



## Gray, Eileen (1878-1976)

by Tee A. Corinne

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Renowned designer of furniture, rugs, and lacquered screens, Eileen Gray also gained fame as an architect who created elegant and spare residences.

Gray was born into a wealthy family in Enniscorthy, Ireland, on August 9, 1878. She grew up in Ireland and London.

Among the first women admitted to the Slade School of Fine Art, Gray studied there from 1898 to 1901 and then in Paris at the Académie Colarossi (1902) and the Académie Julian (1903). After a brief return to England, she moved permanently to France in 1906.

Eileen Gray's early work utilized the art of Oriental lacquer, which involved building a lustrous surface with many layers of resin and fine earth. Using this technique, she embellished screens, lamps, and other forms of furniture.

Around 1909, she began designing natural-toned, abstract, geometrically-patterned rugs that Evelyn Wyld (1882-1973), a lesbian and family friend, executed through weaving and knotting. They continued to work together for the next 17 years.

In 1922, Eileen Gray opened Jean Désert, a showroom/gallery featuring her own lacquered furniture, a decoration service, and rugs manufactured under Evelyn Wyld's supervision. The gallery was run by Gabrielle Bloch (b. ca 1878)--from a French banking family--whose lover was the U.S.-born dancer Loie Fuller (1862-1928).

Jean Désert remained open until 1930, when Gray became more involved in architecture. During her most active period as a designer of furniture, from 1909 to 1928, she moved from an Art Nouveau-influenced aesthetic to Art Deco, and then to more streamlined, modernist work in leather, wood, glass and chromed metal.

Around 1922, Gray became lovers with Marisa Damia (1892-1978), a popular singer who encouraged her to bob her hair and wear tailored suits. Why they separated is unknown; however, Damia became Gabrielle Bloch's lover after Loie Fuller's death in 1928.

In 1926, after seeing the first exhibition of photographs by Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), a lesbian who had recently established her own Paris studio, Gray commissioned a portrait of herself. Abbott produced several memorable images, including a crisp, tailored profile.

By 1926, Gray had become involved with Jean Badovici (1893-1956), an architect, editor, and critic fourteen years her junior. He had written about her design work in 1924 and encouraged her interest in architecture. Their romantic involvement ended in 1932.



A modernist table designed by Eileen Gray. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2 or later.

Gray began designing houses in 1924 and built her first, called E1027, for Badovici between 1926 and 1929. Another important house is Tempa a Pailla at Castellar, on the Riviera, built between 1931 and 1934. Her buildings, mostly elegant and spare residences in France, occupied her until 1958, when she was eighty and losing her eyesight.

Architectural historians admire Gray's buildings for their purity of design and attention to detail. During her later years, she was justifiably distressed when her furniture designs and architecture were credited to others, especially to Badovici.

Although bisexual, Gray was ultimately more interested in work than in passionate attachments. Her most abiding friendships were with lesbians, especially Kate Weatherby (ca 1881-1964) and Evelyn Wyld.

Gray was acquainted with expatriate writers Natalie Clifford Barney and Gertrude Stein and the women who frequented their salons, but preferred the company of one of Barney's lovers, painter Romaine Brooks, who bought Gray's rugs and was, perhaps, sympathetic to Gray's reclusive nature.

Eileen Gray died October 31, 1976, and is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Grave # 17606.

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### **About the Author**

**Tee A. Corinne** was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com).