

Friends of E.1027

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Eileen Gray and E. 1027

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Friends of e.1027 • c/o Sandra Gering Inc, 14 East 63rd Street, New York, NY 10065  
t: 646 336 7183 • f: 646 336 7185 • [e1027@sandrageringinc.com](mailto:e1027@sandrageringinc.com) • [www.e1027.org](http://www.e1027.org)





Photos by: Berenice Abbott

## A SINGULAR WOMAN: EILEEN GRAY AND E. 1027

by Susan Towers

Eileen Gray, avant-garde artist, designer and architect, was one of the leading members of the Modern design movement. Her pioneering multi-purpose, built-in furniture and use of plywood, tubular steel, cork, plastic and other industrial materials have been recognized in recent years as the forerunners of today's design trends.

Independent, intelligent and non-conformist, she led a uniquely creative life, particularly for a woman born in Ireland in 1878. The youngest child of a wealthy Anglo-Irish family, Gray was encouraged in her artistic pursuits by her father James MacLaren Gray, an artist who took her on many painting trips around Europe. After attending classes at the Slade School of Fine art in 1898, Gray first went to Paris with her mother to attend the Exposition Universelle (a sort of World's fair), and by 1906, with both her parents dead, and independently wealthy, Gray moved to an apartment she bought at 21 rue Bonaparte. Fascinated by materials, Gray had discovered lacquer at Charles Dean's studio in Soho, London,

and studied for years in Paris with the Japanese lacquer artist Seizo Sugawara. Patricia O'Reilly, who wrote a book on the life of Eileen Gray, tells of her setting up a lacquer workshop in her bathroom to provide the necessary humidity, painstakingly applying the 30 layers of lacquer and polishing each layer by hand. She invented a new blue (a color particularly difficult to obtain), and experimented with texture, using gold, silver and mother-of-pearl.

In 1913, she sold a dark red lacquered screen named "le Destin" to Jacques Doucet, a couturier and collector, which helped establish her reputation throughout Paris. The same screen would in later years help revive her reputation after years of obscurity when it was bought in 1972 by Yves Saint Laurent for \$36,000, then an unprecedented sum for a "modern" art piece. How did this woman in a man's world go from relative obscurity to become an acclaimed designer whose trademark circular table and Bibendum chair are-considered some of the most iconic designs of the 20th Century?

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Having passed the First World War in London, Gray returned to Paris where she began to design furniture and take on interior design projects. In 1922, she set up shop (remarkably using a fictitious man's name, Jean Désert, for her gallery), and increasingly drew the attention of some of the leading designers and architects of the day – Gropius, Mallet-Stevens, J.J.P. Oud and Le Corbusier, among them. Her simple, modern designs became more experimental and utilized her love of color and texture. Gray also embraced new industrial materials such as tubular steel that were becoming available at the time and that were increasingly popular among progressive designers at the Bauhaus in Germany and in Le Corbusier's Paris studio. One of the first designers to work in chrome (preceding many of the better known designers such as Marcel Breuer and Mies Van der Rohe), Gray was original in her use of aluminum, steel, Bakelite and cork, among other materials. Her rug designs from the 1920s (re-edited by Andrée Putman in 1978 and sold today through Aram in London who own the worldwide head license to her designs) feature abstract and geometric motifs, while sometimes she incorporated "ordinary" materials such as topstitched canvas, perforated felt or brush-carpet for outdoor use (in contrast to the lavish lacquer and furs she also favored).

Encouraged by her contemporaries, some of the leading modern architects of the day, she began to study architecture and after 1927, worked primarily as an architect while continuing to design suitably minimalist furniture for her interiors. Having become friends (and lovers) with Jean Badovici, the much younger Romanian editor of L'Architecture Vivante magazine (and a modern architectural theorist), Gray designed a vacation house for them on the cliffs of Roquebrune, in the south of France near Monte Carlo. Named E. 1027 (a cipher for their initials – E for Eileen; 10 for J(ean), the tenth letter of the alphabet; 2

for B(adovici) etc.), the house was designed as a simple "maison minimum," a style becoming popular among progressive architects across Europe. However, the house is distinguished from other designs of the era in many ways, but particularly in its adaptation to the needs of the inhabitants (I like to think of it as a woman's practicality – as Gray herself said "theory is insufficient for life").

Largely self-taught, Gray proved adept at architectural design and demonstrated a deft command of space and light. Gray and Badovici wrote a detailed "Description" of the villa known as E. 1027 in which they outlined their ideas including foremost the notion that "it is not only a matter of constructing beautiful arrangements of lines, but above all, dwellings for people..." (Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici, "Description" of Villa E. 1027, 1929). In an exhibition text, she described E. 1027 as "a house envisaged from a social point of view: minimum of space, maximum of comfort." In her design and construction of the house, Gray continued to experiment with industrial materials as well as creating an atmosphere of intimacy with the interior furnishings.

Pragmatic yet aesthetically inclined, Gray designed each and every element of the house, taking into consideration the seaside nature of the location, the Mistral that blew into the region, and the comfort of those living in the house. From chairs to screens, carpets and even mosquito netting, every detail of the house was thought out. From the outset, Gray and Badovici were less concerned about appearance and more about making a place to live and to enjoy. The availability of new materials (concrete, steel, large sheets of glass) meant that they could create a sustainable dwelling for use year round in the variable climate of the region. They took advantage of the constructional strength of

reinforced concrete which allowed columns (Le Corbusier termed them *pilotis*) to support floors free of structural walls. A small house, Gray's thoughtful planning and use of sliding doors and windows, as well as concealed storage in walls, made maximum use of the space.

While many Modern architects were distinguishing themselves by rejecting the principals of the past, and particularly those of the Arts and Crafts movement, Gray managed to embrace the possibilities offered by forward-thinking architecture and the new materials at hand, all the while creating a very human environment. In describing the kitchen and entryway of E. 1027, Gray and Badovici note the influence of traditional rural architecture and the "customs of the peasant women of the region." "When viewed from within the room, the entry partition consists of a series of racks that end in a deep vertical segment of a celluloid half cylinder, which encloses a column of gramophone records... The tea table is made of tubes that can be retracted, and it is covered

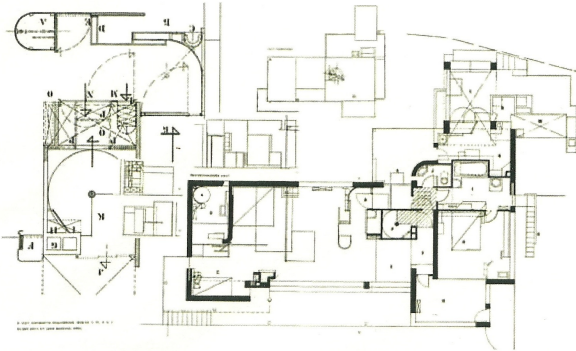
with a cork sheet to avoid the impact and noise of fragile cups." The cloth canopy on the terrace "is made of four independent pieces to resist the strongest mistral winds," and "a heavy brush-weave carpet for the terrace garden provides a note of gaiety." Much of the furniture was built-in and often served a dual purpose as in "the space used to serve and clear the dining room can be transformed into a bar. The bar's surface of striated aluminium (Gray was fond of aluminium which she described as a beautiful material "providing agreeable coolness in hot climates,") which is used for serving meals, can be folded up against a pillar, while a second serving table has pivoting drawers. The dining table is surfaced in cork to avoid the noise...and the table is supported on legs of tubular steel that can be extended or adjusted effortlessly."

Glass partitions, zinc-covered cabinets, corrugated sheet metal, transparent celluloid fabric used as mosquito netting – Gray used all these (at the time) technically advanced materials to create a refined environment of





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comfort, utility and above all, beauty. Although he initially much admired her design, writing to her extolling its "rare spirit...so dignified, so charming and full of wit," (and apparently at Badovici's instigation), on a visit, Le Corbusier painted a series of sexually charged murals on the walls of the villa. In an article in the Financial Times last year, Edwin Heathcote writes that this odd episode is often taken as an act of sexual aggression, a defacement caused by jealousy (of her masterful design? her bisexuality?).

Having split up with Badovici and designed and built another house, Tempe à Pailla, for herself not far away above the port of Menton, Gray remained in the area until World War Two. During the war, E.1027 was occupied by German soldiers who looted the place and apparently used the Modernist master's art for target practice (possibly providing some solace to Gray who was incensed with Le Corbusier's "alterations"). After Badovici's death in 1956, and the murder of the subsequent owner (not to mention Le Corbusier's 1965 drowning in the waters by E. 1027), the house fell into disrepair. Now the house has been taken under the conservancy of the

Conservatoire du Littoral, the local and municipal authorities and is also being supported by a number of organizations including the New York-based Friends of E. 1027, which is spearheaded by art dealer Sandra Gering.

The organization was first conceived in 1998, after Gering's visit to the site, when the building was in a state of disrepair after years of neglect and vandalism. The organization has earned not-for-profit status as a sponsored project of the New York Foundation for the Arts and in March 2012 helped organize a sale at Phillips de Pury, with proceeds going towards the extensive restoration of the Villa and surrounding buildings and site. The organization has been closely working with the French government and the township of Roquebrune-Cap Martin, who together purchased the villa in partnership with the Conservatoire du Littoral soon after the inception of the organization.

Under the auspices of Pierre-Antoine Gatiar, Architecte en Chef et Inspecteur Général des Monuments Historiques, renovations have been underway for the past decade, while emergency

repairs were completed in 2006. So far, major renovations to the exterior of the house have been completed including the façades, roof, and other exterior surfaces. Additionally, renovations to the interior walls and surfaces are complete. The controversial (to Eileen Gray, at least) Le Corbusier murals are being restored on the interior walls of the house.

Once the villa (now classified as a French National Cultural Monument) is fully restored and refurbished with copies of its original furniture and decor, it will be maintained as a public museum with an onsite study and exhibition center for architecture and design in conjunction with the Corbusier foundation. Friends of E. 1027 intends to create a fund to send a young architectural student abroad each year for a month-long study program at the study center. At the time of writing, the estimated date for completion of the restoration of the villa is Summer 2012 and it is expected that the villa will be open to the public in September 2012. Ultimately Gray only built two houses (and an apartment for Jean Badovici), yet these few projects showed her instinctive understanding of

the environment and the needs of its inhabitants. She continued to design until failing eyesight forced her retirement to Paris. Having lost many of her drawings and models to looting during the war, Gray devoted the last decades of her life to documenting her work and thoughts in a series of notebooks. She lived for years in semi-obscurity until an American collector, Robert Walker, became interested in her lacquer work. Saint Laurent's significant purchase in 1972 of 'Le Destin' provided continued momentum which led to a retrospective in London, and a major exhibition at MoMA in 1980.

In 2009, the so-called "dragon" chair designed by Gray sometime between 1915 and 1917, became the most-expensive piece of 20th-Century design sold at auction when it went under the gavel for more than \$28 million. With the restoration of the seaside villa E. 1027 largely complete, and a movie starring Winona Ryder as Eileen Gray in the making by Irish writer/producer Mary McGuckian, it looks as if Eileen Gray, designer, architect, and by all accounts, a singular woman, long overshadowed by her contemporaries, is finally getting the universal recognition she deserves. ■

**Susan Towers**  
VP Marketing and Communications  
Contact: stowers@materialconnexion.com