design and architecture, but a significant number of (likely anonymous) "vernacular" stools and chairs. These decidedly human objects, handcrafted and made with the "purpose" Munari mentions, are emblematic of modernism's parallel interest in traditions of craftsmanship, simplicity, typicalities of place, and a deep affection for the fundamental "truths" of vernaculars of design and making. The Eameses and Alexander Girard, to name a few, studied, collected, and cherished typologies of objects specific to different cultural contexts. Writing in *Architectural Forum* in 1953, Charles Eames offers an appreciation of Japanese architecture in relation to the West:



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Whether it is a paper toy or a tea house, or a garden or a palace, traditional Japanese things seem to represent a super understanding of humble materials and elements in relation to human scale and human needs.<sup>18</sup>

The “parallel thinking” shared by the Guhls and the Eameses was not only about advances in technology and construction or the new forms made possible with modern materials. It was also encapsulated in a shared ethos – an approach to design and making that makes space for feeling and thinking, for intuition and sensuality, and, above all, a connectedness to people and life.

1 “Henry Laugier Speaks at Dinner for International Furniture Competition,” press release, The Museum of Modern Art, August 8, 1947, p. 1; available online at [www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/1230/releases/MOMA\\_1946-1948\\_0104\\_1947-08-08\\_47808.pdf](http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/1230/releases/MOMA_1946-1948_0104_1947-08-08_47808.pdf).

2 For more on the promotion of modern design during MoMA’s early years, see David A. Hanks, “Spreading the Gospel of Modern Design,” in *Partners in Design: Alfred H. Barr Jr. and Philip Johnson*, ed. David A. Hanks, New York, 2015, pp. 174–213.

3 For an account of MoMA’s commitment to functional or highly aestheticized modern design, see Sidney Lawrence, “Declaration of Function: Documents from the Museum of Modern Art’s Design Crusade, 1933–1950,” *Design Issues* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 65–77.

4 “Awards Given in International Low-Cost Furniture Competition,” press release, The Museum of Modern Art, January 13, 1949, p. 1; available online at [www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/1291/releases/MOMA\\_1949\\_0005\\_1949-01-13\\_490113-5.pdf](http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/1291/releases/MOMA_1949_0005_1949-01-13_490113-5.pdf).

5 The design entry is solely attributed to Charles Eames; Ray Eames is not mentioned in the press materials or catalogue produced to accompany the exhibition of prizewinning and notable designs.

6 Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *Prize Designs for Modern Furniture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1950, p. 58.

7 Ibid., p. 8.

8 This group was numbered 7990 (boards a–j); see Marilyn Neuhart, *The Story of Eames Furniture*, Berlin, 2010, pp. 530–89, for more detail on the competition and development of the Eames fiberglass shell chair.

9 Willy Guhl, “Studien über Stuhl- und Sitzformen,” *Werk* 37, no. 8 (1950), p. 231; translation provided by the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 233.

12 Taken from the caption on the Guhls’ entry panels for the International Low-Cost Furniture Competition.

13 Guhl, “Studien über Stuhl- und Sitzformen,” p. 230.

14 The range was not produced until recently by Vitra; much has been written about the challenge of realizing its manufacture at the time.

15 This is the title given to the chair on the competition panels; see MoMA Collection website: [www.moma.org/collection/works/4492](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/4492).

16 Ray Eames, “Line and Color,” *California Arts & Architecture* 60, no. 8 (September 1943), pp. 16–17; reproduced in *An Eames Anthology*, ed. Daniel Ostroff, New Haven and London, 2015, p. 13.

17 Bruno Munari, “Uno torna a casa stanco per aver lavorato tutto il giorno e trova una poltrona scomoda,” *Domus* 202 (October 1944), pp. 374–75; available online at [www.domusweb.it/en/from-the-archive/2012/03/31/searching-for-comfort-in-an-uncomfortable-chair.html](http://www.domusweb.it/en/from-the-archive/2012/03/31/searching-for-comfort-in-an-uncomfortable-chair.html).

18 Charles Eames, “Japanese Architecture and the West,” *Architectural Forum* 98, no. 1 (January 1953), p. 143–48; reproduced in *An Eames Anthology*, ed. Ostroff, p. 111.