

## A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION 5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

### Eileen Gray Chair, 1926



No prizes for guessing what this is.

Yes, indeed. A chair.

But do you notice anything odd about it?

Look carefully now.

There's only one armrest. According to the designer of the chair, this was to 'leave the body more freedom in movement and to allow it to bend forward or turn to the other side unrestricted.'

So a chair doesn't need two armrests. It's possible to be quite comfortable with just the one.

The designer of the chair was a woman named Eileen Gray. Eileen came from County Wexford and believed that just because something had been done in a particular way for years and years didn't mean that it always had to be done this way.

Eileen felt that objects, and in particular furniture, could always be changed and adjusted or tweaked in some way. She studied fine art in London and Paris and ended up living in France for most of her life.

Eileen liked to look at things differently and to try out new ideas. She particularly liked to find out what was happening in other countries.

She wasn't alone in thinking this way. A lot of artists and writers in Europe at the time felt the same. It was called a modernist way of thinking, or the modernist movement. And Eileen, with her wonderful, quirky, practical furniture designs, was very much a part of this movement.

What was unusual about all of this was that Ireland and Irish people were not particularly interested in other countries at that time. We had officially separated from Britain and were busy deciding what kind of country we should become.

We had never had the chance to celebrate our own culture before, and so we looked to the past and to its music and songs and stories and traditional way of doing things. In fact, for years and years Ireland

examined its own culture and had little or no interest in what was happening in Europe, which was really quite close.

Few people had, therefore, heard about Eileen or the modernist movement. But that did change. It took time, but we eventually joined what is now the European Union. And slowly but surely, we began to realise that it was possible to celebrate traditional ways of doing things and look at other cultures and new ideas all at the same time.

It was then that we recognised how incredibly fresh and different this celebrated Irish furniture designer really was.