

Home Cultures

The Journal of Architecture, Design and Domestic Space

ISSN: 1740-6315 (Print) 1751-7427 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfhc20>

Eileen Gray

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To cite this article: Joseph McBrinn (2015) Eileen Gray, Home Cultures, 12:1, 111-113

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175174215X14171915160371>



Published online: 27 Apr 2015.



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EXHIBITION REVIEW

EILEEN GRAYReviewed by
JOSEPH McBRINN*Eileen Gray, Centre Pompidou, Paris,
February 20–May 20, 2013**Eileen Gray: Architect, Designer, Painter,
Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin,
October 12, 2013–January 19, 2014*

JOSEPH McBRINN SITS ON THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE AND BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ART HISTORIANS AND SERVES ON THE EDITORIAL BOARDS OF *THE JOURNAL OF MODERN CRAFT* AND *THE IRISH ARTS REVIEW*. HE IS CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN BOOK PROJECTS THAT DEAL WITH SEWING, MASCULINITY, AND QUEER THEORY; FASHION, MODERNITY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY; AND THE HISTORY OF DESIGN AND CRAFT ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND. J.McBRINN@ULSTER.AC.UK



Since the opening of this retrospective exhibition in Paris in early 2013, critics have made numerous “fifty shades of Gray” puns to draw attention to the Irish-born artist, designer, and architect Eileen Gray’s “enigmatic” personality and still relatively unexplored career. Eileen Gray (1878–1976), unlike many of her prolific male contemporaries, is credited with a more sensuous and sensitive, even decorative, modern vision of domestic spatiality that is generally understood as puzzling, mysterious—and almost certainly problematic—in the grand narratives of Modernism (Pitiot 2013: 15–22). For example, take one of Gray’s chair designs—her *Dragons* armchair, still relatively unknown in the canons of modern design, but which sold for an astounding €21.9 million at the Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé sale in Paris in February 2009. It is a complex mix of luxury materials such as leather, wood, and silver

fashioned into an organic, almost anthropomorphic, shape. It looks back to Thonet and quizzically to Victorian muscular upholstery, and perhaps even forward to the overblown scale of postmodern furniture from the 1980s, and stands in distinction, in terms of its originality and audacity, to the severe and homogenous machine style that would come to dominate chair design, and interior design in general, in Gray's own era.

The *Dragons* armchair was made in 1919, as part of a suite of exotic furniture that included the extraordinary *Pirogue* daybed (on display in the Paris exhibition only), for the interior of an apartment Gray redecorated on the Rue de Lota for her friend, the Parisian *couturière* Juliette Lévy. As Gray gravitated to working with chrome and glass, and less with silver and lacquer, she would, however, reintegrate such works into new interior schemes as is evident in the inclusion of the *Dragons* armchair in the interior, alongside her equally striking Bibendum chair, that Gray designed for another apartment owned by Lévy on the Boulevard Suchet over a decade later. The phallogocentric thrust of Modernism as a narrative of aesthetic, and ideological, secession towards pure form never seems wholly applicable to Gray. Even when she built her two great villas in the south of France, E.1027 and Tempe a Pailla, the interiors, although as radically contemporary as anything else designed in the interwar years, never abandon a schematic use of decoration as a unifying force.

This new retrospective, the first since the London Design Museum's show in 2005, tries to unravel the Gray conundrum by suggesting that she was a designer whose work bridged the shift from a highly aesthetic Art Deco that relied heavily on the concept of luxury as well as the pictorial, the ornamental and a wide range of craft skills to a formulaic ascetic form of Modernism, which although appearing highly minimalist and overtly industrial in its materials and machined in its facture could still employ the decorative and the handmade as a humanizing touch. The exhibition and the weighty accompanying publication do not, however, venture to explain why it was women designers such as Gray (or even contemporaries such as Charlotte Perriand, Lilly Reich, Gunta Stölzl, and Anni Albers) who are often found occupying this problematic middle space in Modernism in distinction to the heroic trajectories of their male counterparts.

The key to Gray's work, this exhibition suggests, is the domestic cultures that inspired and sustained her role first as a designer and then as an architect. Her early interest in furniture and textile design, the lacquer and hand-weaving workshops she set up before the First World War, as well as an examination of her two Côte d'Azur villas, E.1027 and Tempe a Pailla, form the major focus of the show's displays. The Irish Museum of Modern Art showed a scaled-down version of the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, but overall both venues afforded a unique opportunity to get close to some rarely seen, and sometimes unexpected and often very private, objects—such as Gray's drawings

for an unrealized *Ballets des animaux* in 1916 or the evocative photographs of her friends and contemporaries from Romaine Brooks to Gertrude Stein. Some of the objects on display such as the *Six-panel Screen*, c. 1922–5 (shown in both Paris and Dublin), and even the beautiful *Cabinet with pivoting drawers*, c. 1926–9 from E.1027 (also seen in both venues), reveal Gray's recurring preoccupation with forms that speak of concealment and exposure, both physically and psychologically—space as a literal and metaphorical thing.

Feminists have long grappled with Gray's problematic place in Modernist histories and found Le Corbusier's antagonistic interest in her work troubling—even suggesting that his vandalism of E.1027 with a serious of garish murals, which he painted in 1937–9, as analogous to rape. Indeed, a Gray biopic, by the Irish film director Mary McGuckian, focusing on Le Corbusier's jealousy is apparently already in production. However, the most recent and revealing research on Gray by a new generation of critics, such as Katarina Bonnevier from Sweden and Jasmine Rault from Canada, has sought to recontextualize Gray's work in the lesbian culture of Paris's interwar left bank, and reread her ideas through the rubric of queer theory. It is a shame that blockbuster museum exhibitions, such as this, do not afford the exploration and interrogation of a range of methodological and theoretical approaches, and although the catalog of this show is very good, the most revealing discussion of Gray's work, and assessment of her significant contribution to the development of Sapphic modernity and queer domesticity, remains in separate publications (Bonnevier 2007; Rault 2011). Therefore, although both exhibition and catalog, curated and edited by the Centre Pompidou's Cloé Pitiot, are presented as a definitive statement—in some ways Eileen Gray continues to remain elusive.

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