



**Eileen
Gray**

**Non
Conformist
Artist**

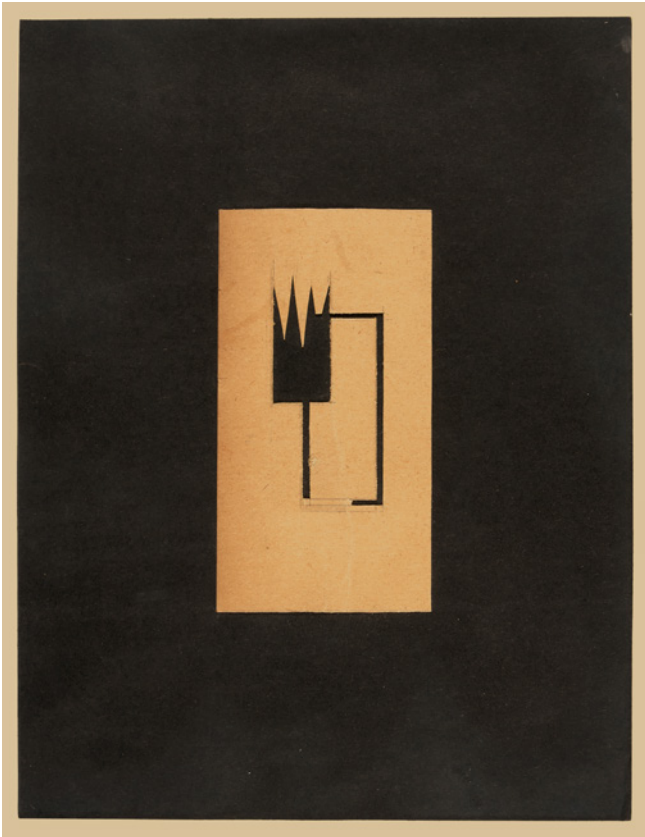
ClassiCon



Portrait of Eileen Gray. Photo by Berenice Abbott, 1926

Free versatile modern courageous

Eileen Gray (1878–1976) was a multi-faceted artist and a non-conformist. As a designer as well as a woman, she chose not to adhere to rigid boundaries, neither in her profession nor in love. Irish-born and an art student from a well-off family, she moved to Paris at the beginning of the 20th century, where she became a cheeky *garçonne* with a short bob cut, and a successful businesswoman.



Wexford. Silhouette on paper, c. 1918–25

“Life without art
is a spring without water.”

Gold and red, brown and black were the colours of that time: in her twenties, Eileen Gray created Japanese-influenced lacquer works and set up an exhibition featuring a lascivious boudoir. Influenced by the art deco style and made of fine woods, her furniture inspired the Parisian avant-garde circles of the Rive Gauche. In these buzzing ‘left bank’ circles, Eileen Gray not only found great loves, freedom and inspiration, but also her first clients, who particularly loved her modern carpets.

From 1909 to 1930, Eileen Gray and a friend ran various small weaving workshops in which her abstract carpet designs were produced. Small-format pictures, which she painted on paper using matte opaque watercolours, served as weaving templates. In addition to such gouaches, Eileen Gray also created collages. With this technique, individual geometric elements, such as squares or circles, could be repositioned to explore design variations.

Each design was a special challenge because, unlike a painting, a carpet has no clearly defined top or bottom, right and left. It has to look good from all sides. In addition, the pattern had to have the same effect when enlarged by a factor of ten to twenty and after having been woven or knotted. As someone who had studied painting, Eileen Gray developed an unerring eye and a special instinct for this.

Classical modernism had radically disposed of all musty, plush interiors. As a designer who loved to experiment, Eileen Gray brought carpets back into the home; featuring modern colours and graphic patterns, they formed an almost symbiotic relationship with her furniture. In an article from 1929, Eileen Gray postulated that a “space for retreat and tranquillity” and “a harmonious atmosphere” were prerequisite to “create a home for people”, and for her, this included these home textiles.

Beige and sand, these natural tones were particularly popular among buyers. As early as 1904, during her travels and field studies in North Africa, Eileen Gray had discovered these warm colours as well as her love of carpet design. From time immemorial, woven works of art have been used in interiors to adorn walls, to define different living areas, to improve acoustics and to lend warmth to floors.

Eileen Gray also envisaged thick carpets in the apartment on Rue de Lota, the first home which, in 1919, she was commissioned to design entirely for the fashion designer Juliette Mathieu-Lévy. Eileen Gray boldly chose black and white, silver and grey for the interior. “Dreams translated into rooms”, is how one critic praised her design.



PHOTO Jean Désert showroom. Photo by Eileen Gray, c. 1926–29
ARTWORK Untitled. Gouache on paper, c. 1922–29



This much-acclaimed major commission encouraged the then 44-year-old designer to open her own gallery in 1921 with the masculine-sounding name 'Jean Désert'. A name that conveyed competence at a time when a female designer, a self-taught one at that, was an exotic exception. Eileen Gray subverted social prejudices in both her professional and private life by boldly playing with identities.

White and black, silver and grey also defined the interiors of the new showroom; instead of lustrous wood, bare steel tubing shone on furniture and fixtures. The ambiguous *Désert et Gray* adorned the gallery's letterhead: performing gender, the fluid staging of gender and identity, remained a motif at the core of her life. The Bibendum club chair, which she designed in 1926, also plays with this notion. She knocked the heavy feet off this insignia of the cigar-smoking, car-driving old-boy networker and replaced them with an airy base of tubular steel – the cheeky statement of a woman who preferred wearing trouser suits, loved women as well as men and drove a car herself.



LEFT Bibendum Armchair, designed 1926

PHOTO Jean Désert showroom front in 217 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris.
Photo by Eileen Gray, c. 1926–29

RUG Wendingen Rug, designed c. 1926–35

Stagnation was alien to Eileen Gray, and so she moved to the Côte d'Azur with her new muse, the architect Jean Badovici. He had encouraged his companion, who was still inexperienced in architecture, to design and build a house there. In 1929, she completed her Villa E1027 on the Mediterranean coast near Monaco, today the iconic Gray *gesamtkunstwerk* par excellence.

Blue, yellow and white – during this auspicious time, the Mediterranean summer colours shone particularly brightly for Eileen Gray, whose work was published by Badovici. In 1929, he dedicated an entire issue of his magazine *L'Architecture vivante* to the now proud architect Eileen Gray and her design manifesto. At that time, new carpet motifs such as *Blue Marine* or *Centimetre* told of the sea and of ship voyages, soon also in a second house in nearby Castellar, where she lived alone from 1940 after separating from Badovici.





LEFT Villa E1027. Photo by Mary Gaudin 2015

PHOTO E1027 living room. Photo by Eileen Gray, c. 1929

RUG Centimetre Rug, designed c. 1926

After the Second World War, during which Eileen Gray, too, fell into oblivion as an architect and designer, she continued to work in a disciplined manner until old age, even without commissions. Drawing, collage and painting, which she pursued throughout her life, were comforting activities for her. Eileen Gray remained a 'private painter', she never exhibited her paintings publicly.

Shortly before her death, she destroyed most of her private documents, including countless photographs and letters. But she carefully preserved the sketches, gouaches and collages that she still had. Many are 'untitled', others bear the names of mythical characters or recall the stations of her life, such as *Bonaparte*, for example, the street where her Paris flat was located. As she had always been very critical and strict with herself, in the end she must have found these works, which are as colourful as her life, worthy of outliving her.

The artist left the world a collection of abstract paintings, carefully glued to cardboard, featuring a note on the rear side, some also signed. When the estate of Jacques Doucet, who was one of her first and perhaps the most important buyer from her Paris beginnings, came up for auction in 1972, the world, and probably Eileen Gray herself, realised the real significance of her work for the first time: the lacquered screen *Le Destin* achieved a record price of 18,000 British pounds.

In the same year, the British Royal Society of Arts awarded her the title Royal Designer of Industry (RDI). Eileen Gray did not appear at the ceremony; self-promotion had never been her thing. A few years after this late claim to fame, in 1976, Eileen Gray died at the age of 98 in her adopted home of Paris.



Piet Mondrian

LEFT Bonaparte. Gouache on paper, c. 1926–35

MIDDLE Untitled. Collage and stencil print, c. 1960

RIGHT Untitled. Gouache on paper, c. 1920–29

Green is Ireland's national colour. Eileen Gray's native island has left its mark in many of her paintings and especially in the *Kilkenny* carpet. That she would "receive something enduring" in the Irish capital was something the designer had still dreamed of. In 2002, a quarter of a century after her death, this dream came true: with the Eileen Gray exhibition in Dublin's National Museum of Ireland, where the poster for the opening featured a photo of the *Non Conformist* armchair.

Green is also the colour of hope, and, with regard to her painterly works, it never deserted the aged Eileen Gray. She had always hoped that new textile works of art would once again emerge from "old designs". After Aram Designs Ltd. in 2003 and ClassiCon in 2004 included the first carpets based on her designs in their collections, the current exhibition now continues to comply precisely with this last wish of Eileen Gray.



ABOVE Non Conformist Armchair, designed 1926

RIGHT ABOVE Untitled. Stencil print, c. 1960

RIGHT BOTTOM Kilkenny Rug, designed c. 1926–1935



IMPRINT

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