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EILEEN GRAY

From Shadow to Light

By Judy Polan

Free-spirited, bold and enigmatic Irish designer Eileen Gray (1878–1976), was an inspirational figure to the Art Deco and modernist movements. “*C’est absurde!*”, she would often say about the dramatic rise, fall and eventual rebirth of public admiration for her singular artistry. As a woman struggling to build a career in a man’s world, an Irishwoman living in France, an aristocrat moving in bohemian circles and a natural rebel who was nonetheless demure and retiring, she was unselfconsciously at ease being the “other.”

It mattered not to her whether her pioneering designs in lacquer, furniture and architecture were celebrated by the likes of *Vogue* magazine: “She stands alone, unique, the champion of an unusually free method of expression”; or famed French architect René Herbst: he called her “the most gifted of our generation”; or essentially forgotten, as they were by the 1940s, a time when the contributions of female artists were regarded dismissively, if noticed at all. Whether basking in the light of public acclaim, or working in her studio with failing eyesight and hearing, Gray steadfastly pursued her creation of streamlined, luxurious and functional modern designs, incorporating elements of the exotic, the abstract and the everyday.

In 1972, the 94-year-old Gray stepped back into the limelight when *Le Destin* — a dazzling four-panel red lacquer screen she had designed in about 1912 for couturier Jacques Doucet

— was snapped up at a Paris auction by trendsetting fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent for the then-staggering price of \$36,000. A long-overdue award from the British Society of Royal Arts soon followed. In 1973, the London Royal Institute of British Architects held a retrospective exhibition of her work; journals such as *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, the *London Times* and the *Herald Tribune* began publishing stories about “the mysterious Miss Gray.” After decades of obscurity, much to her bemusement, she was once again all the rage. And in 2009, 23 years after her death, her lacquered-wood *Dragon* armchair, created around 1920 for Madame Mathieu-Lévy, her first patron, sold at Christie’s for \$28,018,674. It remains the highest price ever paid for a work of 20th-century design.

Eileen Gray was born at Brownswood estate, near Enniscorthy in County Wexford, Ireland. The youngest of five children, she was the daughter of an aristocratic mother, who traced her lineage back to the 15th-century court of Scotland’s King James II, and a dashing but feckless father; her parents’ initially torrid romance had cooled into stony silence by the time Eileen came along. Her affluent family divided its time between their country home and a townhouse in London’s South Kensington. Her father, James, an amateur landscape painter, spotted her creative talent straight away. He took her along on working trips to Italy and Switzerland, rescuing her

Courtesy ClassiCon.

Courtesy ClassiCon.



Courtesy Schirmer-Mosel and Commerce Graphics.

Above Eileen Gray, photographed by Berenice Abbott, Paris, 1926.

Opposite, top The *Blue Marine* rug (1925–35) by Eileen Gray is fabricated today by ClassiCon.

Opposite, bottom Gray's *St. Tropez* rug (1926–29), reissued by ClassiCon.



Above An archival photograph from the magazine *L'illustration*, 1933, shows the living room of the apartment that Gray designed around 1920 for Madame Mathieu-Lévy on the rue de Lota, after its redesign by Paul Ruaud. He retained much of the Gray-designed furniture, including her *Lota* sofa, *Serpent* armchair, in salmon fabric, (background, left) and *Bibendum* chairs, left and right.

Below The *Serpent* armchair, reupholstered in leather, with lacquer armrests in the form of serpents, designed around 1920.



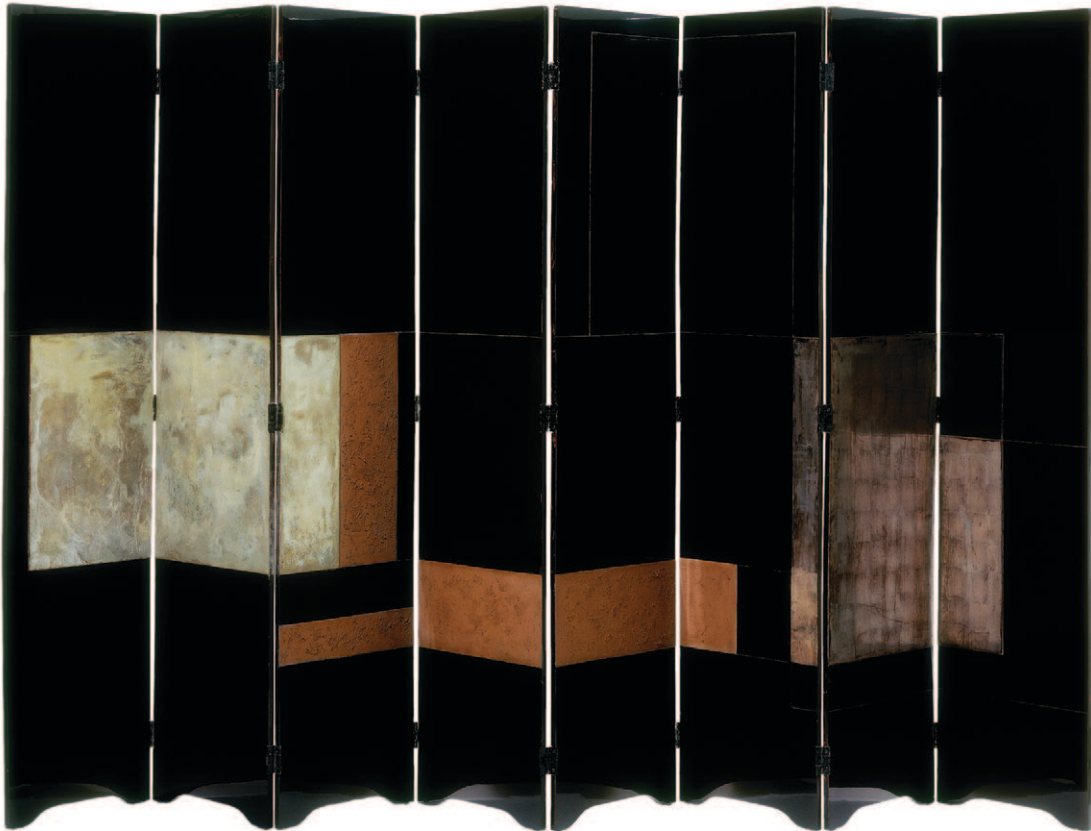
temporarily from her lonely and diffident childhood, and encouraged her to enroll as a painting student at the Slade School of Art in London in 1898.

In 1900, Gray visited the Exposition Universelle in Paris, a mind-boggling international show profoundly inspiring to a new generation of architects and designers. Art Nouveau – a bridge between neoclassicism and modernism – was a focus of the event, highlighting the work of René Lalique, Gustav Klimt and visionary architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, of whom Gray became an ardent fan. Among the notable structures built for the show were the Gare de Lyon train station; the Gare d'Orsay (now the Musée d'Orsay); the Petit Palais, with innovative exhibition halls rendered in glass and steel; and the first line of the Paris Metro, whose arresting Art Nouveau station entrances are now iconic.

The expo featured many of the world's newest technologies: movies with synchronized sound, moving sidewalks, the escalator, electric light bulbs and wireless telegraphy. "The modern world materialized during the first few years of the new century," writes Gray biographer and friend, Peter Adam, in his book, *Eileen Gray: Her Life and Work*, "and the place where it was most felt was Paris."

Enchanted by the spectacle and sense of possibility she experienced at the expo, Gray was inexorably drawn to Paris; she moved to the city in 1902 and enrolled at

Courtesy V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum.



both the Académie Julian and the Académie Colarossi, studying drawing and painting. She socialized there with a coterie of young English art students, leading a freewheeling life that biographer Penelope Rowlands calls “socially charged, but consecrated to work.” Adam comments, “Paris for her meant a new identity, a new freedom, and she made good use of it.” Known to be “unshockable” in sexual matters, according to Adam, she is reputed to have had a multitude of short-lived affairs, and intermittently hot and cold platonic relationships, with both men and women.

Throughout her student years, Gray was continually on the move between Paris, Ireland and London. She eventually grew dissatisfied with her studies, returning to live in London in 1905 to care for her sick mother. While there, she had an epiphany that eventually led her to modernism via an unexpected path: she happened to walk into Mr. D. Charles’s lacquer-screen repair shop in Soho, and was instantly enthralled by the sumptuous Asian decorative technique. She loved its lushness, its timeless quality and its enchanting luminosity. She impulsively asked the shop’s owner if he would be willing to teach her the rudiments of his craft and — much to her surprise — he agreed.

Gray spent many years studying the demanding 22-step technique, first with Charles and later, after returning to Paris, with young Japanese lacquer artisan Seizo Sugawara. Under his tutelage, which evolved into a 40-year collaboration, she became a master of the rhythmic, infinitely imaginative resin-painting process. As her abilities progressed, she added signature touches of silver and gold leaf and mother-of-pearl inlays to her furniture and screen designs.

In 1907, Gray found an airy rental apartment at 21 rue Bonaparte, large enough to incorporate living space and a studio; three years later, she bought the flat, and from then on it served as her permanent base. Despite having at last settled down, she kept up her peripatetic lifestyle; throughout her life she remained intrigued by the visual surprises she encountered in other cultures. She was passionately drawn to the exoticism of North Africa



Courtesy Schirmer-Mosel.

Above Madame Mathieu-Lévy reclines in her rue de Lota apartment, in Eileen Gray’s *Pirogue* sofa, 1920s. The photograph was taken by Baron Adolph de Meyer for a perfume advertisement.

Top Lacquer screen in eight sections, black with silver and bronze-colored inlays, 1922–25.



Courtesy Schirmer-Mosel.

Above Gray's E.1027 house in Roquebrune, on Cap Martin in the south of France, built 1926–29.

Below Living room of the E.1027 house with hand-woven rugs, a *Transat* chair, at right, a *Bibendum* chair, at left, and the 1925 *Daybed* and a slanted occasional table, center. The nautical chart on the wall is inscribed *Invitation au Voyage*.

and the striking Mediterranean landscapes of Spain and the Middle East. During a trip to Algeria, she admired the flat-topped white houses that were to become a fundament of modernist architecture.

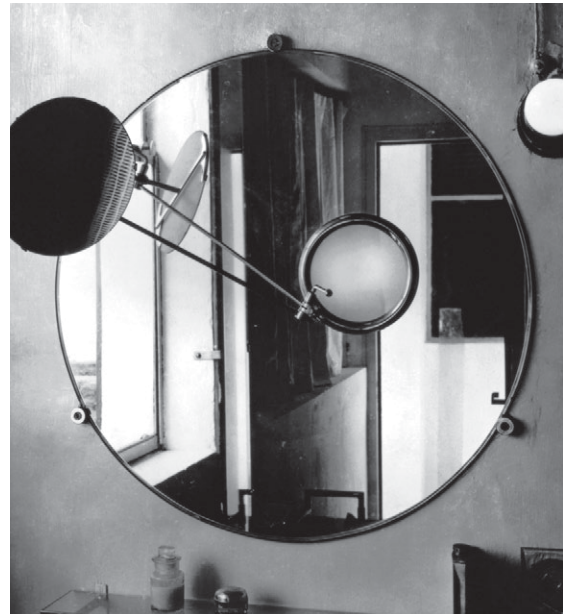
On a trip to Morocco in 1909, Gray observed native craftswomen engaged in weaving and natural wool-dyeing; she became fascinated by rug design, and carpets subsequently became a significant part of her repertoire. In collaboration with her Parisian friend Evelyn Wyld — also a prominent early 20th-century designer — she eventually produced an abundant array of richly colored avant-garde rugs, incorporating, over time, the nonfigurative, geometric artistic language of the Cubist painters.

"She attacked this skill with voracious intensity," writes Rowlands, "as she did almost everything else, including flying, which she also tried at around this time." Gray loved hot air ballooning, eventually got a pilot's license, and with characteristic moxie, drove an ambulance just before the outbreak of World War I. Her enthusiasm for adventure was later reflected in her most exuberant design work, notably the *Satellite* hanging lamp (c. 1925), an aluminum ceiling fixture comprising three floating flat rings alternating with three conical shades.

By 1913, she had gained enough confidence in her lacquer designs to exhibit decorative panels at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs; encouragingly, they attracted the attention of fashion designer Jacques Doucet, who purchased one on the spot and commissioned other pieces for his Paris residence. By this time, Gray had begun to make a name for herself "among the smart set of Paris," according to Peter Adam. "She had the will and the curiosity to move effortlessly with the times." She



Courtesy National Museum of Ireland.



felt that she had found her true *métier* in lacquer; she became so adept at its intricacies that a poet friend gave her the moniker “alchemist of wood.”

Gray left Paris in 1914 and spent the war years in the relative safety of London, having insisted that her guru, Sugawara, accompany her. Her family’s financial support allowed them both to survive; their work was largely unrecognized at the time, outside of Paris. However, when they returned to that city after the war, Gray had a stroke of luck: she was commissioned by Madame Mathieu-Lévy, the wealthy owner of a fashionable millinery shop, to decorate her apartment on rue de Lota.

The apartment commission was the coup that Gray had been waiting for. She readily acceded to Mathieu-Lévy’s request for “something extravagant,” designing the furniture, carpets, textiles, mirrors and wall coverings with an eye for the dramatic and thoroughly modern. A silvery gray color scheme contrasted with black lacquer paneling and screens, creating an aura of distinctive glamour; influences of Middle Eastern design and Cubism prevailed as well. Newspaper and magazine critics lavishly praised the apartment’s ultra-chic style.

Several of Gray’s most recognizable furniture designs were created for the rue de Lota apartment. The *Bibendum* chair — inspired by Bauhaus designer Marcel Breuer’s use of tubular steel, and cheerily named after the Michelin Tire mascot — was a voluptuous wraparound number upholstered in soft leather, with a chrome frame; it remains popular to this day. The languorous, floaty *Pirogue* bed, a canoe-shaped daybed decorated in brown lacquer and silver leaf, was a sensation, considered by many to be the *pièce de résistance* of the suite.

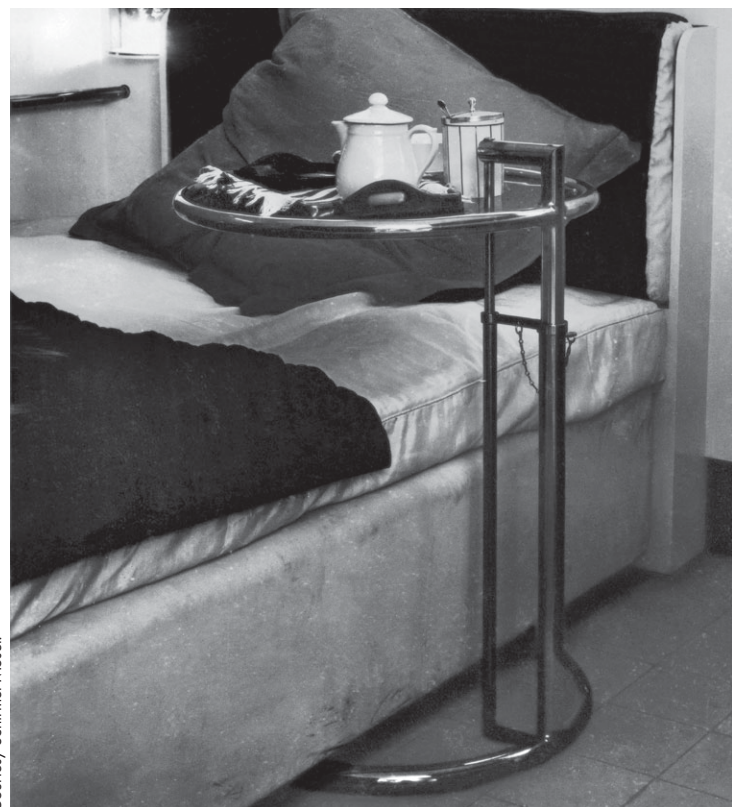
Heartened by the great success of the rue de Lota commission, Gray opened a small shop in Paris in 1921, where she sold her own work and that of her friends and colleagues. She named her enterprise Jean Désert, an homage to her friend and soon-to-be lover, Romanian-born architect and critic Jean Badovici, and to the Moroccan desert. Author Rowlands describes the boutique as “drop-dead elegant ... where the beau monde shopped.” An article in the *Chicago Tribune* stated, “A visit to this shop is a sojourn into the never before seen, never before heard.”

The year 1923 marked a turning point in Gray’s life and career. With the staunch encouragement of Badovici (who had offhandedly asked her “Why don’t you build?”), she began to focus exclusively on

Above, left The E.1027 house was designed to facilitate outdoor living in the mild southern climate, with glass walls that opened wide to multiple terraces, including this one off the living room, with a *Transat* chair and a rug, and canvas to protect against the sun and sea breezes.

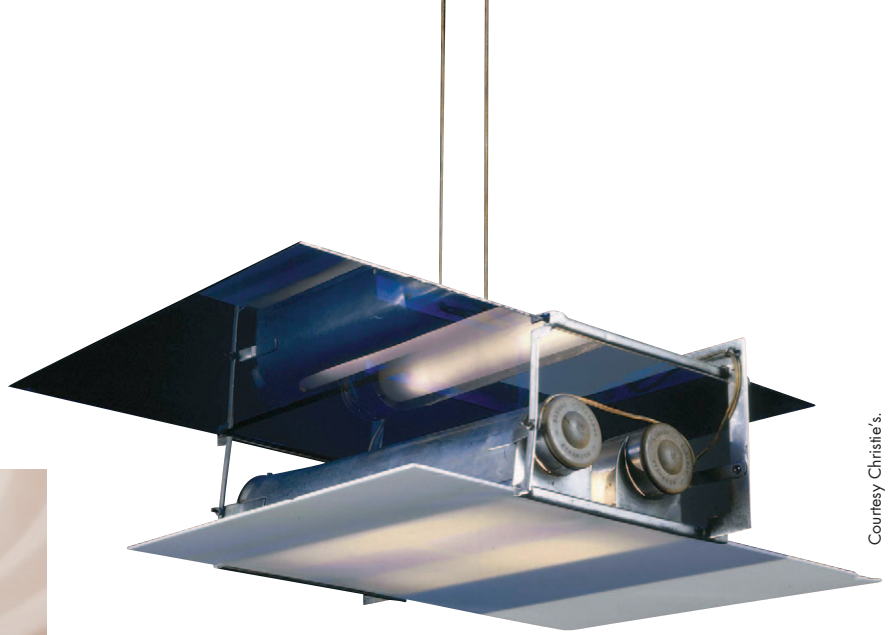
Above, right The *Satellite* mirror, designed for the guest room of E.1027 in 1926–28, has a built-in lamp and movable shaving mirror. It was reproduced for a number of years by Editions Écart International, and can still be found on the vintage market.

Below The iconic E.1027 adjustable-height table, Eileen Gray’s most successful product, was designed for breakfasting in bed.



Right *Airplane lamp* in glass, chromed metal and neon tube, 1925–28. Gray had one in her apartment on the rue Bonaparte.

Below *Satellite suspension lamp*, cream-painted aluminum, c. 1925, composed of three flat rings in ascending scale mounted in alternation with three stepped conical shades in descending scale. Sold at Christie's in 2009 for \$3,837,724.



Courtesy Christie's.



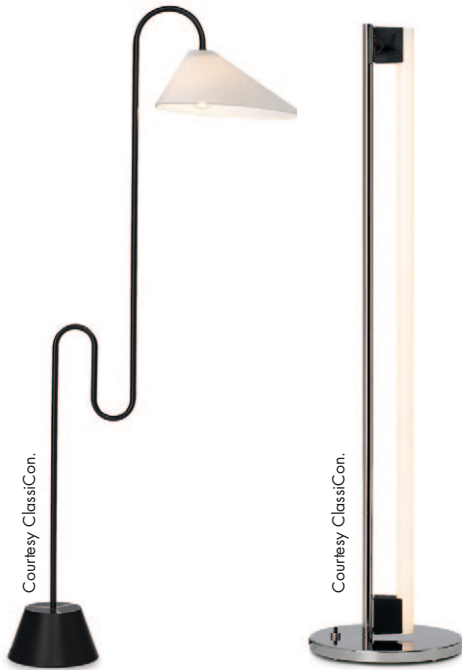
Courtesy Christie's.

architecture. She took drafting lessons, intently studied the influential revue *L'Architecture Vivante* and began to draw plans for imaginary houses. (She made some changes on the personal style front too, bobbing her hair and beginning to dress in highly-tailored, somewhat mannish clothes.) Her friend and biographer J. Stewart Johnson comments, "Once she had tried architecture — in a sense, had gotten her hands on space — there was no going back."

In 1924, she bought property on a steep seaside cliff in the south of France, to collaborate with Badovici on designing a vacation home; the concept was to create a retreat open to sea and sun, but closable in bad weather, with spaces for both socializing and privacy. The E.1027 house was to be the pinnacle of her architectural work. "She knows that our time, with its new possibilities of living, necessitates new ways of feeling," Badovici said. The home's name, humorously made to sound technical and avant garde, was a clever code for the intertwining of Gray's name and her lover's: E for Eileen, 10 (the tenth letter of the alphabet) for Jean, 2 for B and 7 for G.

The E.1027, a three-year project, was a supreme embodiment of the principles of modernism. The L-shaped house — white, flat-roofed, with both fixed and freestanding walls, built of reinforced concrete and steel, with horizontals dominating — was set into a naturally-terraced landscape. Its expansive windows faced the Mediterranean; a tidy spiral stairway led to the guest room, and terminated in a glass-enclosure on the roof. It was an elegant *maison minimum* — open yet compact, minimal yet functional. As a capper, Gray created for the house her now-ubiquitous circular steel-and-glass E.1027 table — inspired, she said, by her sister's love of breakfast in bed.

Gray came to architecture relatively late in life and did not have time to fulfill her promise in the field. She did, though, design a number of other notable buildings, including her own luminous summer house, *Tempe à Pailla*, in southeastern France (built in 1932 when her relationship with Badovici had ended); an ingenious sculptor's studio in Provence, with an oversized door allowing ease of access for large art works; and several small houses that remain unbuilt. For all of these, she created furniture in an "almost shockingly imaginative way," writes Rowlands. "Almost every piece did *something* — folded, fanned out, collapsed, metamorphosed." A reversible tabletop was surfaced with cork on one side, to avoid the clattering of china.



Far left Swiveling floor lamp, 1935, in black steel tubing with a black lacquered steel base. Contemporary reissue by ClassiCon.

Left Tubular lamp, 1930s, chrome-plated with black plastic socket. Contemporary reissue by ClassiCon.

Below and inset This dresser, c. 1930, with swiveling drawers, exemplifies Gray's interest in simple and practical design.



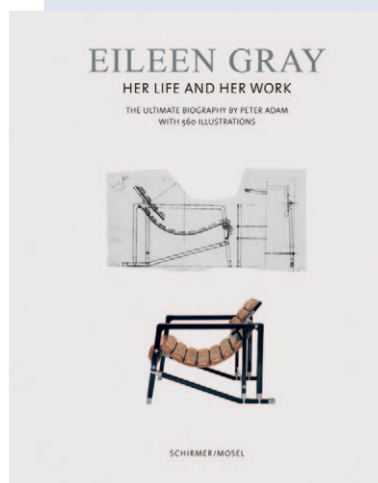
Courtesy Christie's.

The designer began a reclusive period in 1937. At the invitation of pioneering architect Le Corbusier, she had exhibited at the Paris Exposition her plans for a futuristic vacation and leisure center, but did not attend the opening. She remained a mysterious, secluded figure for many years; adding to her sorrows was the fact that most of her residences were bombed or looted by the Germans during World War II. She lost her precious plans and unrealized designs from her apartment in Saint-Tropez; even the built-in furniture at *Tempe à Pailla* was stripped from the premises.

Gray's creativity, though, seemed only to be enhanced by age. She moved back to Paris after World War II and worked at a feverish pace, drawing by candlelight and living on potatoes. Her social conscience came to the forefront, and she became concerned with design solutions to address the postwar housing shortage. She took up photography, designed imaginative stage sets and experimented with Plexiglas.

She emerged from the shadows in 1954 to begin construction of her third house, *Lou Pérou*, near Saint-Tropez. Exhibitions of her architecture were organized in Graz and Vienna (1970) and, in 1972, at the Royal Institute of British Architects. She received honorary titles in London and her native Ireland. In 1979, curator and friend J. Stewart Johnson organized a posthumous exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, subsequently shown at MoMA in New York.

Unfazed by her eleventh-hour encounter with celebrity, Gray returned to lacquer design in her 90s. She continued to make annual pilgrimages to her "blessed stretch of land" between Saint-Tropez and the Italian



To Learn More

Peter Adam, *Eileen Gray: Her Life and Work*, Schirmer-Mosel, 2008.

Ernst Wasmuth, *Eileen Gray, An Architecture For All Senses*, Taschen, 2007 (reissued).

Penelope Rowlands, *Eileen Gray – Compact Design Portfolio*, Chronicle Books, 2002.

Caroline Constant, *Eileen Gray*, Phaidon Press, 2000.

Philippe Garner, *Eileen Gray: Designer and Architect*, Taschen, 1994.



Where to Buy

Gray's furniture has sold at auction for astronomical sums in the past few years. Apart from the more than \$28 million paid for her *Dragon* chair, other spectacular sales at Christie's have included \$193,000 for an original *Transat* chair and almost \$4 million for the *Satellite* pendant lamp. Some original pieces can be found for less: a pair of original chrome and black lacquered wood end tables, c. 1950, was recently on offer for \$6,120 at Mallett London (mallettantiques.com), and a 1935 table lamp for Jumo was going for \$2,600 at Gallery L7 in Los Angeles (galleryl7.com).

Christie's is holding an auction of Art Deco and other modernist design, including some Eileen Gray pieces, from the Chateau de Gourdon collection, March 29-31, in Paris. For information, visit christies.com.

Aram

Fortunately, many of Eileen Gray's designs are still in production today, thanks to Zeev Aram and his company, Aram Designs Ltd., which has held the worldwide license to them since 1975. Aram sells authorized reissues of many Gray pieces from its London store, which has been offering modernist design since 1964. +44 20 7557 7557, aram.co.uk

ClassiCon

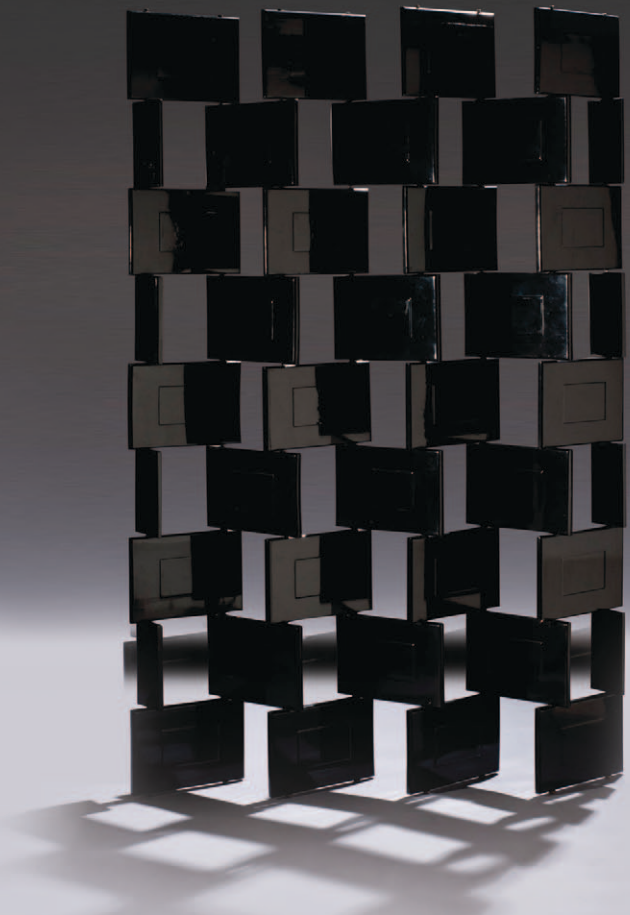
This German company manufactures Gray designs, licensed from Aram. +49 89 74 81 33 0, classicon.com

Reissued Gray pieces on the vintage/auction market.

For many years, French interior designer Andrée Putman produced a number of Gray's pieces through her company, Écart. Although the company recently went out of business, it is possible to find high quality Éditions Écart International and other reeditions at auction and in vintage stores.

Sample prices

- 1927 *Transat* chair, late 20th-century production, \$9,880
- 1925 *Brick* screen in black lacquered wood, 1970s production, \$8,700.
- Fluorescent *Tube* floor lamp, late 20th-century production, \$625
- Pair of chrome and glass tables, 1970s production, \$1,400



border – in springtime to see the flowers, and in the autumn for the grape harvest. She remained an incorrigible force of nature to the end. She died after a fall at the age of 98 in her apartment on rue Bonaparte, having cajoled her attendant into leaving her alone to go buy a piece of wood for a tabletop.

Gray took strong exception to Le Corbusier's assertion that "the house is a machine for living." *Mais non!* The home for her was "a living organism, an extension of the human experience ... it is not a matter of simply constructing beautiful ensembles of lines, but above all, dwellings for people. ... Formulas are nothing – life is everything. A person's house should be his extension, his growth, his spiritual glow." ■

Award-winning writer and musician **Judy Polan** (judyolan.com) is a contributing editor for *Style 1900* and occasional essayist for *Northeast Public Radio*. Her most recent article for *Modernism* was "Rogano: Glamorous Grande Dame" (Vol. 13, No. 4).

Above Black lacquer *Brick* screen, c. 1920s.

Top, left Eileen Gray at her apartment on rue Bonaparte, Paris, 1970. Behind her is a *Brick* screen.

Opposite Study section of the living room at *Tempe à Pailla* (1932–34), the second home that Gray designed for herself in the south of France, with adjustable metal shutters below the ceiling. A bar stool, designed for the E.1027 house, is at center.

