

DE SAEDELEER, ELISABETH (1902 - 1972), textile artist

Name: Elisabeth de Saedeleer
Date of birth: 1902
Date of death: 1972
Parent: Clementina de Saedeleer (née Limpens)
Parent: Valerius Victor Emiel Marie de Saedeleer
Gender: Female
Occupation: textile artist
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Caterina Verdickt

Elisabeth de Saedeleer was born on 17 August 1902 in Sint Martens Latem, a village near Ghent in Belgium, the second of five daughters of the painter Valerius de Saedeleer (1867-1941) and his wife Clementina (née Limpens, 1867-1930). At the age of 12, shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, she and her family left Belgium together with Gustave van de Woestijne (1881-1947) and George Minne (1866-1941) and their families via Ostend to Wales. These Belgian artists were invited to Aberystwyth by the Davies family of Llandinam: **David**, **Gwendoline** and **Margaret Davies**. In contrast to the charity-focused and often pragmatically assembled initiatives undertaken on behalf of Belgian artists in the rest of the UK during the war, a deliberate cultural policy was pursued in this case. The Davies family saw an opportunity to enrich local artistic life with the expertise of established Belgian artists.

Elisabeth and her family settled in a house named 'Tynlon' in Rhydyfelin near Aberystwyth. The father, Valerius, started working immediately upon his arrival and quickly established himself in the art circles of Aberystwyth. The Davies's investments in the Belgian artists did have their specific merits and did affect artistic life indirectly. This was especially true of the daughters of Valerius de Saedeleer, Marie and particularly Elisabeth, who learned how to weave in Wales. Their first works were done after drawings by their father, who functioned as their private designer. Money matters proved to be a constant challenge for the family though, and at a certain point Valerius met a former employee of William Morris, who suggested that his daughters should take up weaving. Engaging women and girls in the creative process had been customary in the circles of William Morris, in contrast to what was common in those days, when women were generally excluded from any professional function. According to one source, Valerius had dreamt of setting up an atelier ever since his daughters were very young. His goal was to revive the ancient craft of tapestry weaving and he envisaged his daughters as active participants. Allegedly, Elisabeth was additionally trained by William Morris's daughter May, as she certainly knew her.

The de Saedeleer family eventually moved back to Belgium in the spring of 1921. After their return, they established themselves in Etikhove and named their new home 'Villa Tynlon' after their Welsh one. The first project they undertook was the founding of their own Arts and Crafts studio in Etikhove, which would become a centre of weaving techniques in the Belgian modernist era, thus building on what they had learned in Wales. Elisabeth took charge of the workplace. She transferred the designs to the actual size required and painted the sample cards herself. In the early years of the studio, she produced tapestry, tableware, clothing and furnishings. Her predilection for both subtle geometric forms and soft colour tones is in analogy with the works of Rennie Mackintosh and derives from her time spent as an exile in Britain.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the studio of Elisabeth de Saedeleer became renowned for its vivid and colourful knotted floor coverings, mural carpets and fabrics for scarfs and tablecloths. The use of central lockets and arabesques clearly show the influences of the traditions of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts weaving techniques. In 1925, the influential Belgian art critic Luc Haesaerts published two extended articles on the art of Elisabeth de Saedeleer. Her work was also installed in the National Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Koekelberg, one of Belgium's most famous Art Deco monuments. In her career she made tapestry after the designs of many internationally renowned artists such as Ossip Zadkine, Michel Seuphor and Marc Chagall. The quality of her work and clientele secured her a solid reputation, and in 1927 she was asked by Henry van de Velde to teach at La Cambre, the newly founded art and design school in Brussels. Here, at the age of 25, and one of the only women, Elisabeth found herself at the core of Belgian artistic life.

For Elisabeth de Saedeleer, the deliberately schemed exile in Aberystwyth proved to be of crucial importance in her career, for it was there that she was trained in weaving techniques and came under the influence of the Arts and Crafts philosophy. After her return to Belgium her expertise and designs were seen as innovative and secured her a unique position in her own country.

Elisabeth de Saedeleer died in Etikhove on 27 June 1972.

Author

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