



Building a Mystery

HOW EILEEN GRAY'S MINIMALIST

MASTERPIECE WAS ALMOST LOST TO HISTORY. BY LANIE GOODMAN

Eileen Gray had few champions in her life. The visionary designer, who was born in Ireland and died in Paris in 1976, was celebrated in her time for her lacquer screens and high-end Parisian furniture gallery, Jean Désert. But Gray did more than decorate the houses of the beau monde of 1920s Paris; she helped invent Modern architecture — in virtual obscurity — with her seminal E.1027 villa. Even as late as 1972, when Yves St. Laurent paid \$36,000 for one of her lacquer screens and the E.1027 table and Transat chairs had launched a million copycats, the world still hadn't noticed her most important design. Her biographer, Peter Adam, observed that she found the sudden attention to her early work absurd.

At the time of Gray's death, the E.1027 villa — a minimalist masterpiece built out of whitewashed concrete on the Cote d'Azur between 1926 and 1929 — was no longer even recognized as hers. The "house by the sea," as she called it, was a project à deux, built with Gray's lover, the Romanian architect and editor Jean Badovici, in whose name Gray bought the land. It was built in the sleepy village of Roquebrune-Cap Martin, just east of Monaco, on a plot of land only accessible by a coastal footpath. Wedged between the railway and the sea, the 1,700-square-foot house juts out elegantly over a terraced garden like an ocean liner. The name was a cipher: E for Eileen, 10 for the letter J, the 10th letter of the alphabet, 2 for the B in Badovici and 7 for the G in Gray.

Practical, versatile, private but convivial, Villa E.1027 had an open-plan living room with a panoramic terrace, an outdoor kitchen, and a sunken black-tiled "sun pool" (filled with sand) in the garden. Gray stenciled "Enter Slowly, Laughter Forbidden" on the walls and designed a cork-topped tea table to avoid the clinking of cutlery.

In 1938, after Gray and Badovici's relationship ended and she moved out, Le Corbusier, the couple's friend and frequent guest, painted seven brightly-colored murals (some overtly erotic) in the villa, without Gray's permission. Furious, she called it "pure vandalism." Thereafter, the villa was often attributed to Corbu, and Gray never returned to the house or reclaimed her furniture. Left behind were some of modern design's most iconic pieces: the Transat deck chair, the Michelin tire-inspired Bibendum chair, an asymmetrical one-armed Non-Conformist chair, and the adjustable E.1027 Telescopic Table.

After Badovici's death in 1956, Le Corbusier urged his wealthy Swiss friend, Marie-Louise Schelbert to buy the villa at auction, perhaps with the intention of preserving his murals. He'd built his own tiny beach hut, le cabanon, right next door. (And as fate would have it, he drowned while swimming in front of the villa in 1965). E.1027 changed hands once more, in 1980, to Madame Schelbert's gynecologist, who sold Gray's furniture, reportedly turned the house into a drug den, and was stabbed to death by a vagrant gardener. The villa sat abandoned thereafter, invaded by squatters and defaced by graffiti.

Now, after numerous administrative battles, Villa E.1027 is in the final stages of a meticulous restoration, a project financed in part by the French Cultural Ministry, the Conservatoire du Littoral and the township of Roquebrune Cap-Martin (plus a small contribution from the American organization "Friends of E.1027"). A team of engineers and conservators have repaired the badly-

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Friends of E.1027

cracked original cement and eliminated massive corrosion to rescue Gray's innovative pivoting fold-out window shutters.

Much of the interior remains empty, the last bits of furniture having been sold or destroyed. Jean-Louis Dedieu, the vice mayor of Roquebrune-Cap Martin, recalls finding one of Gray's screens "half smashed in the garden." What does remain — and not without controversy — are five of the Corbusier murals, which were deemed important to the villa's history and will be restored.

One significant discovery in the restoration was the unearthing of Gray's original colors after many hours of scalpel through layers of white paint, measuring with a fluorescent spectrophotometer and conducting microscopic analysis. "Everyone assumes that modern architecture means white, but Gray was extremely colorful," says Pierre-Antoine Gatier, the head architect at the Restoration of Historical Monuments. "In this very reduced scale, she explodes the limit of space."

Mysteriously, some of the concrete pillars in the garden were originally painted blue on one side, and the downstairs guest room was a brilliant sea green, like the patchy shallows of the Mediterranean below. There's also a geometric composition of white, beige and grey on the tiled stone floors, believed to depict the play of sun and shadows.

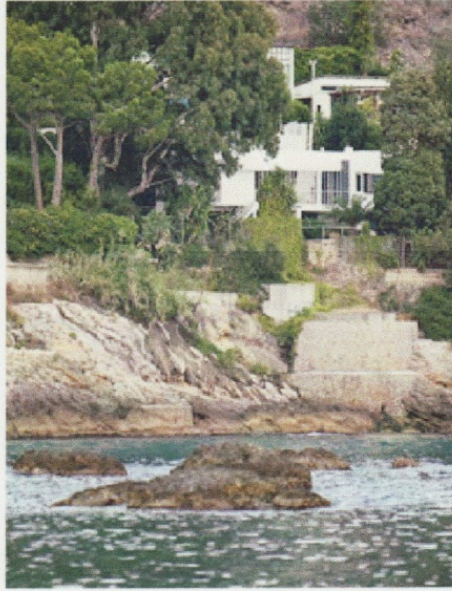
There's talk of inaugurating Villa E.1027 with some of the original furniture and plans to fill the house with replicas of the rugs and furnishings. But there's no set formula for the site yet (a research center, an architects' residence, a museum?). Eileen Gray would probably approve. "Formulas are worth nothing," she wrote. "Life is everything." ■

Roquebrune-Cap-Martin; e1027.org.

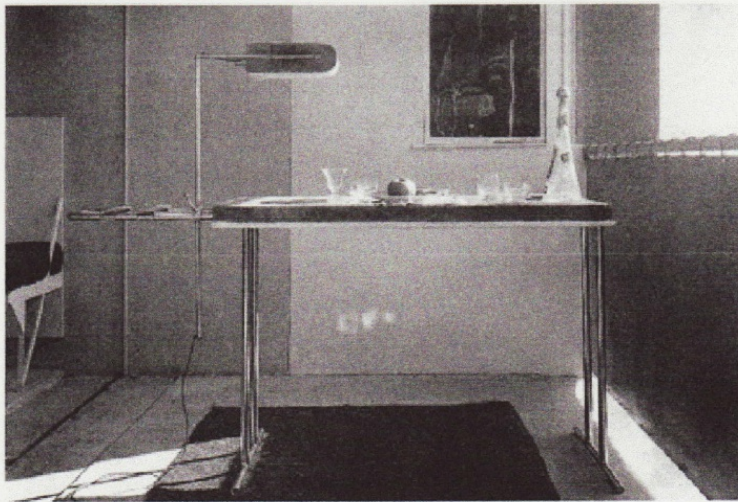


EILEEN GRAY'S VILLA E.1027, IN ROQUEBRUNE, FRANCE, CIRCA 1929.
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VILLA E.1027 TODAY, AFTER A PAINSTAKING RENOVATION.
(ELIZABETH BILLHARDT)



THE INTERIOR IN 1929: THE HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH FURNISHINGS DESIGNED
BY GRAY. (©EDITIONS IMBERNON, WWW.EDITIONSIMBERNON.COM)

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ONE OF THE VILLA'S CONTROVERSIAL LE CORBUSIER MURALS BEING PREPARED FOR RESTORATION. (ELIZABETH BILLHARDT)



GRAY'S BIBENDUM CHAIR, INSPIRED BY THE MICHELIN TIRE MASCOT. (©EDITIONS IMBERNON, WWW.EDITIONSIMBERNON.COM)

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THE RESTORED VILLA E.1027. (ELIZABETH BILLHARDT)



VILLA E.1027
(ELIZABETH BILLHARDT)

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REMIX

HOME AGAIN

When Eileen Gray's 1919 "Dragons" armchair sold for \$28 million at the Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé auction last winter, it fetched the highest price ever paid for a work of 20th-century furniture. Now the Irish-born designer, who lived most of her life in France, is poised for more posthumous acclaim: her 1929 Villa E.1027 (below) opens this fall in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, on the French Riviera, after a painstaking and protracted restoration rescued it from years of dereliction (e1027.org). Nearby there's more Gray: the Museum of Decorative and Modern Arts (Château de Gourdon; 011-33-4-93-09-68-02; chateau-gourdon.com) displays pieces of her original furniture — like a 1927 Transat deck chair — alongside works from her Paris apartment. And just a short distance from the villa is the revamped Hotel Victoria, which has sea-facing rooms inspired by Gray, Le Corbusier and Jean Cocteau (7 Promenade du Cap, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin; 011-33-4-93-35-65-90; hotel-victoria.fr; doubles from \$177). To read more about the restoration of Villa E.1027, go to nytimes.com/tmagazine. LANIE GOODMAN

