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Creating Textiles in Belgium During the 20th Century: A Large Weaving Manufacturer, a Small Textile Studio and a Contemporary Textile Designer.

Text and photographs by

Elsje Janssen

Belgium, and most of all Flanders, has a strong textile history with many large manufacturers as well as some promising young textile designers. This lecture will focus on three periods in time: the beginning, the middle and the end of the 20th century, three different kind of makers: a large manufacturer, a small studio and an independent textile designer, three methods: machine woven jacquard interior fabrics, simple handwoven household textiles and exclusive samples handwoven on a 24 shafts computerised loom, and three types of markets: the export market, the local Belgian market and both.

Most of the weaving mills active in Belgium today, were founded in the 19th century or in the beginning of the 20th century. Since the country is a very small one, their production is mostly made for export. This is also the case for Weverij Waesland a large manufacturer located in Sint Niklaas, Flanders. It started in 1922 but the roots it’s roots go back to the turn of the century. Today they specialise in plain and jacquard flat woven fabrics and plain and jacquard double velvet. Recently the factory moved and expanded and wanted to get rid of masses of old samples. The Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels received 40 boxes of them. An important gift, since the museum did not have a lot of 20th century textiles in its collection. The fact the samples derive from a Flemish weaving manufacturer, makes it even more important for the museum.

Due to lack of time and staff, only 1/5 of the boxes could be opened. It turned out the contents covered a wide variety of Art Nouveau and Art Deco fabrics. The examples give an idea of some of the designs woven, as well as the influence from abroad and the resemblance with for instance the Arts and Crafts Movement. Thanks to the serial numbers given to the samples, they could be arranged in chronological order.

In the early examples we see a copy of Arthur Silver’s Peacock Feather, manufactured for Liberty’s and dated around 1887 1. There are also clear resemblances with Félix Aubert’s Irisses from around 1897-98 2. Waved lines, influenced by the Japanese and so loved in Europe, were also used in other designs with flowers of different origin. The use of central lockets and arabesques can be compared with textiles designed by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Both style and compositions with graceful foliage- and flower motifs, as well as the use of the colours, like blues and greens or reds, greens and yellows, are similar to what was produced in England.

Beside this, an influence from the Belgian architect and designer Henry van de Velde can be detected (Fig. 1). The design is more stylised and subtle. A lot of the samples show the use of more than one set of colours. This makes it easy to see the different results and to make a choice.

264 Textile Society of America 1998 Proceedings
Around the turn of the century tablecloths with a decorative border and a central motive were in fashion. The design reminds us for instance of the style of Charles Reny Mackingtosh and of the Belgian interior designer Georges Serrurier-Bovy. The collection contains several samples in different colours, meant for tablecloths.

Apart from the jacquard fabrics in wool and cotton, the gift contains thin viscose fabrics. A bright red and green striped weaving with oblique repetitive flower motives is reminiscent of the composition of what probably was designed by Archibald Knox for the Silver Studio around 1899. Some of the viscose fabrics are still bound together in samplebooks. Others show a note with technical details about the threads and the colours to be used.

A second, smaller group of fabrics differs greatly from the previous: those with Oriental inspired motives. Both repetitive figures and scenes like landscapes with animals were woven. Those examples should be situated in the context of the period where the European arts and crafts were influenced by the Far East.

For which market Waesland Textiles has produced these fabrics and how big the export was, still needs to be examined.

A third group are the Art Deco weavings, dated in the 1920’s and '30’s. Both heavier upholstery fabrics and lightweight interior fabrics can be found. The style of the designs is very typical: combinations of stylised flowers and geometrical motives (Fig. 2) remind us of the work of the French designer Edouard Bénédictus. Buildings in clouds, circles, squares and triangles, fan-like forms and cog-wheels, small stylised flower bunches under tent-like forms or placed between waving lines: everything has fable colours, pastels or candy colours.

Textile Society of America 1998 Proceedings 265
Apart from this are the more robust geometrical designs in a few attuned colours like blues or browns (Fig. 3) or in one colour scale. More colours are found in the samples of tablecloths. Beside these are examples of the tendency towards simple motives and calm use of colours present as well as the use of structured threads.

The samples cover a small part of the period Waesland Textiles was active. They give a good idea of the variety and the possibilities of a big weaving manufacturer. Of the way it adjusts the product to the export market and of the habit to look over the borders for inspiration.
The second example considers the work of Elisabeth de Saedeleer (1902-1972), the daughter of Valerius de Saedeleer, one of Flanders realistic painters from the first half of the 20th century. Between 1914 and 1921 the family stayed in Wales. They met Mary Morris, daughter of William Morris, and weavers who had worked for him. Valerius de Saedeleer started a weaving studio where his daughters were working. Back in Flanders they continued their activity in Etikhove.

During the 1920’s and ‘30s the studio of Elisabeth de Saedeleer was especially known for making knotted floor coverings. The designs were made by Belgian artists like Paul Haesaerts. She also wove tapestries. For the World Exhibitions in Paris in 1937 and in New York in 1939 the Belgian government had ordered tapestries after designs of Edgar Tytgat. In the 1960’s Elisabeth de Saedeleer made several knotted wall hangings after designs of Michel Seuphor. In 1965 and 1967 they were selected for the International Biennale for Tapestries in Lausanne.

De Saedeleer has taught her whole life. When in 1927 the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde founded in Brussels the “Ecole Nationale Superieure d’ Architecture et des Arts Visuels” better known as ‘La Cambre’, he asked Elisabeth to teach the “cours des arts du tissu”. She did so until 1946. A picture of 1931 shows her in her classroom. In 1947 de Saedeleer published the book “The Art of Hand Weaving”. Beside the materials, the spinning, the dyeing and the weaving, she described several weaving techniques and speaks about carpet weaving and making tapestries.

The same year she started the Atelier et Ecole Elisabeth de Saedeleer. That studio, where she gave classes, executed tapestries and wove utility textiles, such as shawls, tablecloths, place mats, and book covers, as well as decorative textiles, existed until 1965. Since the carpets and tapestries of De Saedeleer are collected and best known, the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels were very happy with a private gift of more than 20 textiles woven at this studio. They can be dated in the 1930’s and ‘40’s and are close to what she describes in her book.

One of the gifts is the small cartoon and the woven realisation in wool that is reproduced in the book. Of the materials de Saedeleer describes and shows on picture, like flax, hemp, wool, cotton, bouc1ette flax and wool, natural and artificial silk, glass-, gold- and silver thread, the museum received several leftovers.

Among the weavings are a finely woven tablecloth in flax, mercerised cotton and viscose and a decorative runner in flax and mercerised cotton. The central part is decorated by playing with the binding system. In a napkin of unbleached flax the corners are decorated in this simple way. For other tablecloths she inserted a different coloured supplementary weft. This technique is also present in covers of photograph-albums (Fig. 4) and in decorative ribbons. She also used thick woollen thread in different colours to insert in her weavings as also can be seen on a picture dating 1931. Not very spectacular are the woven, checked or striped shawls in different colours she sold in her studio.
In contrast to these, de Saedeleer experimented during the '30s and '40s using different fibers. These result in interesting weavings. The materials used, the structure and the sometimes unusual colour combinations remind us of the works of the Bauhaus weavers and for example of what Dorothy Liebes made in the 1950's. Those samples are woven in different colours and different materials, like wool, cotton, viscose, bouclette thread and other fantasy yarns, unspun flax, etc. (Fig. 5).
The unspun flax de Saedeleer also used for placemats and sisal was applied for a sober checked floor carpet in twill weave.

Although De Saedeleer ran a small studio producing textiles for the local market, she has been very important as a teacher and as a defender of the hand weaving craft in Belgium.

Third we focus on contemporary creativity, illustrated in the work of Martine Gyselbrecht, who searches for new hand-weaving techniques by manipulating the binding system.

Martine Gyselbrecht has been active in textiles since the late 1970’s. During many years she taught classes in this field. It was only in the 1980’s she went public. She was immediately spotted and over the years received many prizes and awards. In 1987 she was selected with a series of black-white-blue ikat weavings for the Grand Prix International du Lin in Milan, Italy. A year later these weavings won the first prize in the design contest Design for Europe for best jacquard upholstery fabric, organised by “Interieur 88” in Kortrijk, Flanders. Besides the ikat samples she also presented a metal rockingchair she designer and made by herself. Every 1,5 inch a rubber weft makes loops at the selfedges. Those are used for the metal frame of the chair: the fabric becomes an integrated part of the support structure.

At the end of the ‘80s Gyselbrecht explored the possibilities of coloured ikats. Samples were sold to foreign firms. So were the designs for car upholstery fabrics. They show small playful motives or geometrical patterns that remind us of the designs of the Wiener Werkstatte. When Belgian spinning mills produced a special collection of linen winter yarns, Martine Gyselbrecht was asked by “Fibelin” to create a linnen fabric for winter. In 1990-1991 the results were shown at the Paris fair for clothing fabric “Première Vision”.

Fig. 6.
The interest of the designer shifted towards natural materials and the way they can be used, including the way they can be interlaced to form a fabric, a weaving. The wall hanging *Communication Wire* (240 x 200 cm) is a good example. In 1991 this piece was selected for the 3th International Textile Fair in Kyoto, Japan. It grew out of her fascination with characters and the origin of writing. She describes the tapestry as follows: ‘The story that is going around is one of talk carried on by a thread, lead into the warp and performed by the weft, languaged by the weaver the writings legible in the up and down movements of the contents’. It is woven on a 24 shafts loom and consists of three warp sets. She continues with variations to this script and sells her designs to the industry.

The samplebooks that were exhibited in Kyoto (Fig. 6) show a graphic and a structure that reminds of Anni Albers’ pictorial weavings of the ’50s. Typical for these black and beige samples are the variety in rhythm obtained through the binding and the structure.

Through the use of different materials the stores she makes, which can be used as mobile partition walls in lofts, show a subtle play of colours. Black, white and grey linen warp threads form the basis for a weft in natural, light brown and dark brown veneer wood. Also different colours of reed (Fig. 7) and leather, as well as the subtle use and alternation of natural twigs are used for the roller-blinds.

Original and one-of-a-kind creations are the fabrics for furniture designed by Rafaël De Swerts, a young Flemish designer. The natural flax plays a dominant role in the cover of the more than two meters long benches. The brilliance of the material is articulated by the play of the binding system and Gyselbrecht makes a simple diamond twill fit well with a sober chair.

For the interior decoration she also designed floor coverings: carpets in twill weave woven in flax or in paper cord and playful cartoons in paper to be tufted in wool. In her designs for curtains she plays with simple geometrical motives and transparancy.
Sometimes fine metal thread has been chosen or acrylic is used and shrunk by heating. Although she is loyal to natural materials like flax, she stays open to all interesting possibilities like for instance lycra. During weaving the material is not elastic, but after a treatment with steam it becomes stretchy and stays that way. By combining the lycra with flax, that keeps its length, all different kind of effects can be obtained. This makes the woven structure not immediately recognisable as such. In many of the samples the designer weaves, the presence of nature, like wind, sand and water, can be felt. Those textiles are woven on a computerised 24 shafts loom. They are not designed to be used for one specific purpose. The weaver prefers to see that the client decides for what use the fabric will be applied.

The artist also weaves very simple wall hangings which express a big emotional force and she has woven several pieces to be used by her partner as a painter’s canvas.

Beside designing textiles, which Martine Gyselbrecht considers as creative work, the artist also expresses herself in free creations. In 1993 she won a prize at the Japan Textile-Paper Design Competition with her work Meta’phora which shows strips of potretphotographs. The handwriting of each person was added on chalk paper. This work and a selection of her textiles were on view on the “First Triennial for Design in Flanders”, organised in 1995 by the Artistic Crafts Department of the Flemish Institute for Small and Medium Enterprises 12.

At present, the artist weaves with little colour and as such she visualises purity. Both her inner feelings as well as her intellect reveal itself in her work. About her textile designs she says: ‘My designs stand midway between art and design, old and new, here and there, nature and culture. All of those contrasting elements, which are part of our society.’

Besides Martine Gyselbrecht, Belgium counts many more textile designers working both independently as for manufacturers.

At present, Flanders still plays an important role in the textile industry. The fact that 90% of the production is woven for export is a good example of the continuing output of Flemish weaving.

1 Roller printed cotton manufactured by Rosendale Printing Co.
2 Printed velvet, Paris, Pilon et Cie.
3 Silk and cotton.
6 2eme Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne, 1965, p. 21; 3eme Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne, 1967, no.73.
8 A second edition was published after her death: De Saedeleer, Elisabeth, De handweefkunst, Brussel, 1974.
9 De Saedeleer, Elisabeth, De handweefkunst, Brussel, 1974, p. 105.