

Friends of E.1027

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The machinist's revenge

By Oliver Koerner von Gustorf | 09 June 2015

It's a bit like a Greek tragedy: The father of Modernism invades the house of the Mother of Modernism, desecrates it, and banishes her. He had a "raging desire to sully these walls," wrote Le Corbusier in 1939: "Ten compositions are finished, enough to soil everything." He was talking about E.1027, Eileen Gray's ultra-modern house. Ten years earlier she had designed and built it in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the Côte d'Azur for herself and her lover, Romanian architect Jean Badovici. At that point in time, Gray had already separated from him and gifted him E.1027. Badovici opened the door to his friend Le Corbusier and had him paint a series of semi-abstract murals, some of them with erotic themes, the sheer power of which truly ravaged the house's delicate Minimalism. Gray was horrified. The photographs that show Le Corbusier naked "soiling the walls" document the blunt attempt to appropriate the house, to write over a female art cosmos.

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 • www.e1027.org

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"A raging desire to sully these walls": Le Corbusier (Vincent Perez) paint murals at villa E.1027, in the background Jean Badovici (Francesco Scianna). Image above: In the film "The Price of Desire" Orla Brady plays Eileen Gray. Photo © Little Film Company

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But what drove the world-famous architect to commit such “rape”, which is how Peter Adam, Eileen Gray’s friend and biographer, described the assault. One possible explanation is that Le Corbusier, egomaniac that he was, found himself unable to accept his former pupil’s virtuosity. As a matter of fact Gray’s E.1027 takes its inspiration from the plans Le Corbusier developed for his Villa Le Lac on Lake Geneva and his “Five Points towards a New Architecture”, which typically included long horizontal windows and buildings elevated on pilotis. And yet, the Irish designer and interior designer interpreted Le Corbusier’s approach and took it further to produce an alternative concept to his idea of the “Living Machine”, which later manifested itself in his “Unité d’Habitation”. “A house is not a machine to live in,” she objected. “It is the shell of man, his extension, his release, his spiritual emanation.”

E.1027 is “a villa full of mysteries, secret compartments, partitions and sliding doors – both revealing and disclosing itself,” writes Jennifer Goff in her recent publication “Eileen Gray – Her Work and Her World”. Gray countered Le Corbusier’s functionalism with a most individualist style, which eschewed the systematic development of architecture and design “for man”. Instead, they evolved organically – for specific people, places and situations. A case in point is the “Adjustable Table”, which Gray designed in 1927 for her sister, who liked to have breakfast in bed when staying at E.1027. Now ClassiCon is bringing out a limited edition of this design icon with a black finish – in 2013 Gray’s prototype had already graced the poster for her retrospective at Centre Pompidou. ClassiCon’s CEO Oliver Holy considers Gray one of the most outstanding female artists to have transformed the face of the 20th century, alongside Coco Chanel and Louise Bourgeois.

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Gray's work dovetailed biography and creative vision unlike any other Modernist design oeuvre. Fragile and vessel-like, E.1027 is a far cry from any typical family home. The modular "camping style" she employed for the interior, the mechanical apertures destined to meticulously control the supply of air and light, the ingenuity of the interior design that guides the visitor through the space – all of these form part of a composition that for all its functional thrust adores ambiguity, playfulness and mystery.



Eileen Gray, 1903. Photo © NMI

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Born in 1878 into Irish nobility, Gray was part of the Parisian avant-garde's inner circle in the 1920s and '30s. She counted occultist Aleister Crowley among her closest friends and rubbed elbows with her peers in "Sapphic" salons, such as the one owned by Gertrude Stein. Her relationship with chanson singer Marisa Damia, with whom she enjoyed cruising along the boulevards dressed in Lanvin and with a panther on the backseat, was the talk of the town and her ultramodern furniture and carpets embellished the houses of the beau monde. Her gallery, Jean Désert, counted the likes of James Joyce, René Clair, Elsa Schiaparelli and the Rothschild family among its clients. Jennifer Goff, who also curated the major Gray retrospective at the National Museum of Ireland in 2013, meticulously researched the life of the glamorous designer. And yet, she traces it less on the basis of biographical anecdotes and more following her works – from the early mystical and abstract lacquered partitions at the beginning of the 19th century via her famous "Non-Conformist Chair" (1926) to the pink celluloid folding screens she designed just a few days before she died.

By contrast, Gray's dazzling biography, her love affairs and her complex relationship with Le Corbusier are the main focus of Mary McGuckian's feature film "The Price of Desire", which will be released later this year. Alongside Orla Brady in the role of Eileen Gray, singer Alanis Morissette plays Gray's lover, Marisa Damia. The title of the film alludes to the statement art dealer Cheska Vallois made to the press during Christie's auction of the collection Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé in 2009. Asked how one could possibly spend just under 22 million euros for Gray's "Dragon Chair" she replied: "That's the price of desire." It is precisely this discrepancy that McGuckian, who also produced the documentary "Gray Matters" by Marco Orsini, seeks to address: Collectors are willing to pay record sums for the most important 20th century designer, and yet her oeuvre and artistic vision are as good as unknown to the wider public, aside from a few selected items of furniture.

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Between 1926 and 1929, Eileen Gray built the villa E.1027 in Roquebrune Cap-Martin with her partner, the architect Jean Badovici. Photo © Manuel Bougot

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After Le Corbusier had defaced E.1027 and her next house had been ransacked by the Germans in World War II, Gray withdrew almost entirely from public life. She should only witness the beginnings of her rediscovery. When she died in Paris in 1976 aged 98 only three people attended her funeral. Thanks to the murals, her house in Roquebrune had by then come to be attributed to Le Corbusier, who in the 1950s erected his own Modernist log cabin, Le Cabanon, right beside E.1027. Following the death of Jean Badovici in 1956 Le Corbusier tried to purchase E.1027, albeit without success. He then organized a buyer, Madame Schelbert, who briefly considered having the entire furniture burned. Le Corbusier prevented her from doing so. In August 1965 he suffered a heart attack taking a swim in the ocean at the foot of the cliffs on which E.1027 was built. Gray's house was the last thing he saw.

Giving E.1027 a thorough facelift was the precondition for being able to shoot "The Price of Desire" at the original location. For following Le Corbusier's death the building too experienced an ordeal: In the 1980s, Madame Schelbert was found dead inside – three days after her gynecologist Peter Kägi, a morphine-addict, had ordered that almost all the furniture in E.1027 to be shipped to Zurich. He claimed she had signed over the house to him in 1974, went to court, won the case and was allowed to move in. During the 1990s the very last items of furniture remaining were sold to auctioneers, in 1996 Kägi himself was killed in Gray's villa. The house fell to ruins and suffered devastation at the hands of tramps and junkies. The disputes about its renovation continue to this day. This May it will finally be opened to the public – this house of love that turned into a battlefield.

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Trip recommendation:

Villa E.1027/ Cap Moderne

in Cap Martin-Roquebrune, France(Côte d'Azur)

opening hourse: 3 May til 31 October 2015

Just with preregistration: telephone 0033 06 48 72 90 53 (10 am til 5 pm) or via
mail contact@capmoderne.com

The visit will be guided (start 10 am or 2 pm) for 2,5 hours and costs 15 Euro
www.capmoderne.com/lavillae1027

Book recommendation:

Eileen Gray: Her work and her world

by Dr Jennifer Goff

published by Irish Academic Press

www.irishacademicpress.ie

Exhibition recommendation:

The **Pompidou's Eileen Gray exhibition** of the year 2013 will travel to the Bard
Graduate Center Gallery New York from September 2016 til January 2017:

www.bgc.bard.edu

Or the permanent collection on Eileen Gray at the National Museum of Ireland:

www.museum.ie

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Villa E.1027: E for Eileen, 10 for the letter J of Jean, 2 for the B of Badovici, and 7 for the G of Gray. Photo © Tim Benton, Manuel Bougot

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Living room after the restoration: Gray designs some highly practical dual-function foldaway items. Photo © Tim Benton – FLC/ADAGP, Paris 2015

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Erotic fantasies by Le Corbusier as revenge – here in the guest room. Photo © Manuel Bougot – FLC/ADAGP, Paris 2015.

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The "Adjustable Table", originally in chromium plated steel (1925), is now available in a special edition in mat Black via ClassiCon. Photo © ClassiCon

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Eileen Gray created the "Pirogue" sofa in lacquer arraché for the apartment of a Parisian lady. Photo © Archives Galerie Vallois - Paris, Arnaud Carpentier

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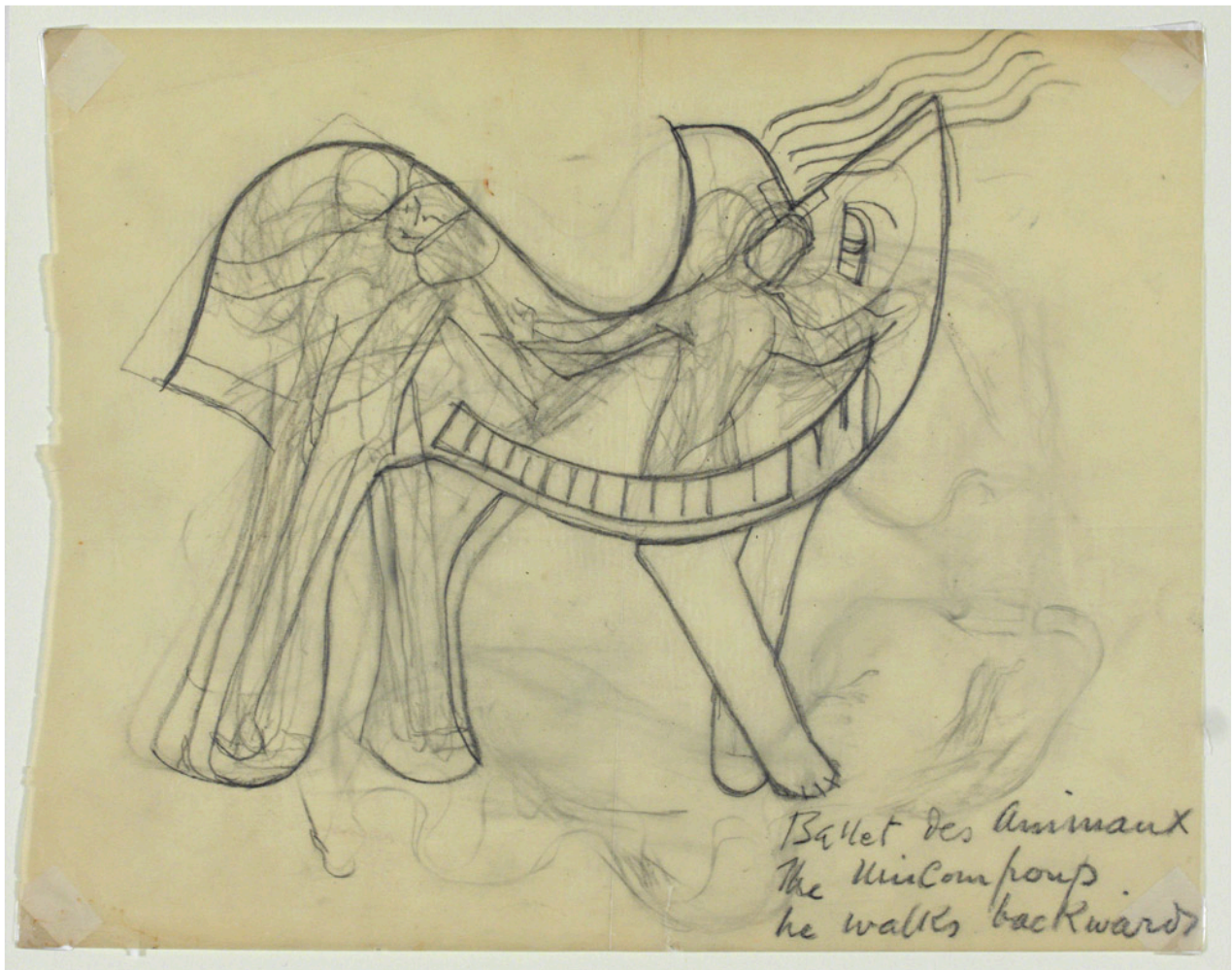
The screen "Le Destin" and the "Charioteer" table Gray created for table for fashion designer Jacques Doucet. Photo © Archives Galerie Vallois

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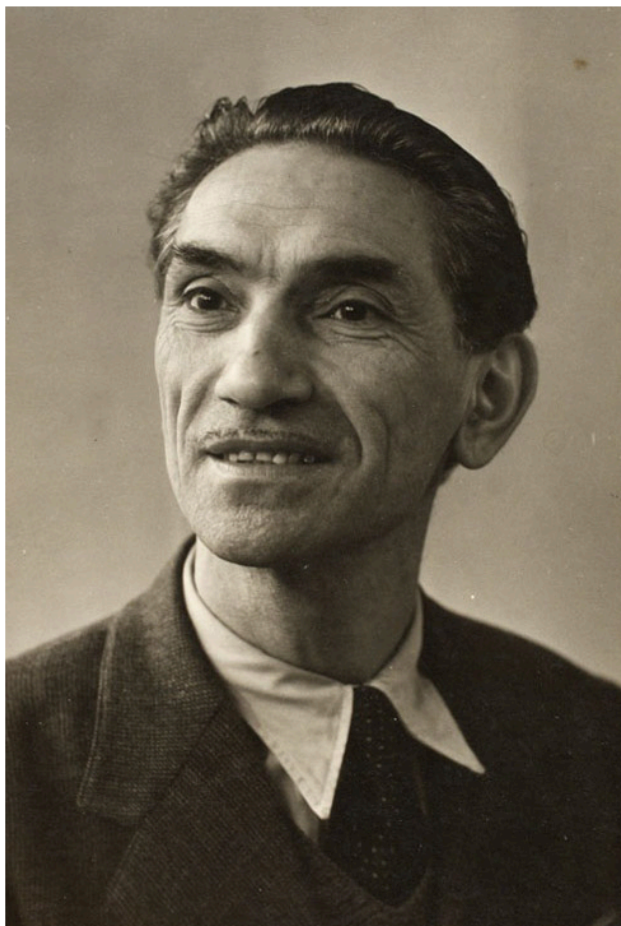
Gouache painting by Eileen Gray from the 1930's. Photo © NMI

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Sketch for "Ballet des Animaux" (1916-1919) – stage scenario for Parisian artist Marisa Damia. Photo © NMI

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Get to know each other in 1921: Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici. She was 43 and he 28 at the time. Photo © George Beresford, NMI