



PETER ADAM

EILEEN GRAY

HER LIFE AND WORK

PETER ADAM

EILEEN GRAY

HER LIFE AND WORK

With 427 illustrations, 153 in colour and duotone



Thames & Hudson

Picture Credits

All illustrations in this book were reproduced with the kind permission of the Eileen Gray Archives or Peter Adam, Paris, with the following exceptions:

© 2009 ClassiCon, Munich: pp. 181, 271, 288 (bottom), 291, 292, 294, 296, 307 (top and bottom), 311, 317, 336, 337, 341, 343, 345

Philippe Garner Archives: pp. 257, 260–61, 262, 264, 265, 269, 276, 280 (top), 282 (top and bottom), 285, 295, 299, 301, 309, 318, 319 (left and right), 325 (left and right), 329, 331, 339

Christie's, London: p. 277

The Sunday Times Magazine: p. 351

Captions translated from German by David H. Wilson

First published in the United Kingdom in 2009
by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

thamesandhudson.com

Original edition © 2009 Schirmer/Mosel, Munich
This edition © 2009 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London
Illustrations copyright © 2009 Eileen Gray Archives, London,
unless otherwise specified
Text copyright © 2009 Peter Adam

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Any copy of this book issued by the publisher as a paperback is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including these words being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-51480-1

Printed and bound in Italy

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Introduction	11
1 Childhood and Student Years	13
2 To Paris	19
3 Early Professional Life	27
4 The Lacquer Cult	39
5 The Great War	47
6 The Early Twenties and the Lota Apartment	49
7 Jean Désert Gallery	63
8 Monte Carlo and Beyond	69
9 <i>L'Architecture Vivante</i>	77
10 Turning Point	82
11 Toward an Architecture	87
12 E.1027	97
13 Life as an Architect	111
14 A House for Herself: Tempe à <i>Pailla</i>	119
15 Building for Others	127
16 The Second World War	136
17 Starting Anew	141
18 The Last House: Lou Pérou	157
19 Recognition at Last	167
Epilogue	179
Postscript	180
 Plates	 183
I Architecture / Interiors	185
II Furniture	255
 Exhibitions	 354
Selected Bibliography	355
Index	358

EILEEN GRAY



Eileen Gray, photographed by Berenice Abbott, Paris, 1926

PETER ADAM

EILEEN GRAY

HER LIFE AND WORK

With 427 illustrations, 153 in colour and duotone



Thames & Hudson

Picture Credits

All illustrations in this book were reproduced with the kind permission of the Eileen Gray Archives or Peter Adam, Paris, with the following exceptions:

© 2009 ClassiCon, Munich: pp. 181, 271, 288 (bottom), 291, 292, 294, 296, 307 (top and bottom), 311, 317, 336, 337, 341, 343, 345

Philippe Garner Archives: pp. 257, 260–61, 262, 264, 265, 269, 276, 280 (top), 282 (top and bottom), 285, 295, 299, 301, 309, 318, 319 (left and right), 325 (left and right), 329, 331, 339

Christie's, London: p. 277

The Sunday Times Magazine: p. 351

Captions translated from German by David H. Wilson

First published in the United Kingdom in 2009
by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

thamesandhudson.com

Original edition © 2009 Schirmer/Mosel, Munich
This edition © 2009 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London
Illustrations copyright © 2009 Eileen Gray Archives, London,
unless otherwise specified
Text copyright © 2009 Peter Adam

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Any copy of this book issued by the publisher as a paperback is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including these words being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-51480-1

Printed and bound in Italy

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Introduction	11
1 Childhood and Student Years	13
2 To Paris	19
3 Early Professional Life	27
4 The Lacquer Cult	39
5 The Great War	47
6 The Early Twenties and the Lota Apartment	49
7 Jean Désert Gallery	63
8 Monte Carlo and Beyond	69
9 <i>L'Architecture Vivante</i>	77
10 Turning Point	82
11 Toward an Architecture	87
12 E.1027	97
13 Life as an Architect	111
14 A House for Herself: Tempe à Paillasson	119
15 Building for Others	127
16 The Second World War	136
17 Starting Anew	141
18 The Last House: Lou Pérou	157
19 Recognition at Last	167
Epilogue	179
Postscript	180
 Plates	 183
I Architecture / Interiors	185
II Furniture	255
 Exhibitions	 354
Selected Bibliography	355
Index	358

*'To create, one must first
question everything.'*

*'The future projects light,
the past only shadows.'*

Eileen Gray

FOREWORD

More than two decades have passed since the publication of the first biography of Eileen Gray. Translated into French, German, Spanish and Japanese, it brought the life and work of one of the most elusive artists, who fiercely guarded her privacy, to the attention of many. Since then the name Eileen Gray has become widely known and her furniture has made history.

In her life time few publications or articles dealt with her work. Apart from a few notes by Le Corbusier, there was little written about her by contemporary architects and designers. The two houses that she built and furnished entirely with her own designs are cited as the purest examples of 1920s domestic architecture. Together with Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto, Gerrit Rietveld and Charles Eames, she has finally found a place among the most influential designers of the twentieth century.

Samples of her furniture are now in leading museums: the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt, the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The National Museum of Ireland holds her entire archive and has devoted several galleries to her life and work.

Her reputation in architecture is widespread. But, however influential, her architectural output was limited. She only built

two houses from scratch, created a few interiors and did a number of unrealized architectural schemes. We have little information on clients or locations. She made elaborate drawings and took numerous photographs of her work, but most projects only exist as small sketches, mere ideas jotted down on a piece of paper. None are dated.

Since I wrote the first biography of Eileen Gray in 1987, leading architects and scholars have begun to examine her work. Every surviving scrap of paper has been scrutinized and analysed in an attempt to turn her into a highly productive architect. This unrelenting quest by so many to do justice to this highly original artist, and to untangle her extraordinary life and career, is remarkable. However, I can still hear her voice: 'totally unnecessary', she used to say, and if she were alive today I am sure she still would.

Her real contribution to twentieth-century architecture is in her refreshing thoughts and undogmatic approach to the quality of living. She expressed her thoughts about building and furniture design in published dialogues. Looking back at her long life and the many different phases of her work, one discovers a mind that coloured everything she created. She felt deeply the spirit of things and objects, reflecting and perfecting them until a chair or a table became the friend of man.

The most interesting thing about Eileen Gray as a person is her struggle with life,

a life that fascinates all generations. It is the story of a woman trying to survive. She fought many battles, most of all with herself. If she was barely recognized during her time, it was mostly of her own doing. She never looked for fame or medals; her outlook on the world was infused with a different kind of dream. This nonconformist, independent of the major art movements of her time, followed her own path without the missionary zeal of many of her contemporary architects. In a unique atmosphere of freedom and rigour without concession to fashion or taste, she created furniture and houses that still speak to us now with a clear and truly timeless voice.

I would like to thank my friend and publisher Andreas Landshoff, who suggested my first book on Eileen Gray, never lost faith in the whole precarious endeavour, and supported me in all later editions. The publisher Lothar Schirmer unflinchingly suggested bringing out this new and extended edition, and I thank him for that. I would also like to thank the National Museum of Ireland which generously gave me permission to use the photographs now in its possession, and Robin Symes who also provided photographs of his collection. Further material was provided by Philippe Garner of Christie's and Sotheby's, London.

INTRODUCTION

I met Eileen Gray for the first time in 1960. She was eighty-two years old. This woman who is now regarded as a pioneer of modern design, and in the Twenties and Thirties was celebrated in architectural circles, was then totally forgotten. There weren't any magazines or books discussing her work; no one bought her furniture. Worn down by illness and age, she led the life of a recluse, a situation that suited her temperament. The only person sharing her solitary life was her faithful housekeeper, Louise Dany, who had joined Eileen in 1927 at nineteen.

On 8 November 1972, at the famous Paris auction house of Hôtel Drouot, there was a sale of Art Deco furniture belonging to the late fashion designer and art collector Jacques Doucet. One curious item was listed in the catalogue: 'Gray (Eileen). *Le Destin* 4-panel screen in lacquer decorated with figures in green and silver on a red background.' When this screen fetched the stupendous price of over \$36,000, newspapers carried the name of Eileen Gray for the first time in thirty-five years. *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *The Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* all picked up on the sale.

Collectors and a few art historians took notice. People started to look for her furniture, as they did for Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann's or Jean Dunand's. The search for the mysterious Eileen Gray began. Here and there a few of her pieces had surfaced and were eagerly bought up by collectors, among them Yves Saint Laurent; Eileen Gray was suddenly fashion-

able again. Not that it made any difference to her. 'It's absurd,' she used to say, and she continued to take her meals alone as she had done for the last thirty years of her life. Her only contacts with the outside world were two or three friends, who formed a kind of lifeline; people to whom she could unburden herself of the daily problems of a life made increasingly difficult by illness and old age.

Eileen was buried on 5 November 1976 at a quiet ceremony without music or eulogies. Her ashes were laid to rest in the presence of three friends, which I know would have suited her very well. Shortly before her death she burned almost all the letters and photographs that concerned her personal life. The discretion she had manifested all her life prevented her from leaving any traces, except in her work. It was there that she wanted her passions and preoccupations to be read. She was not seeking posthumous renown. If she received it nevertheless, it was due to the strength of her work and the originality of the ideas it expressed. The absence of almost any information about her life has made her a kind of cult figure, a role she never intended to play and one she would have wholeheartedly rejected.

In the introduction to her first biography, I wrote: 'Eileen Gray would not have approved of this book. She was never tempted to write her own biography; she shied away from any personal revelations. She might have accepted a few words about her work, although she

would have thought them “unnecessary”.’ That I, despite all this, have decided to write this new biography is not to betray a trust and a warm friendship, but to dispel much of the rumour, the numerous errors and speculations that continuously have grown up around her name. It is also to recall once more the conversations, and the many happy hours we spent together in Paris, London and the south of France. She would have scolded me for making this public, but she would not have prevented me from doing so.

To try to recount Eileen’s life is not an easy task. Most of the protagonists have disappeared and can no longer be questioned. When she was born, Queen Victoria was still on the throne, and when she died, almost a hundred years old, men had flown to the moon. All I could do was to piece together a few memories, to reanimate the recollection of a life, which by all accounts, and in the truest sense of the word, was extraordinary.

The major source for the book was Eileen Gray herself. After the death of her niece, more letters and notes emerged which made us see Eileen the person more clearly. All the words in quotation, if

not otherwise attributed, are her own. They are based on surviving letters – written on an antiquated typewriter – and personal conversations. Eileen’s own English was much coloured by her long life in France, and she often used French terms when writing letters in her mother tongue. Being more interested in other people’s lives than in her own, she was never easily questioned. She was a reluctant and not always reliable witness. She did not like to look into the past (which in any case was blurred), and least of all into her own.

The most formidable help came from her niece, the painter Prunella Clough, now alas also departed. Prunella was Eileen’s only true and lasting friend. A distinguished artist herself, she was able to share many of Eileen’s preoccupations, thoughts and worries. Throughout Eileen’s later years the two women exchanged many letters. These and the many she wrote to me were a fantastic source of information about her daily life and thoughts. Yet after many years of research into her life, she remains an enigma, a puzzle with missing pieces. Maybe this is just as well. ‘The work of an artist is more than his life,’ she wrote in one of her letters.

1

CHILDHOOD AND STUDENT YEARS

Eileen Gray was born in Ireland on 9 August 1878 in the family home of Brownswood. The elegant manor house stood on a picturesque site, originally occupied by a castle, on the banks of the River Slaney. Brownswood was two miles (3.2 km) from Enniscorthy – in County Wexford, in the southeast of Ireland – a rather obscure Norman town known for its cattle market.

Eileen's forebears on her mother's side were very distinguished. Their peerage went back to the fifteenth century, when the first Lord Gray was master of the household of King James II of Scotland. One of her great uncles was postmaster general of Scotland. Her grandmother Lady Jane Stewart, daughter of the tenth Earl of Moray, had married Captain Jeremiah Lonsdale Pounden, and on 3 May 1841 their only daughter, Eveleen (the 19th Lady Gray), was born.

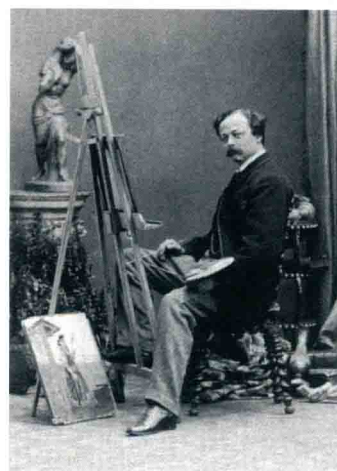
Eveleen was certainly not a conventional child. Strong-minded and independent, at the age of twenty-one she ran off to Italy with a good-looking 30-year-old painter, James Maclaren Smith. They were married in 1863. In 1864, their first son, James Maclaren Stuart, was born; followed by Ethel Eveleen (1866), Lonsdale (1870) and Thora Zelma Grace (1875). On 9 August 1878, their last child, Kathleen Eileen Moray, was born. (In many publications Eileen's birth date is erroneously given as 1879. In later years Eileen herself was always very casual about such matters. Once asked on tele-

vision if she was ninety-six or ninety-seven, she simply replied: 'Is there a difference?')

Eileen spent much of her childhood between London, where her parents had a townhouse in Kensington, and the old Brownswood House. For a while Eileen's parents maintained the outward signs of respectability. She remembered them sitting silently at either end of the long dining-room table. But then her father went back to Italy, where he remained – bar a few visits – for the rest of his life. Eileen's experience of parental authority therefore centred almost exclusively around her mother, a woman of dominating nature and mild eccentricity. She had a rather solemn face, as if she rarely smiled – a woman whose pride had been hurt through the loss of the love of her husband.

Eileen always respected her mother, but her love was for her father, with whom she often travelled and whose life must have seemed to her one of adventure and independence. If her mother instilled in Eileen good manners and a sense of social propriety, her father taught her the love of freedom. He was a minor figure in the arts, painting mostly landscapes and portraits in the Italian manner. Eileen inherited from him not only her beautiful eyes and fine nose, but also her love of art.

Growing up in a large, ancient house as the youngest of five children, most of them considerably older, Eileen felt lonely and unloved. Despite substantial wealth and many servants, life was far from comfortable at Brownswood. In the cold, wet



Eileen's father, James Maclaren Smith



Eileen's mother, Baroness Gray



The family (Eileen is on her mother's lap)