

# Friends of E.1027

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## TOWN&COUNTRY

THE SPHINX OF THE RIVIERA



# THE SPHINX OF THE RIVIERA

Eileen Gray, the modest genius who incited the love and envy of modernist giants, steps back onto the world stage with a feature film and a documentary about her life and the reopening of her sun-drenched masterpiece, Villa E-1027.

By JEAN BOND RAFFERTY  
*Photographs by SIMON WATSON*

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## SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

*From left:* The facade of the upper story of Villa E-1027; one of Le Corbusier's murals today; Corbu, bespectacled and busy at work, in 1938.

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SET INTO A ROCKY HILLSIDE IN ROQUEBRUNE-Cap-Martin, on the Côte d'Azur, Villa E-1027, the masterpiece of Eileen Gray, the patrician Irish trailblazer of modernist design, glimmers like a mirage in the slanting rays of an August evening sun. This week her landmark creation has been whisked back to the year 1929, when E-1027 had just been completed, thanks to an extensive renovation over the past seven years and, more immediately, the efforts of the film crew of *The Price of Desire*, a biopic with some poetic license devoted to Gray and her bohemian artistic set being shot at the villa and scheduled for release this year. Scrimms conceal the florid murals that the architect Le Corbusier painted, without permission, when no one was home, and often in the nude, in several frenzied bouts in 1938 and 1939, a desecration that outraged Gray. The pure white walls restore the original's sense of serenity.

In the film the Irish actress Orla Brady portrays Gray as an aristocratic bisexual. The Canadian singer-songwriter Alanis Morissette plays one of her lovers, the chanteuse Damia. The Italian actor Francesco Scianna plays Jean Badovici, the architect and editor of the avant-garde magazine *L'Architecture Vivante*, Gray's par amour when E-1027 was built; the villa's name, a code for their intertwined initials (E, and then, in alphabetical order, 10 = J, 2 = B, and 7 = G), recognizes both their love and Badovici's technical assistance in the villa's construction. Vincent Perez takes on the role of Le Corbusier (down to his trademark black-rimmed glasses); he narrates a scenario that centers on the trio's charged relationship and ultimate conflict. A second film produced simultaneously, the documentary *Gray Matters*, by the

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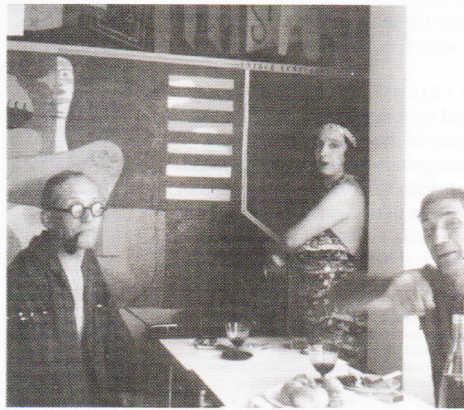
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Monaco-based Marco Orsini, investigates Gray's growing influence and reputation.

Gray conceived the L-shaped white villa with Badovici in 1924. By then she was already a successful Art Deco lacquer artist and designer with two ateliers, a gallery, and a glamorous *Tout Paris* clientele. Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, Elsa Schiaparelli, the banker Philippe de Rothschild, and the maharajah of Indore all owned examples of her work. Badovici, 15 years her junior, brought charm and architectural contacts. His magazine championed such emerging architects of the International Style as Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, and he introduced Gray to his close friend Le Corbusier, who was hammering out his *Five Points of New Architecture*.

LE CORBUSIER, YVONNE, AND BADOVICI



## ALL ABOARD

The seaside villa strikes a nautical theme. *Left:* Corbu, his wife Yvonne, and Jean Badovici, the ex-lover of Eileen Gray and her collaborator in E-1027's design.

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The ultradiscreet Gray destroyed her personal papers before she died, in 1976 at the age of 98. No archive reveals who did what (and certainly not who loved whom), but Gray is credited with seeking out and paying for the site (which is accessible only by a footpath now christened Promenade Le Corbusier) and overseeing the design and construction in situ from 1926 to E-1027's completion in 1929.

Her strikingly simple plan is often seen through the lens of Le Corbusier's modernist dictums, but the elegance of her minimalist exteriors and interiors has a seductive presence and witty livability that is Gray's own. Cloé Pitiot, the Centre Pompidou curator who put together the first Gray retrospective there last spring, calls E-1027 "a manifesto of modernity, as poetical as it is technical." Floor-to-ceiling glass doors open to afford a panorama of the lush landscape and the blue Baie de Roquebrune; bedrooms are arranged to catch the morning sun; a skylighted staircase spirals up to a terrace on the flat roof.

On a wall in the main room a maritime map—stenciled with "Invitation au Voyage," "Beau Temps," and "Vas-y-Totor," the nickname of Gray's sports car—is the key to the shipshape mood in the house. The furnishings—such as her leather and sycamore Transat armchair (inspired by a deck chair), a cork-topped dining table, and the Bibendum chair, the bulbous leather rolls of which recall the Michelin Man, whose nickname is Bibendum—are light and easy to move. Many pieces, such as her now classic tubular steel and glass Table Ajustable, have an ingenious secret twist. Drawers swivel out from one low cabinet and, when pushed back into place, lock, to be released only by means of a small button on the back.

Tucked into one corner of the main room, a divan sports a mobile tablette that holds a book in the perfect reading position or, when folded flat, serves as an accessible writing desk. A built-in cupboard is labeled "Oreillers" (pillows), useful to cushion a siesta or turn the divan into an overflow guest bed. In the spare bathroom next to it, the cabinet is stenciled with the word "Dents" (teeth).

Each room was designed to assure independence for the occupants, with individual terraces and an array of separate exits. From the master bedroom a small balcony curves into the form of a prow. On the second story, sailcloth covers the hand railings, and a single life preserver keeps watch on the blue waters of the bay some distance below.

GRAY REMAINED FRIENDS WITH BADOVICI to the end (she arranged his funeral), but soon after the house was built her desire to share his lifestyle waned. Gray rarely received recognition for her work there, and the house was often attributed to Badovici alone, and even to Corbusier. She moved out in 1932 and went off to build her own home, Tempe a Pailla, a more remote but equally modernist version a couple of miles up the Riviera. "I like

doing things, but I hate possessing them," she told her biographer, Peter Adam, many years later.

But Le Corbusier, with his wife Yvonne, continued to visit Villa E-1027, vacationing there as Badovici's house-guest. By 1938, Corbu had decided to add his own signature to the white interiors, covering the walls with nine erotic, Picasso-esque murals in a cacophony of colors. When she found out, Gray called it vandalism. Adam likens it to rape.

Could it have been an act of esteem? Paris Art Deco dealer Cheska Vallois, who knew Gray in the early 1970s and was instrumental in her renaissance, is convinced that Corbu was motivated by envy. "He perfectly understood the genius of this woman"—in 1937, Le Corbusier had invited Gray to exhibit her architectural project for a vacation center at his Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at an international exhibition in Paris—"and I think it disturbed him," she says.

After all, E-1027 was the antithesis of Le Corbusier's "machine for living," an architectural dictum with which she disagreed. It was an age of manifestos, and Gray was not just building one of the world's most magnetic modernist houses; she was designing a lifestyle. "Exterior architecture seems to have interested avant-garde architects at the expense of the interior," she wrote in 1929, "as though a house ought to be conceived more for the pleasure of the eyes than for the comfort of the inhabitants." Hers satisfied both requisites.

## RINGLEADER

Right: Eileen Gray, as she appeared in 1926, while the villa was being built, photographed by Berenice Abbott. Below: The villa today, with her Black Board rug and Transat chair.

© BERENICE ABBOTT/GETTY IMAGES (GRAY)



**ROADBLOCK** Pending a court decision, a major highway project in Iceland has been halted because of its possible impact on the habitat of elves. Perhaps our own environmental activists have been neglecting the plight of the jackalope.

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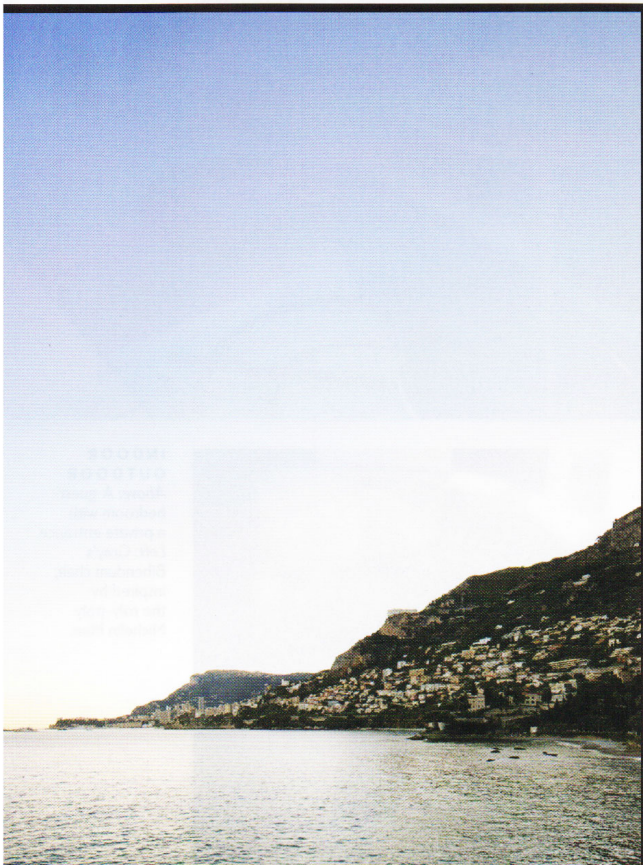
**INDOOR  
OUTDOOR**  
Above: A guest  
bedroom with  
a private entrance.  
Left: Gray's  
Bibendum chair,  
inspired by  
the roly-poly  
Michelin Man.

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**ROOM OF ONE'S OWN**  
Right: Le Corbusier built his five "Unités de Camping," with a mural of a man waving, above the villa. Below: The view of the Mediterranean from Villa E-1027.



What she called "*le style camping*" provoked admiration in Corbu, and the place became something of an obsession to him. He photographed E-1027 and made a series of drawings of it—the only example of his interest in any house by someone else. He wrote her in 1938 to praise "the rare spirit that dictates all of its organization, exterior as well as interior; and has given the modern furniture and equipment a form that is so dignified, so charming and full of wit." Despite the murals and bullying that followed, it remained a letter Gray treasured.

After the Second World War, Gray prevailed on Badovici to write to Corbu and demand that he remove the murals. Corbu's reply was high-handed. He threatened to ridicule Badovici's claim that "the pure functional architecture of E-1027 had been destroyed by my pictorial interventions" by comparing Gray's stenciled designations to his paintings and "laying the debate before the entire world," seemingly certain that his graffiti would attract more acclaim. It marked the definitive end of his 30-year friendship with Badovici.

But Corbu still couldn't stay away. He established a pension arrangement with the villa's next door neighbor, Thomas Rebutato, a plumber who had turned his small vacation cabin into l'Etoile de Mer, a rustic café/bar/restaurant that gained renown for his wife's Niçoise cuisine. The Rebutatos acquiesced to their most celebrated customer's request to build his Cabanon, his own little cabin, attached to the restaurant in 1952. No money changed hands. "He was our squatter," Robert Rebutato, Thomas's son, jokes. When, much later, they reminded the architect that the Cabanon would revert to them on his death, he designed his "Unités de Camping" (five connected vacation cabins) on the property to pay his debt. Sited on the other side of the restaurant, they loom over E-1027 in an apparent quest for domination. In a final ironic twist, Le Corbusier died while swimming in the bay, in 1965. His last view may well have been of E-1027, with its sailcloth balcony and purely decorative life preserver.

Robert Rebutato, who is now an architect in Paris, was mentored by Corbu, and he worked with him and Charlotte Perriand, an interior architect closely connected to Corbu's practice. He recounts another intriguing anecdote. Remarking upon the similarities between Gray's Transat chair and the chaise longue credited to Corbu, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, and Perriand, Rebutato asked, "Did you, Charlotte, copy Eileen Gray, or did she copy you?" Charlotte replied, "Isn't it a lovely day?" She completely changed the subject." Corbu famously growled, "Everyone stole my ideas." "They never, ever spoke of Eileen Gray," Rebutato says.

**BADOVICI DIED IN 1956. WHEN THE VILLA** went up for auction, Corbu arranged for his own patron, the wealthy Swiss widow Marie-Louise Schelbert, to win, despite a higher bid from Aristotle Onassis. Schelbert conserved E-1027, its furniture, and the murals. (Five of the paintings remain there, one of the reasons Le Corbusier was so conscientious about its conservation.) When she died, in 1980, she left it to her doctor, Peter Kägi, but the Schelbert family contested the donation, and the structure began falling apart. Squatters moved in, adding their own graffiti as the legal case dragged on. Kägi finally acquired the [CONTINUED ON PAGE 176]

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**SOLAR POWER**  
One of the decks  
of the villa addresses  
the need for  
both privacy and  
sweeping views.



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## The Sphinx of the Riviera

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 168] deteriorated villa in 1990, selling off the furniture at a Sotheby's auction in Monte Carlo in 1991. Rumors about Kagi's bizarre lifestyle climaxed in his murder in 1996 at the hands of a vagrant hired to work in his garden. Squatters took over again.

The New York gallery owner Sandra Gering saw the dilapidated villa in 1998 and used her contacts to alert the French authorities to its scandalous state of disrepair. She founded an American support association, Friends of E-1027. Meanwhile, on Cap Martin, Rebutato formed his own friends group, promising to donate l'Etoile de Mer on condition that E-1027 be rescued. Both groups contributed extensively to the restoration effort.

The house was in danger of being demolished in 1999, when it was acquired by the Conservatoire du Littoral, an agency that oversees the protection of French coastal areas, in partnership with the commune of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, which manages the site. Their priority was to prevent demolition by getting it officially declared a historical landmark, which they did in 2000. Restoration began in earnest in 2007, but progress has been slow, and the house has been closed to all but a few privileged visitors.

With the villa's restoration complete and work on landscape and security now underway, Gray fans impatiently await its long-delayed opening, expected this summer. If that's not enough to safeguard its future, waiting in the wings is a \$5.3 million master plan being advanced by retired British entrepreneur Michael Likierman that would establish E-1027 as the principal element in a protected historical site. That setup, backed by the friends associations of both Rebutato and Gering, would include Le Corbusier's neighboring Cabanon and Unités de Camping, as well as the Rebutatos' Etoile de Mer, along with a new visitors center.

The slow pace is at odds with the one that the thoroughly independent Eileen Gray set in her lifetime. She was a woman of means who could follow her daring imagination and carry out projects to completion. The youngest of five children of an aristocratic mother and an amateur landscape artist father, she spent her youth moving between the family's manor in County Wexford, Ireland, and their London residence. In her early twenties Gray studied drawing and painting at the Slade School of Fine Art, in London, but curiosity

soon led her off-piste to the discovery of a lacquer restoration atelier in Soho—which turned out to be a life-changing moment.

In 1906 she moved to Paris and bought an apartment on Rue Bonaparte, which would be her principal residence for the rest of her life. She worked with Japanese lacquer master Seizo Sugawara for 25 years in the Paris studio they created. Innovator as well as artist, Gray invented the lacquer color blue from crushed lapis lazuli and encrusted her furniture with mother-of-pearl, gold, and silver leaf.

Friends described her as painfully shy, but what we know of her private life, which she never discussed, would argue the opposite. For adventurous foreigners, then as now, Paris seemed to offer nearly unlimited personal freedom. So it was for Gray. As an art student she larked about with a girlfriend, who dressed as a man so they could visit nightclubs and dives off limits to well-brought-up young ladies. Around 1913 she fell in love with the French nightclub chanteuse Damia, née Marie-Louise Damien. Gray, dressed in a stunning Poirret evening coat and Lanvin hat, drove around the Paris streets with Damia accompanied by the singer's pet panther. Gray's gift to her lover, the Sirène lacquer chair she designed, with its carved mermaid, is an enduring souvenir of their decade-long liaison. But Gray soon retreated to her characteristic life of reserve.

Her other homes, her furniture, her archives, and her art were almost entirely destroyed in the Second World War. She restored Tempe a Pailla, then sold it to British artist Graham Sutherland. Her last completed work of architecture was the extension and renovation (begun in 1954 and completed in 1961) of a rustic house near St-Tropez that she had bought in 1939. But even when she withdrew into obscurity, she never stopped painting and working, largely on architectural projects that were never built.

Today the nearly forgotten woman would be amazed to find herself center stage at last. In 2009 her Dragon chair, a surprise star of the Yves Saint Laurent–Pierre Bergé auction at Christie's in Paris, sold for \$28.3 million, a record for 20th-century furniture that, for many collectors, made her impossible to ignore. Cheska Vallois, who bought the piece on behalf of an undisclosed collector after a titanic bidding war, suggested that the record was the true "price of desire." Vallois will be recreating the moment of triumph in the film of the same name.

As young Art Deco dealers, Cheska and Robert Vallois discovered Eileen Gray's lacquer artworks before they knew anything about the designer. In 1970 they were offered the

furniture of Mme. Mathieu-Lévy's Rue de Lota apartment—including the ravishing Pirogue chaise longue, of tortoiseshell lacquer lined in silver leaf, and the Dragon chair. Cheska remembers searching the pieces for the signature of Jean Dunand, a more famous Deco lacquer artist who also studied with Sugawara. (Gray introduced them!) "Nothing," she recalls. "We just had the intuition to buy those things."

In 1970, Cheska tracked down Gray, then 92, and was soon having tea with her once a week, picking up such arresting anecdotes as Gray's admission that she had tossed some of her furniture (which would now be worth millions) onto the fire to keep warm during the winters. "She said, 'I can make them again,'" the dealer recalls. "But she never did." Two years later an auction of furniture made for couturier Jacques Doucet, an enthusiastic client of Gray's, proved an eye-opener when the knowledgeable American collector and dealer Bob Walker paid \$36,000 for Gray's 1914 coral red lacquer Le Destin screen, a world record for Deco at the time. When auctioneer Philippe Garner informed Gray of the result, "Her reaction was disbelief," Garner remembers. Also in the audience that day was Yves Saint Laurent.

Gray granted London design retailer Zeev Aram worldwide rights to produce some of her furniture in 1973. Remarkably, for a 95-year-old designer, they were her first pieces in production. "She was very elegant, cultured, ladylike, quiet, modest, and shy," Aram recalls. "But when we worked together, she knew exactly what she wanted." When she first sat on a prototype of her Bibendum chair, "she was patting the arms," he says. "Her expression was like that of a child who found a toy that had been lost years ago. Then, leaning back and concentrating, she said, 'The chair should be three centimeters wider.'"

Aram Designs Ltd. now produces an Eileen Gray collection, which includes chairs, sofas, daybeds, tables, lamps, mirrors, screens, and rugs. Aram has donated more than 20 pieces to supply E-1027 with new furniture. Both Gray's designs and Corbu's murals have been preserved intact.

Even after her death Gray had a surprise up her sleeve. In the portfolio she put together at the end of her life, which lists and explains all her artworks, furniture pieces, and architectural projects, Gray's indulgent sense of humor and generosity came to the fore. She described her masterpiece simply: "Conception and realization of the Villa E-1027: Jean Badovici and Eileen Gray. Frescoes: Le Corbusier." •