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## Eileen Gray

BY JUDITH GURA

THE MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE that opened at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in February (and runs through May 20) is only the latest confirmation of Eileen Gray's status as one of the most brilliant designers of the 20th century. Though her star has been ascending for almost four decades, observers were stunned when her circa-1919 Dragons armchair brought €21,905,000 (\$28.3 million) at the landmark Yves Saint Laurent sale at Christie's Paris in 2009, realizing seven times the high estimate and shattering the world auction record for 20th-century furniture. That price may be unrivaled but her works have continued to claim top billing. In December 2012 an incised lacquer screen that racked up \$1,874,500 was the top lot in the Christie's New York sale of the Steven Greenberg collection.

Experts trace the start of the artist's upward trajectory in the design market back to the early 1970s. "The crucial date

was November 1972," says Philippe Garner, the international head of decorative art and design at Christie's and one of the leading authorities on the market for Gray. He was referring to the sale in Paris of property from the estate of French couturier Jacques Doucet, when American collector Robert Walker bought Gray's red lacquer Le Destin screen for the then princely sum of FFfr170,000 (\$36,000). "At the time," Garner says, "her name wasn't on most people's radar."

But dealers including New York-based Tony DeLorenzo and Robert and Cheska Vallois, of Paris, were already fans. In fact, in 1971—a year before the Doucet sale—the Valloises bought their first pieces of Eileen Gray furniture, including the famous Dragons chair, which they resold for less than \$3,000. (Cheska was also the successful bidder on the Dragons chair at the 2009 Saint Laurent sale.) Other discerning collectors who favored

*Eileen Gray's Dragons chair, ca. 1919, made for her first complete interior design project, brought a stunning \$28.3 million at Christie's Paris in 2009 as part of the Yves Saint Laurent sale. In the early 1970s, Paris dealers Robert and Cheska Vallois sold it for less than \$3,000.*

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## ARTIST DOSSIER



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Gray's work early on include Andy Warhol, and later, Michael Chow.

In 1973, encouraged by the success of the Doucet auctions, Gray licensed rights to several of her designs to Zeev Aram, a London producer who continues to market them today and whom Garner credits with having helped bring the designer into the public eye. Ecart, the company founded in 1978 by the late Andrée Putman, also reproduces some Gray designs.

Following Gray's death in 1976 Garner presided over a 1980 sale at Sotheby's in Monte Carlo that included many objects from Gray's own homes, further stimulating buyer interest.

In almost every aspect of her life and work, Gray was a total original. Although her name is associated with the French Art Deco style, she was neither French nor is her work exclusively Art Deco. A native of Ireland, she relocated to Paris in her twenties. She differed from her contemporaries in several significant ways: Financially independent, she did not have to live on the profits of her work, and this enabled her to design to her own taste, rather than to please

A painted wood cabinet, above, with glass mirror shelves and wood drawers, 1926-29, that Gray designed for the E-1027 villa in Roquebrune-Cap Martin, France, is in the current show at the Centre Pompidou, in Paris. The ca.-1929 Bibendum chair, right, sold for \$997,000 at Christie's Paris in 2011, part of the Château de Gourdon auction.

clients or dealers. She fabricated all of her furniture herself, which accounts not only for its perfection of detail but also for its rarity. And in the male-dominated design world of her time, she did not have the benefit of a male colleague or mentor, as Charlotte Perriand and Lily Reich had. As Adriana Friedman, director of the DeLorenzo Gallery, says admiringly, "A woman in a man's world, she conquered it all."

Gray's furniture was made for European clients, and even today it typically comes to auction in European venues, most frequently at Christie's. Carina Villinger, head of 20th-century design at Christie's, says with understandable pride, "We have a reputation for owning this market," although Phillips, Sotheby's, and less frequently Dorotheum and Wright, have also sold her works. The network of collectors is small—as it must be with such limited number of possible acquisitions—but, according to Villinger, it has become more international in recent years.

"It's a complex market," says James Zemaitis, director of the 20th-century design department at Sotheby's. "The production pieces have no market value, and the authentic pieces are really tough for the auction houses... There is enormous pressure to come up with estimates, which tend to be very excessive."

But if estimates are lofty, many connoisseurs think they are justified, in part because each piece that comes to market has a traceable provenance of illustrious collectors or single-family ownership. As Christian Boutonnet, co-owner of Paris gallery L'Arc en Seine, says, "the rare, early lacquered works and unique pieces by Eileen Gray are of course very researched, and this is the reason why they get such incredible prices at auction." Discussing the prospect of finding more Gray works, he says "most of them are in private or museum collections."

After the Greenberg sale, Steven Kelly, a longtime collector of Art Deco design who recently opened a gallery in New York, seemed at ease regarding the cost of his top-lot screen, noting, "It was the only thing I really wanted. I've been collecting for 30 years and never managed to get anything of hers."

At the Christie's Château de Gourdon sale, in March 2011, a black lacquer Brick screen from Gray's Rue Bonaparte apartment fetched €1,353,000 (\$1.9 million), an E-1027 table brought €241,000 (\$340,000), and a Bibendum chair sold for €709,000 (\$1 million).

Not everything is a sure sell. At a Sotheby's Paris sale in November 2011, a Transat armchair from the Maharajah of Indore's palace was passed over (with a €1 million estimate), though an unspectacular coffee table from Gray's Tempe à Pailla home in the Côte d'Azur brought €336,750 (\$455,000), more than double its high estimate.

The designer was born Kathleen Eileen Moray Smith in 1878 in County



### From the Files

Gray was as individualistic in her personal style as in her designs. In her early Paris days she drove around in a roadster, dressed in couture and accompanied by her then-lover, nightclub singer Damia, and Damia's pet panther.

The retrospective at the Centre Pompidou aims to approach the artist's work as an unbroken whole, placing design objects alongside her drawing, painting, lacquering, interior decorating, architecture, and photography.

Gray's pieces often have evocative names or intriguing backstories. The Transat was named to evoke the chairs on transatlantic liners. The name of her villa, E-1027, was a joint numeric code for the initials of Gray and Jean Badovici, her partner in the 1920s.

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A 7-foot-high screen, 1925, right, with black lacquered blocks, was sold by L'Arc en Seine, Paris. Similar examples have recently sold for nearly \$2 million each at auction. An eye-catching ca.-1920 tray, made of painted, lacquered wood, at Galerie Vallois. Although knockoffs and authorized reproductions of the famous E-1027 table abound, this example, below, is one of only a handful of originals she made. One of them sold for \$342,195 in March 2011 at the Christie's Château de Gourdou sale in Paris.

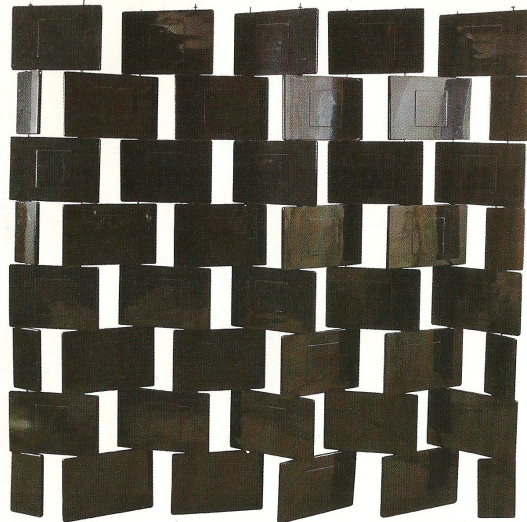
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Wexford, Ireland, though her affluent family changed its surname when her mother became Baroness Gray. While studying at London's Slade School of Art, where Gray was one of the first women admitted, she visited the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, the apogee of Art Nouveau, the influence of which can be seen in her early work. For several years (from 1900 to 1906) she moved back and forth between London, Paris, and Ireland. Though she moved to London during World War I, Paris was her residence of choice. There, having become intrigued by Japanese lacquer, she studied for several years with Japanese craftsman Seizo Sugawara.

Gray first exhibited her designs at the 1913 Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in Paris, after which Jacques Doucet became her first important client and others followed. In the years after the war, Gray's work gradually moved toward a more overtly modernist style, but it was also influenced by her own compulsion to explore new concepts.

Her first complete interior design project, 1919–22, was the Paris apartment of milliner Suzanne Talbot (Mme. Mathieu Lévy) on the Rue de Lota. It is a striking, mostly black-and-white combination of the exotic and the avant-garde. The objects Gray designed for it include the Bibendum chair and the Dragons chair.

Gray's most familiar design is the E-1027 occasional table, made for the vacation home (of the same name) that she designed and built between 1926 and 1929 for herself and her companion at the time, Romanian architect and critic Jean Badovici. An ingeniously telescoping cirlet of tubular chrome-steel and glass, it was reportedly



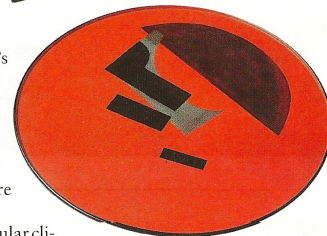
designed to accommodate her sister's fondness for eating in bed. Seeing her furniture today, it is easy to forget how radical it was for its time—Gray was working with chrome-steel and glass at the same time as Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe, and before Le Corbusier.

Gray designed furniture for particular clients or her own residences; none was made purely for the market, and all were done in very small quantities. The Bibendum chair and the E-1027 table were made in single-digit numbers; only nine Brick screens have been identified, and about a dozen Transats (it is hard to believe the mere handful of E-1027s that Gray actually made, in view of the thousands on the market—from authorized reproductions to plagiarized and inferior copies—at prices ranging from \$99 to more than \$1,000).

In 1922 Gray opened a shop with Badovici called Jean Désert, on Paris's chic Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, to sell her own and others' modern furnishings. The best-selling items in its eight years of operation were Gray's striking rugs. Few remain, however, the fibers having succumbed to deterioration with use.

To historians, Gray's architecture is as important and as innovative as her furniture designs. The E-1027 house (its name is a code for the initials of the occupants) is on the side of a cliff in Roquebrune, France, a resort area near Monte Carlo. Intended as a retreat for Gray and Badovici, the house is a virtual laboratory of functional and space-saving designs, including built-in cabinetry with movable sections. After years of neglect, E-1027 is undergoing a lengthy restoration and will reopen as a museum. Gray never designed a house for a client, but she did build two more for her own use, one at Tempe à Pailla, near Castellar, France, finished in 1935, and another, at Lou Perou, near St. Tropez, in 1961.

Le Corbusier was reportedly fascinated by E-1027; he built a house for himself nearby so he could look at it, but it isn't clear whether his interest was fired by admiration for its design, or something more complex. At the invitation of Badovici, he painted eight large and somewhat sensual murals on the pristine walls, and though Gray hated them, they were never removed. In a bizarre coda, the famous architect drowned while swimming in the waters off E-1027 in 1965. Some historians say Gray's house was the last thing he saw. ■



FROM TOP: L'ARC EN SEINE, PARIS; GALERIE VALLOIS, PARIS; AND ARNAUD CARPENTIER, CENTRE POMPIDOU AND JEAN-CLAUDE PLANCHET