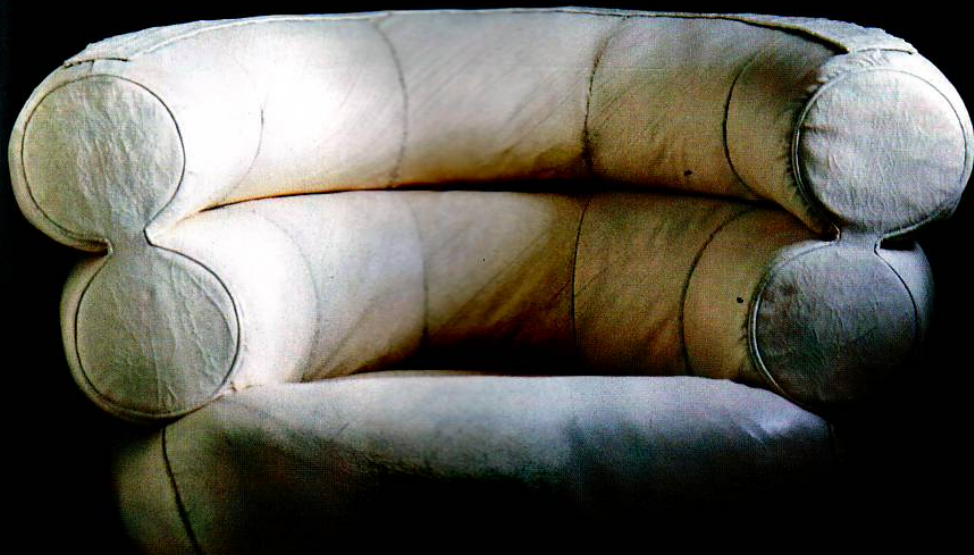


# Friends of E.1027

## Madame Chair Woman

*Bibendum armchair,  
ca. 1926, by Eileen Gray*



HOW TO BUY A MASTERPIECE

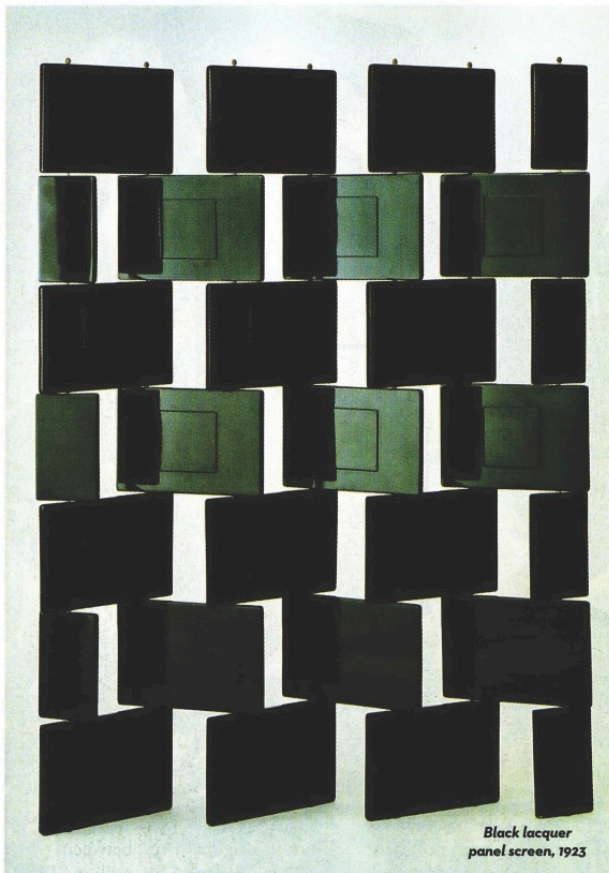
# Madame Chair Woman

*Two years ago, designer Eileen Gray's Dragon Chair sold at auction for \$28 million.*

*But, as collectors know, that's only part of the story. By Mark Van de Walle*

**H**er career started out slow, but Eileen Gray (1879–1976) was a cult figure among those who knew her work. Her first client was Jacques Doucet—he dressed Sarah Bernhardt and was himself beloved by Proust—who wanted to get rid of his collection of 18th-century art and furniture and make his apartment, and his life, more modern. Gray made him a large red lacquer screen called *Le Destin*, decorated on one side with the shadowy figures of three men, and on the other with swooping silver and gold forms. Soon designers, aristocrats and members of the beau monde put in their own orders with the Irish-born Gray. Each piece was unique, made by Gray herself. It didn't hurt that she drove a

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Black lacquer panel screen, 1923

**The black lacquer block screen from Gray's home is estimated at \$1.4 million to \$2.1 million.**

roadster along the streets of Belle Epoque Paris, dressed in Poiret coats and hats by Lanvin. Her lover, the nightclub singer Marie-Louise Damien, better known as Damia, sat next to her, while Damia's pet panther rode in the back.

The lacquer furniture Gray made from around 1913 to 1922 is often categorized as Art Deco. But by the time of the

1925 Paris Exposition, which was the first grand showcase for Art Deco pieces, Gray had moved on, embracing the machine-age utopian vision of modernism. She made the famous Bibendum chair, a leather piece that recalls the Michelin Man. Her admirers and artistic milieu at this point included Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé. She also became an architect around this time, designing the E.1027 home with another lover, a Romanian architect named Jean Badovici; she later built a house for herself. She also made one of the most extensively reproduced modernist tables—anyone who has set foot in Design Within Reach will recognize it—called the E.1027, after her house. In the aftermath of World War

II, Gray essentially retired and wasn't heard from again until the '70s, when her Le Destin screen surfaced at auction and was sold to an American collector for \$36,000, then a record price for 20th-century furniture. Suddenly, says Philippe Garner, head of Christie's 20th-century decorative arts and design department, Gray was "the queen of the heap." In 1973, Yves Saint Laurent bought a lacquered carved-wood and upholstered piece, known as the Dragon Chair. Nearly 40 years later, in February 2009, it sold at auction for \$28 million, surpassing the record for 20th-century design by some \$22 million.

More than a few people felt the price was a symptom of auction fever. Dealer and collector Jose Mugarabé was quoted as saying that the sale was "almost vulgar. You couldn't sell these pieces in any other place for even the commissions they're bringing." But to Garner, the chair was an icon, the object of almost cultish veneration, and collectors knew that once sold, it might disappear again. Paris-based dealer Cheska Vallois, who bought the chair for a second time, in 2009, after selling it in 1971 for \$2,700, presumably agrees.

Gray spent two years crafting the Dragon Chair. She hand-rubbed lacquer, layer after layer, letting it set each time in the humidity of her bathroom, then spent days polishing the chair. What emerged was as much a Symbolist sculpture as it was furniture. Gray's lacquer pieces are still the most prized of her works. "They're such luxurious objects," says Cécile Verdier, head of Sotheby's 20th-century decorative arts and design department in Paris. And, more to the point, there are so few of them. That's partly because of World War II, when so

## The Details

### ON VIEW

**VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS**  
There are six Gray pieces here. One of the most spectacular: the Pirogue chaise longue. [vmfa.state.va.us](http://vmfa.state.va.us).

**VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM** A highlight at this London museum is a black lacquer block screen, which is beloved by Gray cognoscenti. [vam.ac.uk](http://vam.ac.uk).

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND**  
Home to many of Gray's sketches, the museum's Decorative Arts & History building also displays her modernist Non-Conformist chair. [museum.ie](http://museum.ie).

**CENTRE POMPIDOU** One of the three original E.1027 tables that still exist can be found here. [centrepompidou.fr](http://centrepompidou.fr).

### ESSENTIAL READING

An upcoming addition to the "By Architects" series, **Eileen Gray: Objects and Furniture Design** (October, Ediciones Polígrafa) recognizes the designer as part of an elite company: brilliant modernists who could build a home as well as everything inside.

### WHO TO KNOW

**ANTHONY DELORENZO**, owner of DeLorenzo Gallery, 212-249-7575; [delorenzogallery.com](http://delorenzogallery.com).

**PHILIPPE GARNER**, international head of the department of 20th-century design, Christie's London; [christies.com](http://christies.com).

**ROBERT VALLOIS**, owner of Vallois gallery and Art Deco specialist, 33-1/43-29-50-84; [vallois.com](http://vallois.com).

**CÉCILE VERDIER**, head of 20th-century design, Sotheby's Paris; 33-1/53-05-53-22; [sothebys.com](http://sothebys.com).

OBJECTS AND FURNITURE DESIGN

**EILEEN GRAY**



Ediciones Polígrafa

## Friends of E.1027



Folding chair with laminated wood frame, 1938

many apartments were looted or simply destroyed. But it's also because Gray did all the work herself: There was never a shop filled with graphite powder-covered French craftsmen turning out Surrealist-influenced lacquer furniture.

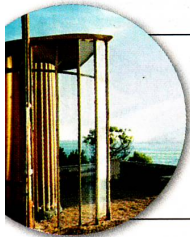
Still, not everything from the period will fetch the price of the Dragon Chair. At a 2010 auction of the dealer Anthony DeLorenzo's collection, the Sirène chair, with its mermaid back, failed to sell when bidding stalled at \$1.7 million, short of the \$2 million estimate. And it's

still occasionally possible to buy Gray's drawings and maquettes for under \$10,000.

But Gray had another career as a modernist. The telescoping glass and chrome table she produced in the late '20s for the E.1027 house is perhaps even more significant than the Dragon Chair. One is as stripped-down as the other is extravagant, but Gray's modernist turn didn't diminish her attention to craft. "You can see the pieces that hold the glass in place," says Garner. "They're copper, and they've all been cut by hand. And

each rivet has been polished as though by a jeweler." In the past, Verdier says, "the modernist work was seen as less valuable, but because she produced so little, that work may catch up." By presstime, collectors will know whether Verdier's theory holds true: Garner is presiding over the blockbuster sale of the Château de Gourdon collection at the end of March, which includes 13 very modern pieces by Gray. Estimates are high: the E.1027 table, for \$283,566 to \$425,350, and a Bibendum chair, the only surviving

in its original form, between \$845,739 and \$1.1 million. The auction piece that everyone will be watching, however, is the black lacquer panel screen from Gray's own apartment, with an estimate of \$1.4 million to \$2.1 million. Less than a year ago, one went for \$842,500 at auction. At this year's TEFAF art fair, one was for sale for \$1.8 million. "The pecking order at the Yves Saint Laurent auction was Brancusi, Mondrian and then Gray," says Garner. "And that is absolutely where Gray should be. It seems only just." ■



**THE E.1027 HOUSE** Some of the pieces in the Château de Gourdon auction in March came from Gray's finest work: a whitewashed concrete home, called the E.1027, built into a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean. Gray, a self-taught architect, built E.1027 as a hideaway for herself and her lover, Jean Badovici. Friend (and later neighbor) Le Corbusier loved it so much, he "destroyed" it—as far as Gray was concerned—by painting lewd murals on the walls during a visit. After years of neglect, the home is being restored and is expected to reopen as a museum next year. Le Corbusier's murals have, of course, been left intact. e1027.org.

departures.com

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