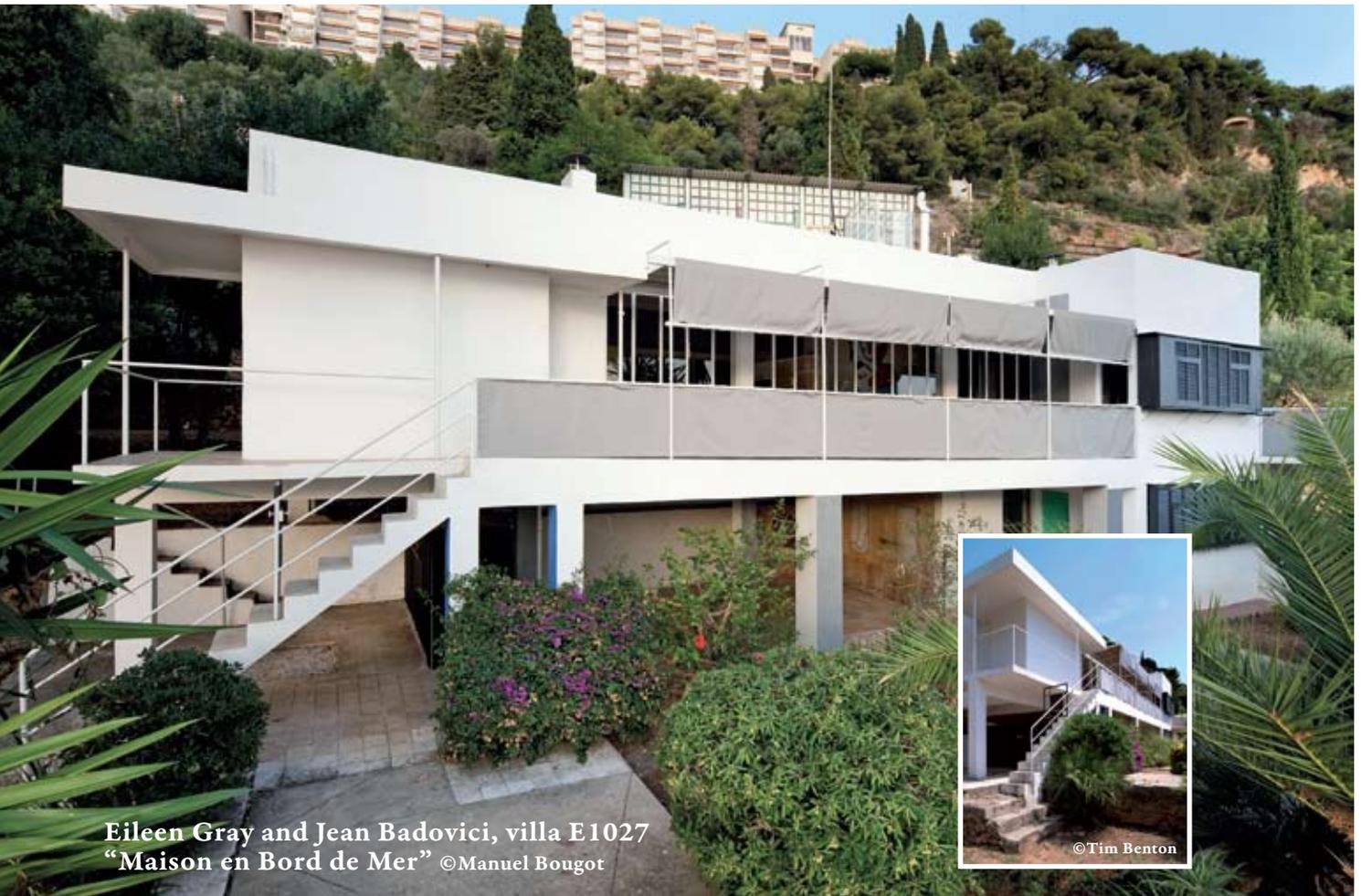


# EILEEN GRAY: A long life and a short dream

BY MAUREEN EMERSON



Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici, villa E1027  
“Maison en Bord de Mer” ©Manuel Bougot

AFTER what many agree have been far too many years of neglect, the iconic Modernist villa E1027 at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin has been restored and opened to the public as of May 3rd. Built by the designer Eileen Gray in the late 1920s, it

was one of the very few modern villas on the Côte d'Azur at that time and its design is of great importance in the heritage of architecture. In addition to its streamlined beauty, the villa's own story is full of drama.

The lovely Sentier des Douaniers, which

follows the coastline of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, also bears the name of Promenade Le Corbusier and with reason – for it was below here on the terraces of limestone rock that Le Corbusier became obsessed with a stunning Modernist



E1027's main room, far left, with copies of furniture including Bibendum Chair and carpets designed by Eileen Gray, and mural by Le Corbusier.

©Manuel Bougot - FLC/ADAGP. Master bedroom (left)  
©Tim Benton - FLC/ADAGP.

villa, wrought revenge and eventually met his death.

Le Corbusier, whose real name was Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, was born in Switzerland in 1887. In 1917 he moved to Paris where he studied architecture and design and soon adopted his more striking pseudonym. He is now known for his villas, urban planning, workers' housing and the wide use of reinforced concrete – many of his designs being controversial. But it was one villa in particular, designed by another architect, which would become his obsession.

It was in Paris that Le Corbusier first met the young Irish-Scots designer, Eileen Gray. Eileen was born Kathleen Eileen Moray Smith in County Wexford in August 1878, the youngest of five children. She changed her surname when her mother became Baroness Gray through inheritance. Her father, James MacLaren Smith, was a landscape painter. When her parents split up, Eileen was 11 and she and her mother moved to Kensington in London, where Eileen studied at the renowned Slade School of Fine Art. In spite of her reserved personality, thanks to family money she was fiercely independent, and was probably already aware of her bisexuality when she moved to Paris in 1903 and bought the elegant apartment at 21 rue Bonaparte in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which she would use until the end of her life. Here she ceased to be an Edwardian Irish-Scots girl, bobbed her hair and ordered the most fashionable clothes, moving among well-heeled Paris expatriates. She was now free to work and indulge her preferences. Among her lovers was the nightclub singer Marisa Damia. They were very much of their time, driving around Paris with Marisa's pet panther on the back seat of Gray's sports car.

But art and the creation of beautiful objects were Eileen's driving force. It was her lacquer work, learnt from a Japanese craftsman, that brought her to international attention. Her painstaking creations in the form of stunning high-gloss screens in glowing colours would eventually lead on to groundbreaking Art Deco designs for furniture. When war broke out in 1914, she became an ambulance driver for the French Army but seemed to tire of this fairly quickly, and returned to her design work.

Once the war was over Eileen opened the Galerie Jean Désert on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, selling stylish modern pieces to the cognoscenti. Now launching into interior design, her work became noticed as she continued to produce her lacquered screens and created for a private client such pieces as her famous chubby Bibendum Chair, her red lacquer serpent chair and the burnished Pirogue boat-bed. Art Deco furniture was the privilege of the rich. She collaborated on carpet design with her friend Evelyn Wyld, an architect and designer, with whom she had made research trips into the Sahara. Evelyn Wyld, with Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux (another architect and associate of Le Corbusier), then opened a carpet shop called "Deco" in Cannes, which would fail during the Depression, as did Eileen's Paris gallery. She was now beginning to be respected by other avant-garde designers and was asked to exhibit her work at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in Paris in 1923. In the world of Art Deco design, Eileen had arrived.

She now took as her lover a clever Romanian, Jean Badovici, editor of an important avant-garde

*A LONG LIFE, PAGE 32*



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L'Etoile de Mer and terraced garden. Below: terrace and bar by Thomas Rebutato (1949). ©Manuel Bougot – FLC/ADAGP.



A LONG LIFE, FROM PAGE 31

magazine *L'Architecture Vivante*. It was through Badovici that Eileen first met Le Corbusier, as Badovici was both his friend and promoter. In the early years of the 1920s, on what was then called the Riviera by an ever-growing number of young, glamorous, sun-loving expatriates, Badovici decided he wanted a holiday home on the sea near Menton and that she should design it. A devoted Eileen set out to find a suitable site, eventually deciding on narrow terraces high above the Mediterranean, overlooking the bay of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin and below the railway line which runs along the coast. The house she built there, the *maison en bord de mer*, among the wild myrtle, lavender and rosemary, was her first attempt at architecture and would be Modernist rather than Art Deco.

Up to that point the most important Modernist villa on the coast had been the Villa Noailles, above Hyères, in the Var, designed by the French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens for Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles. Evelyn's design, built

between 1926 and 1929 and worked on with Badovici, would take Modernism a step further, embracing Le Corbusier's idea of "New Beauty", a free-flowing plan. Instead of supporting walls she used pilotis, or reinforced concrete columns. The open plan living area, on a raised floor, is in the central part of the house, with screen partitions that could be moved to create alternative spaces. There are two bedrooms, with all rooms having access to a balcony. A spiral staircase of glass and metal rises through the centre of the house to that obligatory element of modernism, a flat roof or solarium. The kitchen is at one side, away from the main space and simple in the extreme. In this L-shaped house, floor to ceiling windows embrace the sun and the sparkling sea beneath. For her Mediterranean home Eileen designed eminently functional, yet stylish, furniture and fittings. Drawers and tables extended, tucked in or folded out as needed, so as to be flexible and moveable. It was for E1027 she designed the celebrated Transat Chair, an elegant lounge designed to be used as a deckchair. She felt that "human

needs" should guide the designer.

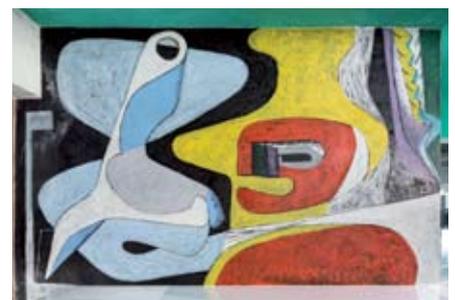
The name of the house, E1027, became a symbol of her relationship with Badovici at that time: E for Eileen, 10 and 2 representing Badovici's initials as they come in the alphabet, 7 for Gray.

Covered in crisp white stucco, with its balconies and terraces edged with slim metal handrails, the whole villa had the shape of a small ship sailing along its narrow terrace above the sea. She wished all to be calm and quiet, stencilling on the walls such requests as *entrez lentement* and *défense de rire*.

She spent several summers at the villa but the idyll of E1027 came to a conclusion when Eileen and Badovici ended their relationship, although they would remain friends of sorts. By 1932 she had left to build herself another Modernist house, allowing Badovici to continue to use E1027. On a plot near the village of Castallar high above Menton and adjoining an old farmhouse it was, like her Roquebrune house, modern, simple, space saving and light-embracing. She called it *Tempe à Pailla*. During the years of the Second World War, Eileen, as an enemy alien and like so many others in her situation, was sent away from Castallar further into the countryside. Later, in 1956, she would sell *Tempe à Pailla* to the British artist Graham Sutherland.

It was in 1937 that Corbusier arrived for a first visit and his admiration for the villa developed into the obsession which would haunt him until the end of his days.

With Badovici's permission, and the streak of eccentricity that was so much part of his character, in 1938 he began to paint eight large, mainly lewd, coloured frescoes on the stark, white interior walls of the house (below). Photographs show him, adding insult to injury, by painting in the nude displaying his badge of honour – the scar of a shark bite on his bare thigh. When Eileen heard of the murals she



E1027's guest bedroom; mural by Le Corbusier ©Manuel Bougot – FLC/ADAGP.

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was distressed, calling them “a violation” and “an act of vandalism”. She demanded that Badovici write to Le Corbusier threatening to remove them. This was never done. Already feeling estranged from the villa, Eileen would not return.

In 1952, still bewitched by Eileen’s villa, Le Corbusier built a small timber cabin, less than 4 square meters, above E1027 on land given to him by Thomas Rebutato. This was Le Cabanon, which became famous in its own right. Rebutato owned a small *vinguette* nearby – L’Étoile de Mer – and had become close friends with Le Corbusier, who had decorated the *vinguette* with paintings and coloured panels. When Badovici died in 1956, Le Corbusier added a rather rickety,

painted two-storey holiday hostel next to the *vinguette*. Seen from the sea this construction, looming above E1027 as it does, demeans the purity of the villa below.

In 1960 he persuaded a friend, Madame Marie-Louise Schelbert of Zurich, to buy E1027 as a holiday home, himself becoming involved with its care and contents. Thus began a spell of twenty-two years when the villa was, to a certain degree, looked after. During this time Le Corbusier would never acknowledge Eileen as the architect, letting it be assumed that E1027 was his own creation. In August 1965 he went down to the coast below for his daily swim and there, scrambling out of the water onto the rocks, he died, probably as a result of a heart attack.

Above him E1027 gazed down passively.

The true decline began when Madame Schelbert died in 1982 and she left the villa to her doctor, Peter Kagi, who removed the furniture to Switzerland, selling it ten years later in Monaco. In 1996 Kagi was murdered, in a dispute over money, by one of the many itinerant labourers he would bring to the house.

E1027 deteriorated quickly, vandalised by squatters, neither the French nor Irish governments showing any interest in its preservation. It was not until 1999 that benevolent groups, one in New York, the Conservatoire du Littoral, backed by the town of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin and the French government began to realise to what extent Eileen’s villa was worth restoring for posterity. The fact that, at this time, her talent was being rediscovered and celebrated could only have encouraged the project. Eileen had retired to her elegant Paris apartment many years previously. Here she led a reclusive life, still producing new ideas and projects and quietly amused at the revived interest in her work. In 1978 she died, aged 98, and her ashes were buried in Père Lachaise cemetery. Now, at auction, her creations command the highest prices for Art Deco furniture in the world. Perhaps this too would have amused her. ■

Open until Oct 31st, visit Villa E1027 just as Eileen Gray left it. By reservation only; tickets €15/person. Contact Cap Moderne, the organisation which has taken E1027 under its wing: [capmoderne.com](http://capmoderne.com)

©Maureen Emerson, author of *Escape to Provence* and the forthcoming *Living and Loving on the Riviera*.

Overview of the site. In the background, La Promenade Le Corbusier (the old Sentier des Douaniers) and the railway line to Nice and Italy. ©Manuel Bougot. Inset: Le Cabanon by Le Corbusier ©Manuel Bougot – FLC/ADAG.

