

Should Le Corbusier's E.1027 murals be considered as "historical monuments"?

BY AGNÈS CAILLIAU

Le Corbusier's murals in E.1027, the famous house designed by Eileen Gray, have been maintained and restored as "historical monuments".

I subscribe to a different view, and shall express it from three perspectives:

- a legal and administrative dimension: only Eileen Gray's E.1027 is designated a Historical Monument. The murals are not covered by this classification.
- an artistic point of view: Le Corbusier's murals are detrimental to the original state of the architectural work and to the spirit of the house, they are discordant. The murals, by their mere presence, endanger the architectural work.
- a physical/technical angle: Le Corbusier's murals themselves are in physical danger.

The title of this article is deliberately provocative. The intention is to question the "historical monument" status of Le Corbusier's E.1027 murals from three perspectives:

- legal and administrative: because they are part of the E.1027 building which itself is a 20th century historical monument.
- artistic: are Le Corbusier's paintings complementary to the architectural works of Eileen Gray (1878–1976)?
- technical: how can we ensure the preservation of the murals? Do they need to be kept within the house?

The protected "historical monument" status of E.1027

This first section refers to French legal concepts concerning historical monuments. This aspect is a prerequisite to a full understanding of this topic. France was late in recognizing the importance of E.1027, as it has been for numerous French 20th century buildings.

When E.1027 was initially listed in the historical monument inventory, on 29 October 1975, it was called "*La Villa construite par Badovici*" [The Villa built by Badovici], *promenade* Le Corbusier in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, (Alpes Maritimes).

Twenty-five years later (27 march 2000), the French Ministry for Culture and Communication issued a new decree that superseded the older one giving it the name of "*La Villa E.1027 d'Eileen Gray*" as an historical monument in its entirety, including the garden and lands. Thus granting it the maximum protected status available, and naming its designer, which is rare enough to be worthy of note (Figure 01). The name of the creator of E.1027, the designer Eileen Gray, was

from this moment completely associated with the decision to designate it a historical monument. The decree that establishes its status mentions the name of its creator a second time: "from an artistic point of view, the E.1027 Villa by Eileen Gray in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin (Alpes Maritimes) is of public interest because of its great importance in the Modern Movement of 20th century architectural history".

The report that this decision was based on contains serious and detailed research undertaken by the enumerator Jean Marx, of the Regional Directorate for Cultural Affairs of the Provence Alpes — Côte d'Azur Region. Eileen Gray is known as a "decorator and architect of Irish origins". It clearly states that, "apart from some modifications made by Le Corbusier, a regular guest, when he decorated it with painted murals in 1938, the house had undergone no other transformation since its creation".

The word "decorator" is particularly significant. In French, "*décor*" is a slightly old-fashioned word that is often used for historical monuments. It usually makes reference to an ensemble of paintings, to polychromes in general, and any other supplementary elements that are part of the monument. The term "*villa*" which is used to refer to E.1027 is in fact inappropriate. It is the term used by the locals of the Côte d'Azur to designate an opulent house which has lands.

The portfolio prepared by Eileen Gray with and for her architect friend, Jean Badovici (1893–1956), gives us all the information required for an understanding of the exceptional nature of the house. It should be known it is referred to by Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici as a house: "we have tried to convey with this tiny house...".

Eileen Gray, Jean Badovici and Le Corbusier always referred to E.1027 as "the house". Le Corbusier called it

“Bado’s House” or “*la baraque*” (a familiar term for any house, that Badovici also used). Let’s hope that the term “house” might one day be employed as part of the restoration work of E.1027 by the Cap Modern association.

The entrance, a pedestrian-only access, leads us to “*La Maison en bord de mer*” grounds, via concrete steps. As an introduction, waves, little pebbles and fish swimming have been drawn in the fresh mortar, with simplicity and poetry, Eileen Gray’s deep qualities. See the hand rail made of tubes. Minimalism is obviously already present, anticipating the whole property’s atmosphere. The “tiny house” is built on narrow terraces held up by dry stone walls (Figure 02).

Houses in the south of France often have an entrance on all sides. As Eileen Gray wrote “the entrance has been removed which is suitable for a place where the windows and doors are rarely opened”. A staircase leads up directly to the balcony and “*la living-room*”.

The artistic relationship between Le Corbusier’s murals and Eileen Gray’s house. Is there synergy between the two works?

Our analysis is based on the well-documented research by Marie-Odile Hubert² (b. 1982) and also that of Tim Benton³ (b. 1945) which leads us to observe that:

- Le Corbusier did not prepare any drafts or sketches for this group of paintings which could have indicated his intention of complementing the modernity of E.1027.
- Le Corbusier expressed himself on the walls of E.1027 with no thought as to any particular chronology related to space or time.
- Le Corbusier indicates no order, nor the existence of any relationship between the paintings themselves. The eight paintings were undertaken with no special research to take into account and complement their setting. They are located in a very practical and pragmatic way, on the flat surfaces of those walls that were large enough to paint

standing up, “naturally” framed by the inner and outer corners of the perpendicular surfaces surrounding them.

- Le Corbusier’s paintings deal with recurrent themes, with some variations, that already existed in his paintings that pre-date these murals by several years.

As an example, let’s examine the murals, starting with the two that are located on the main level of the house (Figure 03).

It is a version of a 1938 mural that brings to mind previous paintings known as “The Figure with the Yellow Door” and “Figure in front of the White Door”, according to Tim, who describes it as the

fruit of detailed research undertaken in 1932 on the relationship between the shape of a tree and that of a female nude. The model for the tree can be found in the courtyard of the Vidal house where Le Corbusier spent every summer between 1926 and 1936 during his vacation in Piquey⁴.

This painting is, therefore, related to the house where Le Corbusier and his wife spent their holidays, in Cap Ferret, in the Arcachon Bay. The impact of this painting is even more “violent” because Le Corbusier placed it at the end of the long diagonal line of the living room, so that it is immediately visible and imposing on the field of vision of anyone entering the house.

Eileen Gray wrote:

We wanted to design this room in such a way that anyone could, at any moment, be completely independent and experience a solitary and contemplative atmosphere (...) with a large divan of 2.2 meters by 2 meters, where one can sit or lie down, rest or have a comfortable conversation, an essential piece of furniture that can be converted into a bed.

The mural renders Eileen Gray’s concept of the E.1027 living-room impossible.

Additionally, Tim Benton has this to say about this painting:



01 General view of *Maison en bord de mer* E.1027 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin (toponymic name: brown rocks), France. © Agnès Cailliau, 2019.



02 Path leading to the *Maison en bord de mer* E.1027, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France. © Agnès Cailliau, 2019.

The mural version of the “Figure à la porte jaune” is hard to defend in the context of E.1027. Crude in style with strident colors, it does not positively contribute to the delicate articulation of space⁵.

Le Corbusier was aware of the forceful character of his paintings which did not hinder his admiration of E.1027:

Here is this house that’s as big as the Lakeside house, brought to life by forceful and explosive paintings, some of which are ten square meters (...) This house is remarkable, in an attractive location, night and day⁶.

And “At Bado’s, five days in his delightful house, busy painting two murals that have turned out really well and have really helped me progress”⁷.

In August 1939, one year after the first mural, Le Corbusier painted another mural in the interior dining area — “*coin salle à manger*” — that covers the entire wall (Figure 05).

The presence of the radiator in the corner of the painting does not seem to bother the painter, even though for many, the underlying effect is to highlight its presence. This mural shows how Le Corbusier did not adapt to the architectural partition wall. Instead he monopolized it. This mural invades all of the deliberately narrow space for meals, and goes against the obviously minimalist and fluid traits which characterize the prevailing atmosphere of the house. The Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici portfolio in 1929 gives the first state of the room.

This is a mural version on the theme “*Masque et pigne de pin*” (painting with mask and pine nut) from 1930 according to Tim Benton. As for Marie-Odile Hubert it represents a butcher’s bone. Personally I sometimes see a sweet blue and white female figure about to be eaten by a big red monster! In any case, a nightmarish and frightening scene to sleep beneath, for friends and guests of E.1027.

Le Corbusier completely disregarded Eileen Gray’s furniture. The painting continued behind a writing cabinet, as if it were not there!

On a draft watercolor painting dating from before the mural, it is interesting to note the blank part of the writing cabinet mark he represented.

Here are decisions which could have been made during the restoration of the house:

- remove Le Corbusier’s mural,
- take the opportunity to “restore” the writing cabinet in the rules of art, i.e. according to Eileen Gray’s design as much as possible.

The main entrance of E.1027, at the end of a concrete path that runs parallel to a terrace, was also used as a dining area, as it is next to the kitchen and sheltered from the wind and the sun.

In a very detailed analysis of this painting, Tim Benton sees an allusion to Yvonne, Le Corbusier’s wife, who loved knitting. The existence of this painting in the main entrance is disturbing.

The writing “*le sens interdit*” [wrong way or no entry] and “*entrez lentement*” [enter slowly], stencilled by Eileen Gray and fortunately still preserved, seem to be addressed to

Le Corbusier, as if he had insolently crossed a line in an untimely manner with his personal artwork.

According to Tim Benton, the painting on the right hand side of the E.1027 entrance mural is a reminder of an earlier painting by Le Corbusier, “*La Femme rouge à la pelote verte*”. The preparatory sketches and studies for this painting show an evolution in the detail of the wrought iron balcony, which became solid and black, and of the louvered shutter, which became stylized. Once again, “as it is often the case in his artwork dating from the end of the 30s, Le Corbusier reuses themes he has already employed several years earlier”⁸.

As Tim says:

The painting in the entrance clearly dominates the area that leads to the interior, the dazzling and contrasting colors – green, red, blue, yellow, brown and light blue, – in the shadows of the entrance can be interpreted as wanting to revitalize the wall. However, it is difficult to construe this painting as anything other than dominating the villa⁹.

By painting standing up and naked in Cap Martin, Le Corbusier was indulging his passion for painting, cultivating his natural hedonism. The paintings are treated like artworks that are part of a series with variations, like a musical composition. Le Corbusier seems to follow an internal, personal order. He expresses it through his work, making himself at home on the walls of E.1027, with his usual audacity. At this time before the WWII, the large walls made up for the lack of space in his small studio that overlooked the roof of the house, the scarcity of canvasses, and the financial difficulties noted by Tim Benton as well as the painting supplies he asked Badovici for.

His paintings, which he erroneously called *frescoes*, are a very personal “framing.” One can only concur with Tim Benton when he writes: “It is nevertheless impossible to deny that Le Corbusier’s graphical interventions create a stark contrast with the style of the Villa, to the point that it takes a lot of imagination to disassociate them, and to judge them individually, with their own respective qualities”¹⁰.

Technical aspects of the murals: how can we best preserve the artworks?

Located by the sea, E.1027 is extremely exposed, there are sea mists and sea breezes, salts, sun, temperature variations, strong rain, flooding, with all the logical consequences one can imagine for the artworks.

The murals were painted on dry partition walls on a “finish coat that is made up of a mixture of air lime and a hydraulic binder, Portland cement, or natural cement. A lime-based coating has been applied to this mortar”¹¹. Cement is not a very good material. Microscopic cracks appear as it ages. The salt is migrating, both from within the walls outwards, through the supports to the outer layers of the painting, and back again, disintegrating the murals.

Despite the recent painstaking work to consolidate the coats, fill in the gaps, remove layers, renovate the faded paint etc., the required conditions for maintaining and conserving the murals are not fulfilled¹². A case in point is

the painting in the dining area, which is located in front of a large window, in direct sunlight. It is prone to rising damp with salt efflorescences, that easily migrate due to the wide range of temperatures and multiply the many parameters of serious risk to the works.

The murals had already been repainted three times by Le Corbusier himself in 1939, 1949 then finally in 1962. Le Corbusier was particularly keen that they should be preserved. Later, every mural was repainted yet again by a local painter called Jean Broniarski in 1977–1978.

It is worth noting here that the “original” state, as determined and restored by Marie-Odile Hubert, gives the impression that the murals were extremely well finished, even though one can see that the actual originals were crudely finished, with drips between the solid colors. Perhaps the two layers of paint subsequently applied by Le Corbusier ten then twenty three years after the initial layer were intended to hide these imperfections.

The restoration of the nautical map led to the decision to hide the mural in the living room behind a cover, that can be open or closed. This cover is light years from Eileen Gray’s immensely clever furniture. She believed that “What is required is to give an object the shape that best matches the spontaneous gesture or instinctive reflex that accompanies its purpose”¹³.

To sum things up:

- only Eileen Gray’s E.1027 is designated a Historical Monument (in the legal sense). The murals are not covered by this classification.
- Le Corbusier’s painted murals are detrimental to the original state of the architectural work and to the spirit of the house, they are discordant. The murals, by their mere presence, endanger the architectural work.
- Le Corbusier’s murals themselves are in physical danger.

We suggest that the murals should be removed — it is possible, by cutting the partitions made with hollow bricks, two centimeters behind the art works. The clay substrate permits their careful removal in order to preserve them.

The murals, positioned as if they were framed paintings, could then join the rest of Le Corbusier’s works, and further the understanding of the different phases of his career as an artist/painter.

In parallel, we note as Tim Benton does, that on 27 March 1932, Le Corbusier wrote to Yvonne about his admiration for the murals and frescoes in the Catalan Art Museum of Barcelona - yet these have been removed from their original locations! The principle of a posthumous relocation of these endangered works to a museum should therefore

03 E.1027, view of the main entrance. © Viviana Andrada Baumann, 2016.



04 Le Corbusier, “*La grande pièce*”, or living-room in E.1027, *Maison en Bord de mer*, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, mural referred to as “*Peinture murale de la toilette complète*” by P.A. Gatier & M.O. Hubert, or “*La première peinture dans la salle de séjour*”, according to Tim Benton. © Agnès Cailliau, 2017.



05 E.1027, view of the dining area, 1939, a variation on “*Spirales géométriques*” 1932. © Viviana Andrada Baumann, 2016.

06 E.1027, view of guest balcony and sun pool.
© Viviana Andrada Baumann, 2016.



07 View of the E.1027 exhibition wagon, Association Cap Moderne, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin railway station. © Agnès Cailliau, 2019.



not aggrieve him. The principle of preserving these works by relocating them to a safe place, should not be considered an offense in these circumstances. Given that Le Corbusier returned three times to repaint his murals, without modifying them, shows his tenacity which should be taken into account.

This would allow the restitution of the very interesting “sgraffite”. (The work is neither a painted mural nor a sgraffito. It is once again an erroneous term used by Le Corbusier and taken up by architectural historians). It appears as “engraving” research in the surface of the wall, explained by E.1027 being a “laboratoire” according to Jean Badovici.

This would also avoid the murals being constantly treated as a digression to E.1027. Their very presence can even be detrimental to Le Corbusier, for example there is an article in The Guardian of 13 April 2015, “Eileen Gray’s E.1027 review”, which describes “painted murals, crude and garish on its walls” and refers to Le Corbusier as someone who “asserted his dominion as a urinating dog, over the territory”.

Our conclusion is in direct opposition to the one made by Pierre-Antoine Gatier (b. 1959), the head architect for historical monuments, and responsible for the restoration of E.1027 when he says:

These paintings represent a vital testimony to Le Corbusier’s activity as a mural painter and as a participant in the ensemble that is created (by the architecture and the murals) around the Cabanon. The group responsible for the restoration of Villa E.1027, validated by the site’s steering committee, proposes an amalgamation of these historic estates, thereby permitting the conservation on-site of Le Corbusier’s murals alongside Eileen Gray’s polychromes, and opposing the artificial return to the lost state of the designer¹⁴.

I would like to leave you with two quotations by Eileen Gray. I think they beautifully illustrate her wisdom and the mindfulness she had on her surrounding environment :

We must plan for a time when the current need for movement, for a busy life, comes to an end; it will gradually decrease as the influence of war disappears and is replaced by a need for inner culture and a more refined life.

You want architecture to be a symphony that expresses the entirety of an inner life (Figure 06–07).

Notes

- 1 Eileen Gray & Jean Badovici, *L’Architecture Vivante*, 1929 EAM. Ed. Imbernon.
- 2 Marie-Odile Hubert, “Les Peintures murales de Le Corbusier – E.1027”, in *Le Corbusier Ultimes pensées, derniers projets – 1960/1965* Massilia, 2013, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier, Marseille, Editions Imbernon, 12–33, 2013.
- 3 Tim Benton, *Le Corbusier, peintre à Cap Martin*, Paris, Editions du Patrimoine, 2015.
- 4 Ibid., 47.
- 5 Ibid., 47.
- 6 Ibid., 67, Lettre de Le Corbusier à sa mère, 25 août 1939, FLC R2 (1) 142.
- 7 Ibid., 46, Lettre de Le Corbusier, lettre à sa mère, 8 mai 1938, FLC R2 (1) 248.
- 8 Ibid., 67.
- 9 Ibid., 71.
- 10 Ibid., 82.
- 11 Jean-Marc Vallet, “Les Peintures murales de Le Corbusier – E.1027, note sur le CICRP”, in *Le Corbusier Ultimes pensées, derniers projets – 1960/1965* Massilia, 2013, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier, Marseille, Editions Imbernon, 34–35.
- 12 Marie-Odile Hubert, “Les Peintures murales de Le Corbusier – E.1027”, in *Le Corbusier Ultimes pensées, derniers projets – 1960/1965* Massilia, 2013, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier, Marseille, Editions Imbernon, 25.
- 13 Eileen Gray, Jean Badovici, “E.1027 Maison en bord de mer”, *L’Architecture vivante*, Hiver, Paris, Albert Morancé, 1929, réédition Marseille, Edition Imbernon, 2006.
- 14 Pierre-Antoine Gatier, “Les Peintures murales de Le Corbusier – E.1027 Liminaire de PA Gatier”, in *Le Corbusier Ultimes pensées, derniers projets – 1960/1965* Massilia, 2013, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier, Marseille, Editions Imbernon, 8–9.

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