



Image 1 Opposite:
Eileen photographed by
Berenice Abbott in
Paris 1926. She was
about 48 years old when
these pictures was taken.

Introduction

Eileen Gray was an Irish Architect and Designer. She spent her youth in Ireland and lived her adult life in Paris. Having been neglected for most of her career, she was eventually accredited as one of the most influential furniture designers and architects of the 20th Century. In my assignment I hope to give an insight into her early childhood, her years studying in London and Paris and her time spend in her beloved France.

Early Youth

When Eileen was born, Queen Victoria was still on the throne. She lived through two world wars and when she died on the 5th November 1976, aged 98 men had flown to the moon. Kathleen Eileen Moray Smith (formally known as Eileen Gray) was born on the 9th August 1878 in the grand family manor called Brownswood which was two miles from Enniscorthy, in Co. Wexford. She was the fifth child of Eveleen and James Maclaren Smith.

When Eileen was ten her sister Ethel aged twenty-two married Henry Tufnell Campbell, the son of Lord Lindsay. Eileen detested Henry as he was a snob and she never got on with her sister Ethel. She loathed any exhibition of wealth and considered it as vulgar. In general she hated the complacency and arrogance of her class. This pride and self-confidence clashed with Eileen's inborn feeling of compassion and social injustice.

It was because of Henry's involvement that the children's surname changed to Gray. He encouraged his mother-in-law Eveleen to claim her title – Baroness Gray in the peerage of

Scotland. Eveleen inherited this title on the death of her uncle in 1893. Eileen's father James Maclaren Smith received Royal Licence to change his name to Smith-Gray and hence the children from then on were known as Gray. Eileen refused to use the title 'The Honourable' before her name as she felt it was unseemly to use it when dealing with workmen. Her father was a Scottish artist and a dreamer. He spent most of his life roaming around Europe and encouraged Eileen to make use of her artistic interests. He separated from her mother in 1888.

As a child growing up in Brownswood, Eileen felt very lonely and unloved. Her siblings were many years older and she had no relationship with them. She was born into wealth and had many servants, during the cold winter the children had to put on coats while walking down the corridors and ascending and descending the staircase. She always felt frightened in the old creaking house and one night she put two chairs outside her mother bedroom and slept there for the entire night, in the morning the servants found Eileen half-frozen on the chairs. She was an extremely frightened child, at the end of her life she wrote, "I have instinctive fears, fears of ghosts, of people. This fright never left me and I have often tried in vain to conquest it." ¹

At the age of 22 and the last year of the 19th century, Eileen's got word that her brother Lonsdale who was in South Africa died after consuming poisoned water. In the same year her beloved father James died.

Paris

In 1900 Eileen and her mother went to Paris to see the great Universal Exhibition. This was a world's fair that celebrated the achievements of artists and designers over the previous century. Eileen had a keen interest in Charles Rennie Mackintosh's work which was on display at the exhibition. Mackintosh had designed the Glasgow School of Art three years previously. This visit to Paris had a profound impact on her life. While in Paris her eyes were opened to designs by René Lalique, Eugène Graset and Emile Gallé which the three leading department stores, Le Bon Marché, Le Louvre and Le Printemps had put on display.

¹ Adams, P. (2000) Eileen Gray, Architect Designer, Page 13, Publisher Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.

Eileen persuaded her two friends from the Slade School, sculptor Kathleen Bruce (later Lady Scott) and Jessie Gavin to join her in Paris. The three women enrolled at the Ecole Colarossi which was an art school popular among foreign students. Soon after Eileen, Kathleen and Jessie moved to another art college, Académie Julian on the Rue de la Harpe. It had been founded in 1886 by prize fighter and artist, model Rodolphe Julian who was said to have known little about painting. Kathleen and Jessie took a studio together and Eileen rented a place on the fifth floor on the rue Bara. Eileen lived a solitary existence; her mother came to visit her from time to time.

London

Having lived three years in Paris in 1905 Eileen returned to London as her mother became ill, and she stayed for nearly two years. While shopping in Dean Street she found a lacquer repair shop run by Mr D. Charles. Eileen knew from her visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum the elegance, smoothness and texture of the Chinese and Japanese screens and was very impressed with them. She persuaded Mr Charles to take her on as an apprentice. She worked very hard and took a keen interest in watching the workmen apply many colours of European varnishes to the damaged screens. Eileen's job was to rub down the many coats of lacquer applied to the screens until the workmen were happy with the overall finish.

Return to Paris

When she returned to Paris in the autumn of 1906 Mr Charles gave her varnish samples and the names of people who worked in the field of lacquer. One of those people was Seizo Sugawara. Seizo was from Japan and he had come to Paris to restore the lacquer pieces Japan had sent to the Universal Exhibition of 1900. He loved Paris so much he never returned to Japan when his contract came to an end. On meeting Seizo, Eileen asked him to teach her the ancient craft of lacquer. It is a very demanding process requiring both patience and hard work. Lacquer is the resin from the Rhus Succedanea tree which grows in the Far East.



Image 2 Opposite: Sugawara making

Wooden sculptures in the studio on the rue Guénégaud:

Eileen moved into an apartment rue Bonaparte and set up a work shop there. As she began to learn the art of lacquer making she used to make notes of her triumphs and failures. One chapter dealt with the best ways to achieve rugged surfaces and how to use charcoal. She painstakingly learned how to put on up to 30 layers of lacquer and allowing several days drying time. For drying purposes Eileen put her screens in her bathroom as lacquer has to dry in a humid atmosphere, she kept the taps running all night. Her flat was surrounded with many samples waiting to dry. Between each coat she used to rub down the lacquer with a pumice stone and the flat of her palm. This was very delegate work as any imperfection could mean starting again from the beginning. She was not a patient person, when she made mistakes like applying too much lacquer which caused ripple effect, her anger was feared among her colleagues, but her stubbornness pushed her to achieve greater and better results until she was satisfied with the finish. Eileen used Chinese lacquer which she imported from Mr Charles in London but over time and through the influence of Sugawara she changed to Japanese lacquer. Eileen felt there was not much difference between the two, "The Chinese lacquer had more oil in it and was less resistant than the Japanese one which was harder".²



Images 3 and 4 Opposite:

Inspiration from the East Eileen

Gray screen and Lacquer panels



²

Adams, P. (2000) Eileen Gray, Architect Designer, Page 54, Publisher Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.

She was obsessed with achieving the colour blue for her screens. Mr Charles had told her on numerous occasions along with other artists that the colour blue could not be achieved as the green would always be the dominating colour. Not to be outdone she used a new chemical substance that finally gave her the desired blue.

Image 5 Opposite:

**Eileen Gray's Black lacquer
screen, courtesy of Christie's,
estimated at up to €1.5 million**



Image 6 Opposite:

**This eight-panel screen, circa 1921-23,
by Eileen Gray is estimated at
\$1,500,000-2,500,000.**

Eileen was engaged in large scale production of screens and furniture. Sugawara and Eileen often worked day and night on large lacquer panels. It took her a long time to produce these pieces and as a result she turned out only a few screens. She often despaired at the endless painstaking work: "Lacquer takes so long, twenty coats, sometimes forty coats, and the other side of the wood has to be lacquered too otherwise it will warp".³

Eventually her flat in the rue Bonaparte became too cramped to live and work in. She found a more suitable place which would also accommodate Sugawara and it was there where most of the lacquer work was done.

Jacques Doucet, The Couturier and Collector



In 1913 she was invited to exhibit some of her work at the VIII Salon de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs. It was the first time her designs were seen by the general public. She displayed numerous screens one of which included the lacquer and mother-of-pearl panel *Om Mani Padme Hum* (Image 7 Opposite). The title of this panel was the six sounds of the sacred Buddhist prayer meaning "hail the jewel in the Lotus, hail".⁴ She got glowing reviews in the newspapers and magazines. One such from the magazine *Art et Décoration*, which reported: "Miss Gray uses that admirable material lacquer and creates with it interesting unusual mantelpieces, friezes, and library panels. Seeing her entries, one regrets that this beautiful technique is not more favoured by our decorators".⁵ Eileen was very pleased with the reviews. Many influential people came to see her work one of which was the fashion designer and collector Jacques Doucet. He had seen Eileen's blue and red lacquer panel *Le Magicien* and immediately wanted to meet the artist.

³ Page 54, ⁴ Page 76 and ⁵ Page 75 all from Adams, P. (2000) *Eileen Gray, Architect Designer, Publisher* Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.

When he arrived in Eileen's studio she was working on the dark red Le Destin screen and he bought it there and then for €300 and insisted that she sign the screen. This was a rarity as Eileen never signed her work. Once word got out that Jacques Doucet, the couturier and collector had bought Eileen's screen her reputation spread throughout Paris like wildfire. He also commissioned from her several pieces of furniture including lacquer screens and tables for his apartment in the Avenue du Bois.

Image 8 Opposite:

Lacquer screen

Le Destin which

Jacques Doucet

bought from

Eileen Gray in

1913



Image 9 Opposite:

**The other side of
the screen,**

Le Destin, shows

Swirling geometry



Image 10 Above: Eileen Gray Lotus table with four tassels of amber which she designed for Jacques Doucet's apartment in the Avenue du Bois in 1915. The tassels were added to the table by Doucet and Eileen detested them.⁶

Image 11 Opposite:

The table is a two tier round table with legs of silver lacquer sculptured in an African inspired styles. On the top a red and silver bilboquet cup and ball design, which Eileen claimed its purchaser, Jacques Doucet, had added later. The table went on to be called the the Bilboquet Table.⁷



⁶ Page 79, ⁷ Page 80 all from Adams, P. (2000) Eileen Gray, Architect Designer, Publisher Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.



Image 12 Above: Jacques Doucet apartment in the Avenue du Bois with Eileen's Lotus Table displayed



Image 13 Above: Jacques Doucet's apartment in the Avenue du Bois with Eileen's Bilboquet Table.

The First World War - 28th July 1914 and lasted until 11th November 1918

Image 14 Opposite: Eileen's lacquer tools and materials: powered pigments, palette knives, incising implements, spatulas, stone weight, brushes and unfinished panels and containers.



During the first World war Eileen packed her personal belongings along with her many lacquer tools and headed for London. She rented a disused tool shop in Cheyne Walk. Sugarwara slept in a room near the tool shop and Eileen stayed in her mother's house in Kensington. Fortunately for Eileen her mother was in the family home in Enniscorthy. Eileen found it difficult to sell any of her furniture in England and she felt the English taste was very poor in comparison to her French counterparts. She did sell a silly table with large legs like a stork. During the war years nobody had money for food let alone expensive furniture.

The war brought tragedy to Eileen's family once more, her brother James died in 1919 as a result of injuries he received during the War. By 1917 Eileen could not take the misery and hardship of London and returned to Paris. On November 11th 1918 the Armistice was signed and the War was over. Eileen's mother died in 1919 and she returned to Ireland her funeral.

Post War

After the war Paris had changed, it had taken a terrible toll. The restaurants and theatres gradually opened and newspapers and magazines were freely available. Many of the women who had taken up men's roles during the war would not now give up their new found privileges and responsibilities. As a result a social revolution took place this in turn helped Eileen's career in the following years. At this stage Eileen was a woman in her forties. Paris was changing with new influx for foreigners, American, English etc. As people's wealth grew so too did the Art Deco. Madame Mathieu-Lévy, a wealthy owner of a famous modest salon wanted a radically new look for her flat and commissioned Eileen to carry out the work. It was Eileen's most ambitious project and she was rewarded with an extensive commission. She was given carte blanche and was excited about designing and creating lamps, carpets and wall coverings. The work on Madame Mathieu-Lévy house took over four years Madame Mathieu-Lévy was a very vibrant lady and demanded that Eileen make pieces of furniture.



Image 15 Across:

From 1917 to 1921, Eileen Gray was commissioned to re-design the apartment of boutique owner, Madame Mathieu Levy. This took four years and it was during this time that Eileen designed her most famous piece of furniture, the Bibendum Chair.

Image 16 Across:
Rue de Lota
apartment designed
by Eileen Gray with
her Pirogue sofa

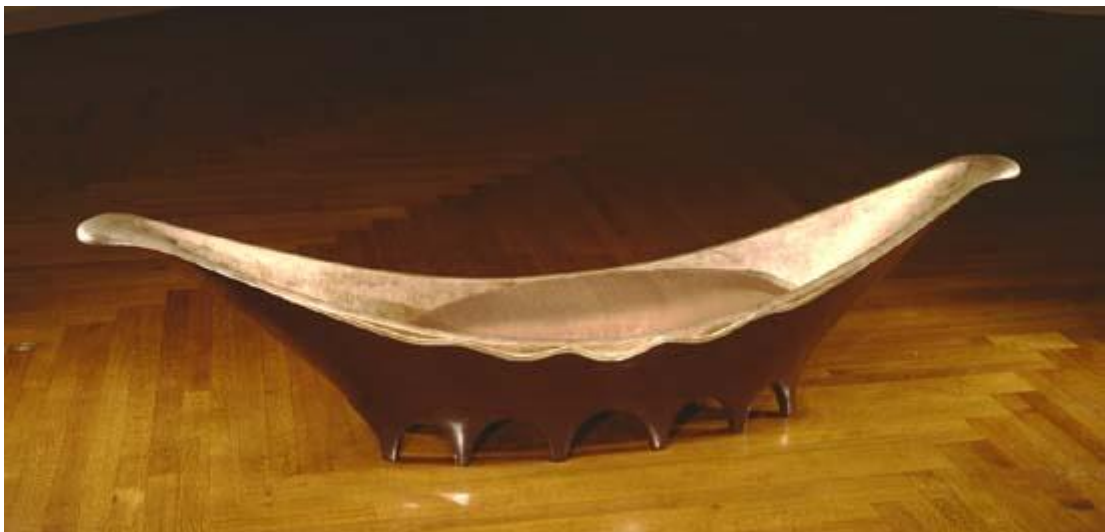


Image 17 Above: Eileen made the Pirogue sofa which looked like a boat bed in brown lacquer and various colours of tortoiseshell. The large cushions were in mat gold. Eileen made three versions of this sofa. In 1982 one of the Pirogue sofas sold for over \$100,000 at an auction in Paris.



Image 18 Opposite
The entrance hall at
Madame Mathieu-Lévy's
apartment with the
block boards.

It took over 4 years to finish the apartment. In 1922 Eileen was working on the lacquer screens for the entrance hall. They consisted of four hundred and fifty small rectangular lacquered panels from which she was to develop one of her best known lacquer pieces the "Block Screen". They were in mat grey, gold and silver (Image 18 Above). She eventually finished the apartment in 1924.

As Madame Mathieu-Lévy was looking for something extravagant, Eileen also made a low armchair in red lacquer with rear serpent in yellow dotted in lacquer. It was upholstered in a pale salmon (not in black leather as it was later, in Yves Saint Laurent's flat, (Image 19 opposite).





There was also a bookcase with two shelves which could be adjusted to the height of books. She also made the Bibendum armchair (Image 20 opposite). The chair was called after the character in the Michelin Man advertisement known as Bibendum to promote tyres. Eileen had a wicket sense of humour. It was made between 1921-1924 and contains two armrests with a back and two tubes neatly arranged on top of each other. It was upholstered in a cream coloured leather. The legs were made of silver stainless steel cylinder.

The E.1027 table (image 21 opposite) was made in 1927. It bears the same name as the house E.1027. The attractive aesthetic elements include the simple round chrome plated steel tube frame with a round clear tempered glass top. The top can be adjusted to various heights as needed. The table is nicely balanced out on the bottom by a round base similar to that of the top table.



Eileen's workmanship carried rave reviews in many newspapers and magazine articles on the apartment. It was hailed as a triumph of de lux modern living.

Around 1907 Eileen grew tired of working with lacquer and applied her knowledge of painting and drawing to designing and making rugs. At that time she met Evelyn Wyld whose older sister had befriended Eileen's older sister. Evelyn had graduated from the Royal College of Music and had no knowledge of rug making. It was a mutual friend of both Eileen and Evelyn who suggested Evelyn try her hand at rug making. Eileen and Evelyn travelled to North Africa and spent some of their time working with Arab women in the art of weaving and dyeing wool with natural colours. As with her lessons in lacquer Eileen began to log her experiences with wool how to achieve certain dye or to weave a particular texture. Eileen acquired new premises to set up a work shop for carpet making, the two women went into partnership. Eileen designed the patterns while Evelyn looked after the making of them. Eileen realised it was much easier to sell carpets and certainly much cheaper to make than the costly time consuming lacquer work.

Jean Désert:

Image 22 Below: Exterior of Jean Désert at 217 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré





**Image 23 Opposite: Carpet/rug with
Eileen Gray's label on the back.**

In 1921 while still working at the rue de Lota apartment Eileen decided to open a shop as she was tired of clients invading the privacy of her home. Initially when the shop needed a name Eileen felt that a man's name would give a more serious tone to the business and she called it Jean Désert. Eileen had no intention of running the shop as she did not know how to deal with clients nor did she know how to attract them. She couldn't possibly throw herself into the noisy and colourful happenings in the decorator's world. Eileen was not a jolly person she lacked niceness and would probably drive the customers away. Instead she employed a saleswoman. The shop stocked many items such as Eileen's furniture, lamps, lacquer screens, rugs and much more. The rugs were her best seller in the shop. She designed the rugs and her friend Evelyn Wyld wove them in the workshop. Each rug carried a label saying Designed by Eileen Gray at the workshop of Evelyn Wyld (see image 23 above).

Through her increasing reading and research she knew it was time to get away from the lacquer cult. She decided to use chrome and tubular steel in her design. Exotic wood was used such as zebrawood and she was always looking out for unusual African woods. She also experimented with materials such as slate or the first synthetic resin invented by Leo Hendrik Baekeland and known as Bakelite.

She changed her designs completely but the clientele of Jean Désert did not let Eileen have her way. They were anxiously looking for Eileen's old pieces they had seen in the smart salons of Paris.

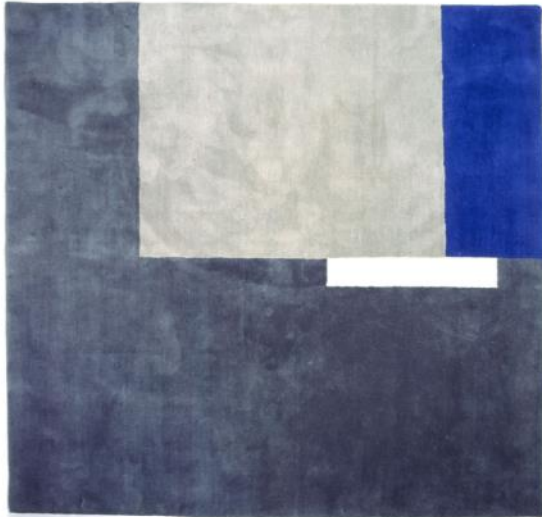


Image 24 Opposite:
The Roquebrune
designed by Eileen Gray in the
early 1920's

Image 25 Opposite:
This rug was made around 1922 for
Mme Mathieu Lévy's apartment at
Rue de Lota.

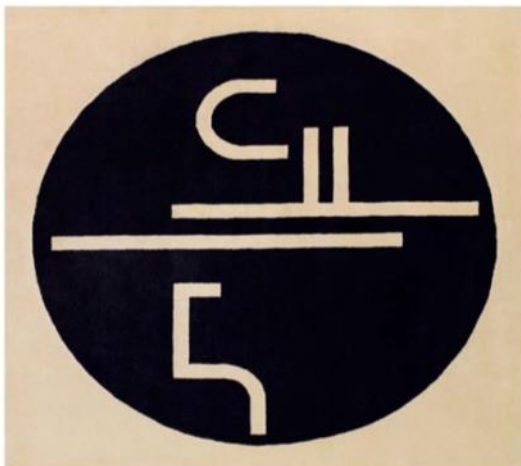
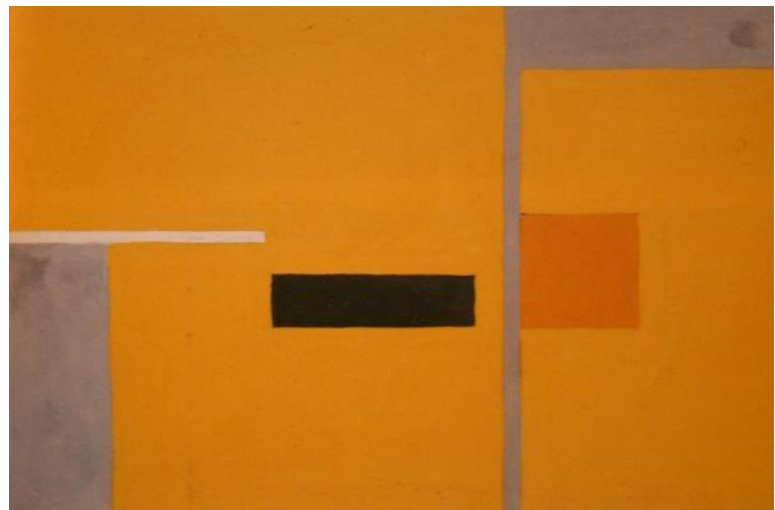


Image 26 Opposite
Eileen Gray's St. Tropez Rug
Designed in 1920

Eileen's business improved somewhat, her clientele were famous and rich. Unfortunately there was no one at the shop who had any business knowledge. Some clients did not pay, others exchanged the rugs several times because the design did not go with their furniture. Decorators, who had ordered rugs, complained that the merchandise was not delivered on the promised date. Quite frankly Eileen did not care as it was full steam ahead with her thoughts greatly on architecture.

Eileen decided she no longer wanted to keep the shop. She wrote to important clients and offered her furniture at cost price. Many of the items were sold, including four Bibendum chairs at \$425 each. An architect bought a large lacquer screen for \$1,000, any unsold items were stored in her apartment in rue Bonaparte. Eileen could no longer cope with difficult clients and it was a release to her when she finally closed Jean Désert on 3rd February 1930. She kept a little piece of metal with the initials J.D. (Jean Désert) as a souvenir.

Eileen and Architecture

Around early 1919 Eileen met Jean Badovici, a poor Romanian architectural student studying in Paris. He encouraged Eileen to study Architecture and as she was bored with the mundane work of making furniture she embarked enthusiastically with the idea of becoming an architect. Although Eileen's previous work were marked with clear structural conception and daring innovation she knew that the next step in her life was one of most importance.

She worked closely with Jean Badovici and sometimes helped him with the choice of illustrations and with writing for his articles in the L'Architecture Vivante magazine.

Again as with her lacquer screens and rugs she meticulously built up a library containing specific works on architectural problems. A friend of Jean's Adrienne Gorska who was also an architect took Eileen along with her to sites and taught her the first steps in architectural drawings.



Image 27 Above a scale model of Eileen Gray's House E.1027

Jean Badovici wanted Eileen to build him a house in the south of France. When she eventually found the plot in 1927 she bought it in his name. Eileen collaborates with Jean on the design of the house which was on the cliffs at Roquebrune near Monaco.

Unable to draw architectural plans she made a model of the house (see image 27 above). She called the house E.1027 after Badovici and herself.

'E ' for Eileen,

10 for ' J ' (Jean) the tenth letter of the alphabet,

'2' for B (Badovici) and

'7' for G (Gray)

It was finished in 1929 and was her first house she was now fifty-one years old.



Image 28 Above: E.1027 in 1929 on completion

Images 29 opposite Is a scale model of E.1027 made by Eileen Gray and Image 30 below is the actual house when built.



Image 30 Opposite

When Jean Badovici died in August 1956 Eileen realised he never made a Will. Although E.1027 in hindsight belonged to Eileen it was legally and solely Jean Badovici's house and was subsequently left to his sister who was a nun in Romania. It went up for auction and was sold to an architecture named Le Corbusier. Eileen could never retrieve any of her furniture from the house.

Eileen built only two houses and altered some existing apartments. None of these would be considered of any importance.



Image 31 above: E.1027 the living room measuring 498 × 349 with Eileen's furniture

Eileen spend the last days of her life in her apartment in Paris which she shared with her maid Louise Dany who was also Eileen's friend and companion. Louise had lived and worked with Eileen from 1927 to 1976.

It was always Eileen's wish to die alone and she did on the 5th November 1976 aged 98 in her apartment on rue Bonaparte in Paris.

Conclusion

Eileen Gray's contributions were overlooked for many years, but she is now considered one of the most influential designers of modern times. Over the years many designers have tried to emulate her designs and have found inspiration in her furniture and architectural designs. Since her death in 1976 her furniture has become very popular. Although there are very few original pieces of furniture available for sale as the people who have them do not wish to part with them.

Before doing this assignment on Eileen Gray I really did not think much of her furniture. I had been to Collins Barracks a few years ago and looked at her exhibition. After reading her biography by film maker Peter Adam I now only have admiration for her determination and drive to succeed in everything she set out to accomplish. She was the first designer to use steel tubing in her furniture. She was an amazing woman and one wonders what she would design today if she were alive.

The National Museum of Ireland at Collins Barracks purchased her archives in 2002 and opened a permanent exhibition of her work.

The French government bought the house E.1027 in 1999 while it was in poor condition and have gone about restoring it. It has since been designated as a French National Cultural Monument in memory of Eileen Grey.