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

**The chair that Yves loved**

This is the chair that sold for an incredible €21.5m at auction, but it’s unlikely that its owner Yves Saint Laurent ever sat in it. 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 carver’s work had been cut simply to cut the legs of the sitter. Despite being a visual centrepiece 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, Cocteau and Matisse, its new owner remains a mystery but it was bought on their behalf by French art dealer Cheska Valois who first sold it to Saint Laurent in the 1970s.

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 it as ‘rare spirit’ but his friendship with Gray soured when, curiously, he arrived at the villa in 1938, stripped naked and painted a series of sensual 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.

Now, thanks to the local authorities and the New York-based organisation, Friends of E.1027, major renovations are being carried out on the house and Le Corbusier’s infamous murals are being restored in partnership with the villa’s new owner. When they are complete by 2010, the house will be used as a public museum and exhibition centre.

Back home in Ireland, Eileen Gray started to arouse interest with an exhibition of her work in 1973. In 1975, John Shahan of the National Museum wrote to her in Paris asking for some of her designs to exhibit here.

She wrote back promptly explaining that, unfortunately, all her work had either been sold or destroyed during the war. ‘I would have liked so much to have something permanent in Ireland, but I suppose it is too late now,’ she wrote.

But it was not too late. Far from it. In 2002, the National Museum at Collins Barracks put together a permanent collection of personal memorabilia, tools, drawings, designs and furniture that captures the spirit of an extraordinary woman.

Who knows, maybe in time she’ll even become famous here?