L'Art de Vivre
The Designs of Eileen Gray (1878-1976)

Dorothy Walker

celebrates an Irish architect and designer whose work is both revolutionary and timeless

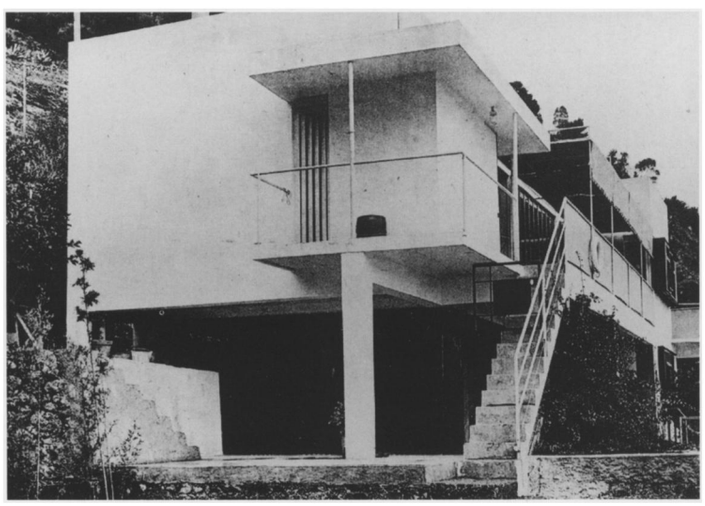
Le Corbusier may have advocated that 'a house is a machine for living', but Eileen Gray brought to the design of that machine all the charm and common sense of her womanly gift for the art of living. Eileen Gray (Fig 1) was one of the most remarkable Irishwomen and one of the most remarkable artists of the century. She was born near Enniscorthy, county Wexford, in 1878, into an aristocratic Scottish-Irish family. Her father was a painter and her mother a Scots baroness in her own right. She grew up in a privileged, secluded family environment in county Wexford, but after her father's death in 1900, she persuaded her mother to allow her to go to London to study art at the Slade School in 1901, when she was twenty-two. But, having the memory of a short visit to Paris with her mother in 1900 still vivid in her head, she found London depressing and boring. So she moved to Paris in 1902 following the traditional route of many Irish artists before her, including the great painter Roderic O'Conor, to the Ecole Colarossi in the rue de la Grande Chaumière and, after a short period, to the Académie Julian.

After three years, her mother's illness brought her back to London, where the family also had a house, for a further two years. Here she first came across antique Chinese lacquer screens. She persuaded the owner of a lacquer workshop to let her help, and she got to know the materials used in this very painstaking and meticulous process. On her return to Paris in 1906, she moved into an apartment on the rue Bonaparte,[1] where she lived for the rest of her very long life until her death at the age of ninety-eight. At the end of that year, 1906, she met the young Japanese lacquer-worker Sugawara, who taught her the art of lacquer in which she worked for the next twenty-five years. Sugawara had been sent to Paris to restore the lacquer pieces sent by Japan to the Paris World Exhibition of 1900. He initiated Eileen Gray into the complicated stages of the traditional Japanese techniques, which involve applying twenty-two layers of lacquer, with correspondingly lengthy intervals between coats to allow each layer to dry. Besides requiring infinite patience, this technique requires extremely sensitive skills. Gray, however, became so proficient that she is considered one of the great lacquer artists of all time. Among the many beautiful pieces that she produced in her lacquer career, it is the large surfaces with no decoration which best demonstrate her virtuosity, a feat rarely achieved outside the Far East by a Western artist.

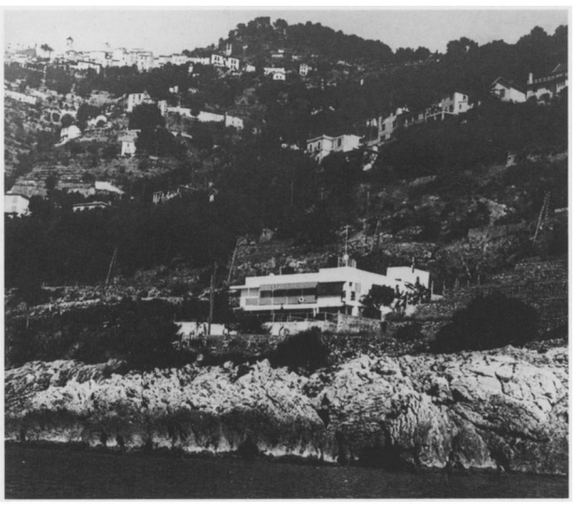
While her earlier works have the nobility of exquisite objects, they also have a serial rigidity that was to be a forerunner of the qualities of her architecture and applied arts during the 1920s, endowing them with an 'anticipatory character', whereby they reflected an interpenetration of European and Far Eastern cultural concepts. Her knowledge and expertise in the design and fabrication of Japanese lacquer objects and her empathy with the simplicity and spiritual quality of traditional Japanese design were hugely influential in introducing these characteristics into European design of the 1920s and '30s.

The temperament required to succeed in her chosen field – daring, innovation,

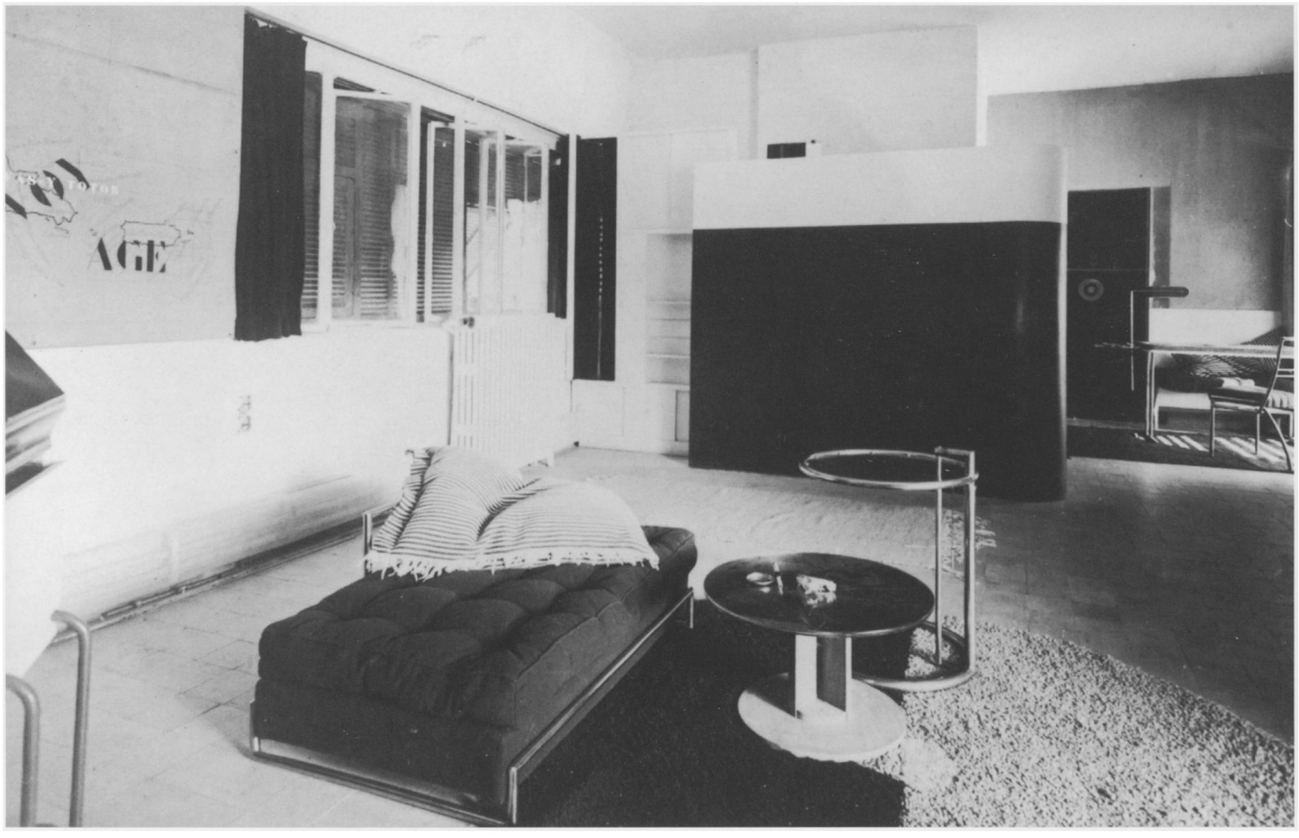
(Opposite). **1.** Berenice Abbott: *Portrait photograph of Eileen Gray*. 1926. Gray was born in Enniscorthy to an Irish father (who was a painter) and a Scottish mother and belatedly went to the Slade School and thereafter to Paris where she lived for the rest of her life.



2. Eileen Gray (1878-1976): *E1027, Roquebrune*. 1929. View of the porch and corner with the sleeping-alcove. Contemporary photograph from *L'Architecture Vivante* (1929). E1027 was the witty name given the house by Gray. Built as a retreat for herself and her young Romanian architect friend, Jean Badovici, the design of E1027 was influenced by Le Corbusier's *Five Points of the New Architecture*.



3. Eileen Gray: *E1027, Roquebrune*. 1929. View from the sea. Contemporary photograph from *L'Architecture Vivante* (1929). In siting the house Gray paid particular attention to the orientation of the sun which she studied with great precision before deciding on the final position of the building.



4. Eileen GRAY: *E1027, Roquebrune.* 1929. The living-room. Contemporary photograph by Eileen Gray from *L'Architecture Vivante* (1929). All the furniture, fittings and carpets are by Gray.

5. Eileen GRAY: *E1027, Roquebrune.* 1929. The living-room. Contemporary photograph by Eileen Gray from *L'Architecture Vivante* (1929). On the right is Gray's Transat Chair.

an infinite patience – seemed to fit her character exactly. Her personal courage was remarkable: she can be said to have been a pioneer of aviation, having flown the English Channel with the famous aviator, Blériot in 1913.

Throughout the period prior to the Great War, she became more skilled and inventive at her lacquer work, and more renowned and successful in showing and selling her beautiful screens. The period was a time of the most intense activity in the arts in Paris, with artists of many nationalities flocking to this centre of creative energy, as artists tend to do. While Roderic O'Conor's paintings were being regularly exhibited at the Salons d'Automne et des Indépendents, Eileen Gray's screens were being exhibited at the Salon de la Societé des Artistes Décorateurs.

Paris was indisputably the centre of the European art world in the pre-Great War period, a time of artistic exploration and innovation in all the arts, with a ferment of new ideas bubbling up right across Europe from Moscow to Montmartre. It was at one of these exhibitions that the leading fashion designer of the time, Jacques Doucet, bought one of her screens, and subsequently commissioned further screens and items of furniture from her. One of the most beautiful is the large 'Lotus' desk with a distinctive Egyptian flavour, made in 1915, and pre-dating by seven years the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and its remarkable treasures which unleashed a wave of neo-Egyptian design across the world; so that, here again, Eileen Gray's design had an anticipatory character. Doucet also commissioned her to make lacquer frames for his Van Gogh paintings.

While her architecture and furniture of the 1920s and '30s is now widely acknowledged to have been a major influence on other designers of the time, her early decorative work in the Arts Décoratifs in Paris has not had the recognition it deserves in the invention of the Art Déco style. For there is no denying that her work pre-dates the mainstream of the movement, that she was highly regarded and very successful in the first twenty years of the century, and that her decorative lacquer work had a very wide influence. In the early 1920s, her fame began to spread to America and England through articles and illustrations in the quality fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and quality newspapers like the London *Times*, the New York *Herald*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

After the Great War, Paris was again seething with new ideas in all the arts, while the beau-monde was trying to recapture the glamour and luxury of the Belle Epoque. Proust published *A la recherche du Temps Perdu*; Joyce's novel *Ulysses* was published in 1922; Diaghileff's Russian Ballet was opening new frontiers in music, dance, and the visual arts; the Dadaists and Surrealists were issuing manifestoes and the revolutionary artists of the pre-war period, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, were now gaining a widespread recognition.

Architecture was also cutting new edges: the elderly French architect Auguste Perret had revolutionised building construction by his use of the engineer Freyssinet's invention of reinforced concrete, and the young Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, had moved to France and was publishing the first of his twenty-nine books on architecture and city-planning.

Eileen Gray was commissioned to design an apartment for Madame Mathieu-Lévy, a prominent figure in the fashion world of Paris, in 1919. She designed everything in the apartment, creating a completely new environment, covering the entrance hall walls with plain lacquered panels, but also designing the carpets, lamps, and all the furniture. She made beautiful black lacquer wall panels streaked with silver leaf for the main salon, which also contained the 'Pirogue' sofa, a canoe-shaped day-bed made of lacquer and tortoise-shell.[2] This piece represented ultimate elegance, and invented a form which, until then, had not existed in the entire history of furniture.

One of the most significant designs of the Mathieu-Lévy apartment were the black lacquer wall panels for the entrance hall, which she subsequently developed into free-standing screens. While she had always used previous screens as elements in the spatial organisation of a room, the block screens, in their quiet and ultra-simple way, were a real revolution. While they permitted a sub-division of the space, as the earlier screens had done, they added a crucial dimension of transparency and airiness. They also questioned the integrity of the wall, as well as the principle of its construction, by breaking up the surface, indeed creating the first example of post-modernist deconstruction! The Japanese influence is discernible also in these block-screens, in the flexible nature of internal walls in the traditional house.

Encouraged by the commissions she was receiving from the Proustian world in which she moved, which included Proust's friend, the Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre, and the celebrated lesbian coterie surrounding the American, Nathalie Barney, Djuna Barnes, and Oscar Wilde's niece, Dolly Wilde, she opened her own gallery under the name of Jean Desert in the ultra-fashionable street of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré in 1922. Here she sold lacquer screens, wall pieces, furniture, lamps, carpets and mirrors. She also continued to make the very simple, unadorned lacquer objects, plates and bowls in the Japanese manner, whose quality made it possible for only genuine connoisseurs of Japanese art to tell the difference between them and objects made by Japanese masters.

In 1925, she was invited to design an entire room for the XIV Salon des Artistes Décorateurs which she called the Monte Carlo room. It was a dual purpose bedroom/boudoir – 'I like the notion of a 'boudoir' as somewhere to sulk' – which contained a black lacquer sofa bed covered in fur, in front of a large lacquer screen in dark red with matt white lacquer panels. She again designed the carpets, lamps, tables, desks, free-standing screens and every other detail of the room. The design met with great success, and was reviewed and illustrated in the architectural and interior decoration magazines.

Her designs were particularly admired by the architects of the Dutch avant-garde group de Stijl, and indeed she herself was also influenced by their work. The design of the Monte Carlo room was very much more austere than the luxurious apartment for Madame Mathieu-Lévy, and it met with praise and approval

from fellow-designers and leading architects of the period like Pierre Chareau and Robert Mallet-Stevens. The latter invited her to work with him but she declined, preferring to work independently. By the mid-1920s she was established as one of the leading designers in France, with many articles, both in France and other countries, devoted to her work. The most influential Dutch art and cultural magazine of the period, *Wendigen*, dedicated a special edition to her. She continued to feel a strong affinity with the de Stijl movement, not only for their aesthetic austerity, but also for their social philosophy and their interest in mass-production for improving the lot of the common man and woman.

In a way, she had become disgusted with the extravagant luxury of the beau-monde of Paris, and was becoming more interested in designing for the general public. She was very excited by the de Stijl exhibition in Paris in 1923, which summed up the architectural credo of the group. Their ideas on architecture prompted her to try her hand herself at this almost totally male-dominated calling. She was finally pushed into actually doing so by a young Romanian architect, Jean Badovici, who had come to Paris to study at the Beaux-Arts and the Ecole Supérieure d'Architecture. He and a Greek journalist friend, Christian Zervos, founded a new magazine called *L'Architecture Vivante* (Living Architecture) which was first published in 1923, at the time when Eileen Gray was receiving great praise and encouragement from discerning critics and architects. Badovici's magazine covered all the major developments in architecture and design throughout the world; he himself was passionately interested in the new architecture, and through his interest became very friendly with Le Corbusier and the Dutch architects of de Stijl.

Through Badovici, Eileen Gray also met them and eagerly discussed their ideas. She and Badovici travelled together to Holland and Germany to see new buildings first-hand, and so became familiar with the work of Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Rietveld, and many others. She also subscribed to Le Corbusier's magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau* and began to study the history and theories of architecture through the ages; she had no formal architectural training, she was entirely self-taught, but she practised on projects by making models. She built her first house at Roquebrune on the Mediterranean coast between Nice and Menton. The house was a retreat for herself and Badovici, who made suggestions for changes to her first design.

She also designed, in 1924/25, a small house for an engineer, likewise on the Mediterranean coast. It stood on pilotis, and in its floor plans and elevations, is one of the earliest manifestations of European Modernist architecture on the small domestic scale, along with Le Corbusier's Maison Cook and Maison Guiette. What she was seeking to achieve was the greatest simplicity and feeling of space combined with sensitivity and harmony. In her dialogue with Badovici 'From Eclecticism to Doubt', published in *L'Architecture Vivante* in the special issue devoted to the house at Roquebrune, she maintained that *simplicity does not always follow from simplification*, and *it is architecture itself that must be the real decoration*. The project for the engineer's house demonstrated the independence with which she approached the design of the individual dwelling, with a dynamic balance of elements capable of harmonising the opposition of interior and exterior. The engineer's house was never built, but building of the Roquebrune house (Figs 2-5) was commenced in 1926. In a romantic gesture, she named it E1027 – E for Eileen, 10 for J, the tenth letter of the alphabet, 2 for B, and 7 for G, thus incorporating both her own and Badovici's initials.

The house was completed in 1929, when she was fifty-one. The finished house was very much in line with Le Corbusier's *Five Points of the New Architecture* of 1926: (1). It stands on pilotis; (2). The roof is reached via a staircase; (3). Open-plan living is achieved by a combination of free-standing and fixed walls; (4). The windows are horizontal; (5). The south window creates an open facade.

What is also interesting is the orientation to the sun, which she studied with great precision before deciding on the final position of the house. (It is always surprising that, in a country which sees relatively little sun, Irish architects, to this day, pay so little attention to the sun's orientation.) She regarded the dwelling 'as a living organism' in which the open plan living room was used for both meals and relaxation. This has become so widespread nowadays that it is really difficult to imagine how revolutionary a concept it was in the 1920s. She also envisaged the house, and indeed all of her furniture designs at this time, as prototypes for mass production, which was a prime concern of avant-garde architects right across Europe from Russia to France. Eileen Gray's designs, however, show a more personal, feminine concern for practical use than those of her male contemporaries. Her aesthetic sense has proved to be both more revolutionary and more timeless than, say, that of Pierre Chareau, who had many very practical ideas but whose design sense was not so finely tuned as that of Eileen Gray. Only the furniture of the great architect/designers Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, has survived in the mass-produced market to the end of the twentieth century, along with the furniture of the Irish architect Eileen Gray. It must be added that Mies van der Rohe worked with the designer Lilly Reich, le Corbusier's furniture was designed by Charlotte Perriand, and Alvar Aalto's by his architect wife, Aino.[3] The Transat chair (Fig 5),[4] the tubular steel bedside table and the Bibendum armchair (Fig 8) (Figs 6 & 7), all designed for E1027 in 1927, are still selling as fast as they can be made, while her carpet designs are not only still being made, but have had a huge influence on designers worldwide.[5]

Badovici published a special issue of *L'Architecture Vivante* on E1027 when it was finished in 1929, illustrated by some thirty of her own photographs. It was also illustrated in the inaugural issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and photographs of it were shown in the first Salon of the Union des Artistes Modernes, when it was considered among the most successfully realised Modernist buildings in France, complete with furniture and furnishings, and the only one to be designed and built by a woman. The year 1929 was, in fact, something of a bio-energy year for

6. *Interior of the Exhibition,* Eileen Gray, an Architect for all Senses, *at the Deutsche Architektur-Museum, Frankfurt. 1996.* Gray's Monte Carlo sofa, 1927-29, is on the left; the Rivoli or Gate-leg tea table of the same date on the right. Made of tubing that can be folded, it is covered with cork to avoid noise and shocks to delicate china. Circular trays in aluminium for biscuits or cakes may be rotated to bring the plates within easy reach. Cups may be placed on the narrower end of the table which extends its length.

7. *Interior of the Exhibition,* Eileen Gray, an Architect for all Senses, *at the Deutsche Architektur-Museum, Frankfurt. 1996.* In this view of the Exhibition installation, Gray's Bibendum Chair of 1927-29 is on the right; the rectangular portable table of the same date on the left; and her neon floor-lamp in the centre.

the new architecture, which included not only E1027 and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, but Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion and Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre.

Le Corbusier greatly admired E1027[6] so much so that he built himself a small hut nearby, and, in later years, when he frequently stayed with Badovici, painted eight large murals on the walls. These, being assertive, colourful works, quite altered the character of the space, and have presented a serious problem in the restoration of the house. The Irish architect, Patrick Mellett, who is based in Paris, has undertaken a vigorous campaign to have the house purchased and established as a sort of Annamaghkerrig for Irish architects, where they could spend time developing projects or pursuing particular studies. Le Corbusier died in the sea, swimming off the rocks below E1027 on one of his frequent visits to his holiday hut.

E1027 and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye were published together in the German magazine *Der Baumeister* in 1930. About this time, Gray closed her shop 'Jean Desert' in Paris. It had been losing money, because of the very high cost of the luxury lacquer goods, but her main reason was that she wished to devote herself fully to architecture. She designed one of her best-known interiors, Badovici's tiny studio apartment – four hundred and thirty square feet – on the rue Chateaubriand in Paris. Because of its tiny size, she made the most of her very practical ideas of storage and built-in furniture. It contained an entrance, a kitchenette, a bar, and a bathroom hidden behind a curved wall, as well as the main study/bedroom. She created extra space by the use of mirrors, and even used the ceiling for storage space. And it contained examples of all the furniture designed for E1027. Her design for Badovici's apartment was a revolutionary departure for interior design, with its use of glass bricks, black ceilings, recessed lighting, and other elements which are familiar now, but which were unheard of at that time.

However, shortly after the little apartment was finished, Eileen Gray terminated her relationship with Badovici, and thereafter devoted more and more of her time to architecture.

She became a founder-member of the Union des Artistes Modernes, founded in 1929 by the architect Robert Mallet-Stevens, with Charlotte Perriand, René Herbst, Jean Prouvé, Sonia Delaunay, Pierre Chareau, le Corbusier, Gustav Miklos and the sculptors Jean and Joel Mantel. The UAM wanted to get away from the Salon system of official juries and prizes, in order to remain open to all new ideas: they held several exhibitions but the Great Depression of the early 1930s severely hampered their efforts to find support for the avant-garde in architecture or design. Eileen Gray last showed work with the UAM in 1934.

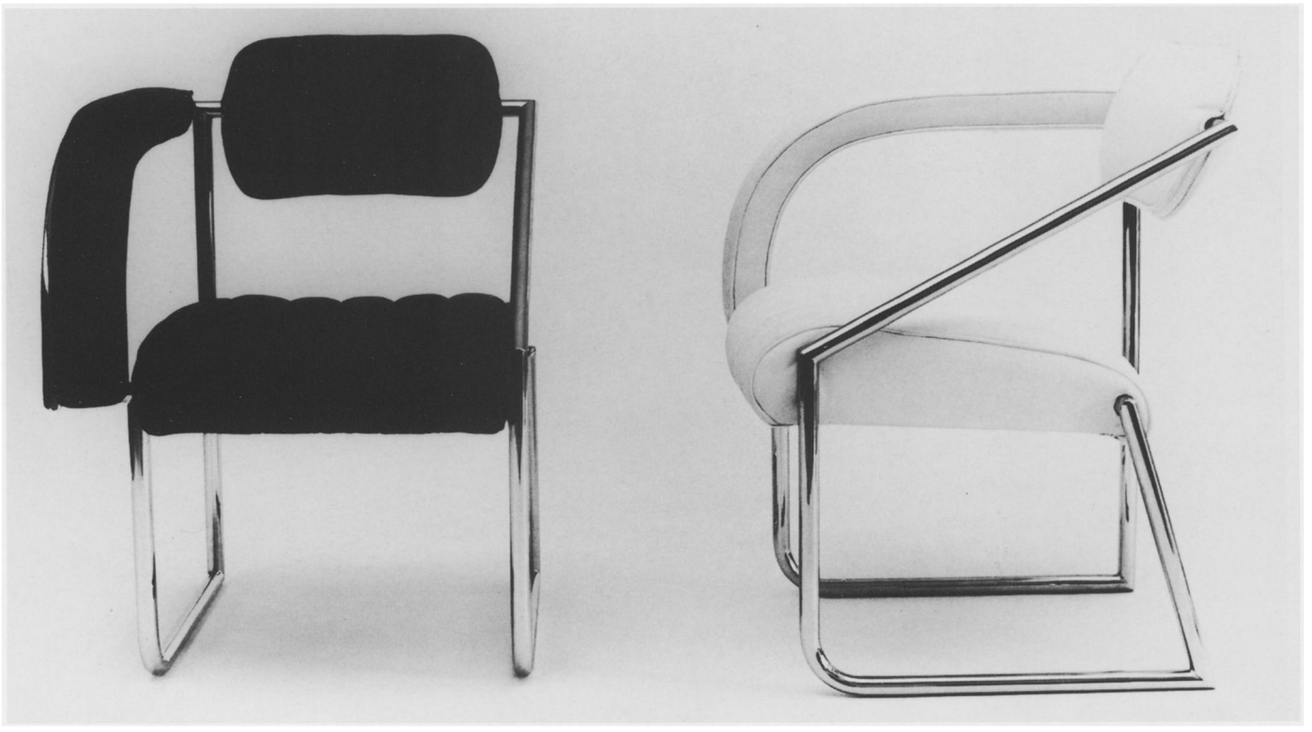
Meanwhile she moved out of E1027, leaving it to Badovici, and set about designing a small house for herself a little further east on the coast near the Italian border at Castellar. This was her first independent construction, without any help from Badovici, and is extremely interesting in its integration of Modernist/Post-Modernist concerns. In contrast to E1027, where social life and entertaining were priorities, Tempe à

8. Eileen GRAY: *The Bibendum Chair*. Leather and chrome steel, 1929. Designed for E1027, the chair is still in production. Gray's furniture designs show a more personal, feminine concern for practical use than those of her contemporary male designers.

Pailla, as she called it, was conceived as a place of solitude and retreat, a very beautiful hermit's cell. The site contained three existing large stone cisterns which she integrated into the design, building on top of and inside their massive stone walls. She inserted a garage and chauffeur's room within the first tank – her designs invariably included rooms for the chauffeur and housekeeper; she may have worked all her life but not at housework! (In fact, she had the same housekeeper, Louise, from the 1920s until her death in 1976.) She used the second stone tank as a cellar, and the third as a water reservoir. The house achieved the same degree of integration of interior and exterior as in E1027, with the additional integration of the rugged stone walls with the whitewashed concrete of the new structure, so the simplicity of her design again achieved those levels of sophisticated syntheses which created the harmony and peace of the space. The very important exhibition of her work in the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt (Figs 6 & 7) which took place in September-December 1996 as part of the Irish Diaspora programme, was sub-titled 'an architecture for all the senses', which seems absolutely accurate. All the comfort-seeking senses are satisfied but there is also a spirit-comfort in these harmonies.

A detail like her love of plants is evident in all her photographs of her projects. Indeed the indoor/outdoor planting was another innovation in her architecture which has become so familiar that it no longer appears even noticeable.

The catalogue of the 1996 Frankfurt exhibition is invaluable for the study of Eileen Gray's art; there are essays on different



9. Eileen GRAY: *The Non-conformist Chair*. Leather and chrome steel, 1927-29. By the mid-twenties, Gray was established as one of the leading designers in France and she became interested in having her designs mass-produced.

aspects, the lacquer work, projects including the late 1930s Cultural Centre and Vacation Centre, temporary housing. It includes the 1929 dialogue with Jean Badovici 'From Eclecticism to doubt', an essay on the effect of the Depression on French art and design of the 1930s. Peter Adam's biography *Eileen Gray* gives a fuller account of her private life, as well as a comprehensive account of her architecture and design.

A final detail which has always intrigued me: Evie Hone and Mainie Jellett were living in Paris at the same time as Eileen Gray, and although they knew each other, they never became really friendly. Eileen Gray was a good deal older than the two young painters, but all three came from the same privileged background, and had the same passionate interest in and commitment to Modernism, but it seemed that the two artists were somewhat in awe of their very celebrated compatriot. They were more friendly with her friend Kate Weatherby who offered Evie Hone the use of her flat in Paris while she was travelling in the South of France with Eileen Gray. One can only fantasise about the fruitful collaboration which might have resulted from a closer relationship.

DOROTHY WALKER is an international art critic and author of Modern Art in Ireland *(reviewed in this issue) and* Michael Scott, architect, in (casual) conversation with Dorothy Walker *(Cork 1995).*

1. I visited Eileen Gray at this apartment in 1975.
2. In 1982, one of the three versions of the Pirogue sofa was sold at auction in Paris for $100,000.
3. In 1996, the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed an exhibition of Lilly Reich's designs for exhibitions, houses and furniture, and the Museum of Modern Art in the Pompidou Centre, Paris, showed an exhibition of Charlotte Perriand's furniture.
4. Eileen Gray told me in Paris in 1975 that the only person who had made enquiries to buy the Transat chair in recent times, before she was 'rediscovered' was 'an American artist called Stella.'
5. In 1974, when only a handful of her original carpets survived, I wrote to Eileen Gray suggesting that they might be re-made by Donegal Carpets. She was enthusiastic about this idea, but unfortunately Donegal Carpets had just closed. My second suggestion was the V'Soske Joyce factory in Oughterard, Co Galway. Eileen Gray was also initially enthusiastic about this suggestion, until V'Soske Joyce wrote to say that they would be interested in 'adapting' Miss Gray's designs. Miss Gray was not interested in having her designs 'adapted' by anybody, and subsequently had her unadapted designs woven in Morocco. While I was corresponding with her about the carpets, in every letter she urged me to come and visit her in Paris. So, eventually, Robin, my husband, and I did go to see her in her apartment in the rue Bonaparte in January 1975. She was by then a tiny old lady aged ninety-seven, very lively and very deaf. She could hardly hear me at all, but Robin's soft melodious voice seemed to have no problem for her; she could hear him perfectly. The apartment was on the piano noble of a typical 18th-century Paris house, with large rooms and high ceilings, in which her beautiful black lacquer screen was quite at home. She showed us a photograph of her old home near Enniscorthy when it was a simple Georgian manor-house, plain and unadorned; even after almost eighty years she was still angry with her brother-in-law who had rebuilt the house into a grandiose and pretentious Edwardian pile. Robin wrote the citation for her when the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland made her an Honorary Fellow before her death.
6. In the late 1940s, Le Corbusier kept a model of Eileen Gray's house permanently in his tiny work-cell, the only object in it apart from his drawing-board; this was related to the author by her late husband, the architect Robin Walker, who worked in Le Corbusier's atelier in 1947/48.