

Pompidou reassesses pioneer Gray

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SPECIAL REPORT DESIGN

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Paris. Although she lived in France for 70 years before her death in 1976, Eileen Gray is less celebrated in her adopted homeland than she is in the UK and US. But that seems set to change with the Centre Pompidou's exhibition looking at the long life and prolific work of the Irish-born architect and designer. In touch with many of the key movements and central artistic figures of the 20th century, Gray remained a free-spirited and restless creator.

"She was a pioneer," says Cloé Pitiot, the show's curator. "She was a painter, an architect, a designer – and she was a woman, doing this at the beginning of the 20th century, and that's incredible."

Born near Enniscorthy in 1878 into an aristocratic family, Gray was one of the first women to attend London's Slade School in 1898. Initially a painter, her design work began in earnest when she adopted lacquer techniques, first in London and then in Paris, with the Japanese artist Seizo Sugawara. With him, she opened an atelier in 1910,

along with another studio with the weaver Evelyn Wyld. "She worked with an arts and crafts logic – for her, artists and artisans needed to come together to create the best work," Pitiot says.

The results were a procession of design classics, from the red lacquer screen *Le Destin*, 1914, and the *Fauteuil Sirène* chair of 1919, to the minimal shapes of her *Bibendum* and *Transat* chairs, both created in the mid-1920s in parallel with great Modernists, such as Mies Van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer. Gray's designs are closely linked in the show, and in her life, to particular spaces: the interiors of the Galerie Jean Désert, Paris, where her designs were sold until 1930, and her two architectural masterpieces, Villa E1027 and Tempe à Pailla, both situated on the southern coast of France.

Around the works will be documentary photos of lovers and friends in the gay community in 1920s Paris, and the architect Jean Badovici, a key figure in the creation of Villa E1027. "Historians classify her within Art Deco and afterwards within Modernism, but she didn't want to be in Art Deco and her work is quite different from [pure] Modernism –

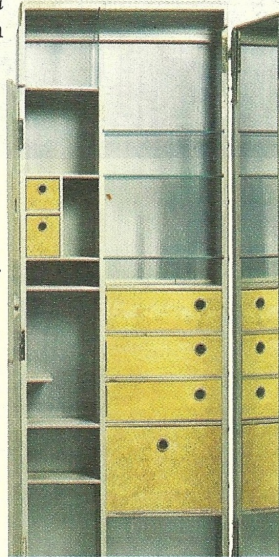
she cuts across movements," Pitiot says. "For her, the important thing was to create and be inventive."

The show's final room reflects a quieter side of her practice: small gouaches made throughout her career. "Painting was like a secret garden in her life," Pitiot says. "It was a passion for her, while furniture and architecture were a job."

Ben Luke

- Eileen Gray, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 20 February-20 May
- For Design Special see *The Art Newspaper* 2, pp 13-21

Dressing screen, 1926-29



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