

So would you dare sit on Eileen's €22m chair?

Clodagh Finn on the late Irish designer whose furniture is breaking auction records around the world

For some months now Irish designer Eileen Gray has been quietly breaking records on the world market, yet she has somehow slipped under the radar at home.

In February, she made history when a one-off armchair she created during the First World War went under the hammer for an incredible €21.9m, making it the most expensive piece of 20th-century design ever sold.

The 24in-high Dragon Armchair, or 'Fauteuil Aux Dragons', was owned by the late fashion legend Yves Saint-Laurent and its sale by Christie's in Paris established Eileen Gray as the most sought-after furniture designer among collectors.

The global love affair continued this week when three pieces of her furniture made top price at a Brussels auction: a console table went for €3.12m, a lacquered bookcase made €2.4m and a window seat fetched €810,000.

Why, then, is the woman from Wexford not yet a household name in her own country?

In part, it's the familiar story of the artistic genius who is celebrated only after their death. During her lifetime, Eileen Gray was admired for her lacquer work, but it wasn't until after her death in 1976 that she gained international recognition as a designer and architect.

Now, she is hailed as the 'mother of Modernism' and is celebrated as a woman who helped shape 20th-century style. However, Eileen Gray would probably have shunned such attention. In fact, she was so painfully shy that she couldn't serve the chic clientele who came to her exclusive shop in 1920s Paris to buy her original rugs, furniture and fittings.

In other ways, though, she was fearless. She was a true design pioneer and embraced modern technology in all its forms. In recorded interviews, she comes across as a playful, intelligent and fastidious person.

When her work first started to gain recognition in the 1970s, she was sceptical — and droll: "One must be grateful to all those people who bother to unearth us and at least to preserve some of the work," she said.

She died — aged 98 and still working — before the Eileen Gray 'revival' really took off. It's hard to guess what she would make of it all but she would certainly be pleased to know that at least one of her wishes came true.

She wanted her furniture designs to be mass-produced at affordable prices, and that is exactly what has happened to her iconic glass and tubular steel table (see picture). She designed the adjustable table so that her sister could have breakfast in bed more comfortably and it went on to inspire several copies, one of them sold by furniture giant Ikea. You can even buy a version online at Amazon for about €140.

When asked where it all began, Eileen Gray recalled spending lunchtimes wandering around Soho in 1900 when she was a student at the Slade School of Art in London. She would grab a sandwich and walk through the streets, soaking up the atmosphere. When she came across a shop that repaired lacquered screens, she was fascinated and asked for work, not realising that she would go on to master the laborious and complicated art.

No doubt she was influenced by her Irish roots too. Her father was a keen amateur artist and brought her on tours of Italy and Switzerland as a

child. The youngest of five, she was born into a wealthy family at Brownswood outside Enniscorthy in Wexford. Christened Kathleen Eileen Moray, she was renamed Gray after her mother's aristocratic family.

In 1900, her mother took her to the International Exposition in Paris and she fell in love with the city. Two years later, she moved there to continue her painting studies. She was 24 and had arrived in a city on the verge of an artistic revolution. She moved in a circle that included authors, artists, designers and aristocrats.

Eileen Gray knew and admired author Gertrude Stein and her lover Alice B Toklas, but remained very discreet about her own relationship with famous singer Marisa Damia.

Her main focus was her work. She persuaded Japanese lacquer master Seizo Sugawara to teach her the art form. It didn't matter to her that it took nine months of polishing and rubbing to produce even the smallest piece of lacquer — or that the dangerous materials gave her a painful disease of the hands. She worked assiduously, recording her experiments meticulously in a notebook.

When she opened her shop, Jean Désert, in the fashionable rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, she already had a dedicated following. A *New York Times* writer visited and said it was an adventure: "a sojourn into the never-before-seen".

Soon, she began to design not just furniture but whole interiors. She was commissioned to design several apartments and was known for her simple, clean modern lines. The finish was stunning, the materials luxurious, yet the overall look was uncluttered and unostentatious. But, above all, she was practical.

She embraced all that was modern and, in 1907, bought her first motor car. A few years later, she jumped at the chance to go up in a hot air balloon and in 1913 was one of the first passengers to fly to Acapulco from Mexico City. When war broke out in 1914, Eileen Gray volunteered to drive an ambulance in Paris.

Yet she was extremely shy and aloof, as an anecdote told by architectural historian Joseph Rykwert shows. On one occasion she was asked if she knew the poet and renowned art critic Guillaume Apollinaire. "Yes," she

replied, "I was invited to dine with him one evening, then I thought it over: what would I have to say to this great poet? So I called him and told him I had the flu."

Her life took yet another twist when she met Romanian architect Jean Badovici who became her collaborator and lover, even though he was 14 years her junior. She was introduced to architect Le Corbusier and set about teaching herself to design buildings.

The modern villa she designed, named E.1027 and built on a steep cliff overlooking the Mediterranean at Roquebrune in the South of France, continues to attract admirers.

Le Corbusier was a regular visitor to the house and complimented its "rare spirit" but his friendship with Gray soured when, curiously, he arrived at the villa in 1938, stripped naked and painted a series of sexual murals on the wall. Gray was outraged and called it an "act of vandalism".

The villa fell into disrepair and German and Italian troops used Le Corbusier's murals as target practice during the Second World War.

THE CHAIR THAT YVES LOVED

This is the chair that sold for an incredible €21.9m at auction, but it's unlikely that its owner Yves Saint Laurent ever sat in it.

And if he did, he probably wouldn't have done so for long. When it was sold in Paris, dealers at the auction commented that while the lacquered brown leather looked comfortable, it was likely that the carved dragon-shaped arms would cut into the legs of the sitter.

It probably formed a visual centre-piece in Saint Laurent's dazzling sitting room on the Rue de Babylone in Paris where it was surrounded by antique pieces and works by Picasso, Cezanne and Matisse.

Its new owner remains a mystery but it was bought on their behalf by French art dealer Cheska Vallois who first sold it to Saint Laurent in the 1970s.



Grand designs: (anti-clockwise from centre) the €21.9m leather chair; Eileen Gray; a copy of mid-1920s table, and the original; one of the designer's interiors; and her tools

