

The Museum of Modern Art

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EILEEN GRAY: DESIGNER FIRST AMERICAN EXHIBITION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MASTER OF DECORATIVE ARTS ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A major exhibition devoted to rediscovering the strikingly original work of the British modern designer Eileen Gray (1879-1976) will be on view in the first-floor galleries of The Museum of Modern Art, February 7 through April 1, 1980. Directed by J. Stewart Johnson, Curator of Design, EILEEN GRAY: DESIGNER will present a revealing retrospective of this now legendary figure's multifaceted career, ranging from the elegant Art Deco furniture and lacquered screens of her first period to her daring design and architectural experiments of the 1920s and 1930s. Gray's multi-purpose and built-in furniture of metal, plywood, cork, plastic and other industrial materials has been recognized in the past decade as a forerunner of today's design trends.

The exhibition will contain material lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, and private English and American collectors as well as objects in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Gray's architecture will be portrayed in drawings and photo blow-ups of executed works and by the rough models she constructed of projects. In addition, there will be a selection of early publications featuring her work, as well as her notebooks setting forth instructions for lacquer techniques and her daybooks documenting her output and the clients for whom she made objects.

(more)

EILEEN GRAY: DESIGNER has been made possible through generous grants from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation and The British Council, and was prepared under the auspices of the International Council of The Museum of Modern Art. A slightly different version of the exhibition was seen last year at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. On the occasion of the exhibition, The Museum of Modern Art is publishing J. Stewart Johnson's book on Eileen Gray.* Mr. Johnson will present a lecture at the Museum on her work, Thursday, March 20 at 4:00 p.m.

By any measure Eileen Gray was as remarkable a woman as she was a designer. Born to a privileged Anglo-Irish family in 1879, she moved to Paris in 1902 after studying at the Slade School. It was during her student days in London that Gray began to work in lacquer, an extraordinarily demanding medium. "There were plenty of young women in London at the turn of the century, the height of the arts and crafts craze, creating handmade objects," Mr. Johnson writes, "but it seems safe to say that she was the only one with the imagination and courage to tackle oriental lacquer." It was Gray's lacquer work that brought her to the attention of one of the great Parisian patrons of the arts, the grand couturier Jacques Doucet, for whom she designed furniture which used the elegant medium of lacquer to enhance new forms.

By the early 1920s her work had become so revolutionary that she was scathingly attacked by the French critics. This same work, however, was seen and deeply admired by J.J.P. Oud and the other architects of the Dutch de Stijl movement. They and such avant-garde French architects as Le Corbusier urged her to try her hand at architecture, despite the fact that she had no formal training. Between 1926 and 1929 she designed and built (together with the Romanian architect Jean Badovici) a seaside house--"E-1027"--at Roquebrune on the Riviera. This was one of the first truly radical modern buildings in France

and was much admired by Le Corbusier, among others. It was followed by the Paris apartment Gray designed for Badovici and, in the early 1930s, by another seaside house ("Tempe a Pailla") that she designed for herself near Menton. The furniture and overall designs for these houses reveal the particularly vital and inventive nature of Gray's commitment to modernist tenets. Her sensitive attention to texture, color, and detail was anything but coldly doctrinaire. While Gray's architectural output was limited--the two houses and Badovici's Paris apartment were followed by a series of ambitious but unbuilt projects she worked on throughout the remaining years of her long life--it should not be forgotten that she was a woman working quite independently in a highly organized profession that was almost completely male dominated.

When looked at as a whole, as Mr. Johnson writes, Eileen Gray's career "is one of ever broadening horizons, of a lively intelligence and genuine talent constantly exploring, testing, and moving on, never satisfied, always on the go.... Her designs, both early and late speak to us with freshness, intelligence, and integrity. She was, first and last, an original."

* Eileen Gray: Designer. By J. Stewart Johnson. 68 pages; 62 illustrations. \$12.50 clothbound; \$7.95 paperbound. This book is published and distributed by The Museum of Modern Art.

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