

How a Young Girl Went to Wales during the Great War, to Become the Leading Lady at 'La Cambre' Institut supérieur des arts décoratifs in Brussels¹

This article will elaborate on the case of Elisabeth De Saedeleer who by invitation of the Davies sisters of Aberystwyth made Wales her home during the Great War. Elisabeth worked in Aberystwyth until 1922, commissioned to do so by the Davies sisters, who were keen on injecting Aberystwyth's cultural life with the expertise of refugee-artists. Elisabeth trained in tapestry weaving in the William Morris tradition, and when back in Belgium her tapestry firm would grow out to be an important one in the Interwar period.

The exile in Wales clearly influenced the De Saedeleer's oeuvre and her further development and allows one to study the interaction of the artist with the political-cultural life in Wales, and also how the Welsh art-life in its turn gave impulses. On her return to Belgium Elisabeth would become out to be a sought-after artist, who cooperated with modernist designers and architects for over more than a decade. She was invited to teach at La Cambre by founding director Henry Vande Velde in 1925. Both Welsh and Belgian archives, sources and designs are now being researched and analyzed in order to portray this aspects of Belgian interior design which has never before been researched.

Keywords: war refugee, interior design, tapestry, Belgium, Arts and Crafts

At the beginning of the Great War in August 1914 Belgium was a neutral country. The German invasion came as a shock and the German atrocities were so extreme, that vast masses of the Belgian population left their homes and fled to France, the Netherlands and Great Britain. Hundreds of thousands of Belgians passed the ports of Antwerp and Ostend and tried to board a boat to cross the channel (Fig. 1). In total over 150 000 Belgians, of whom approximately 300 were artists of all sorts, would stay for a shorter or a longer period in Britain during the War.

The many refugees caused chaos, especially in the first months of the war, due to the surprise attack of the Germans, but, however chaotic it might have been, the British press spoke of a peaceful invasion. The Belgians were in general not seen as a threat. At that time it was clear that their stay would be temporary.²

Once the refugees arrived in Folkestone, for instance, they were transported to London by train (Fig. 2). There they were registered at the offices of the War Refugee Committee in the General Building of Aldwych in London. This committee sought to house, clothe and provide for the Belgians. After a few months many Belgians found their own place to stay, and started to organize their temporary lives in the United Kingdom (UK). The War Refugee Committee was set up, under the presidency of statesman Herbert John Gladstone (1854–1930), and in many smaller cities and in the country local subcommittees were also set up. The subcommittees also took care of the refugees and sought to house, clothe and provide for them.³ The local committees were expected to inform the central WRC of the number of refugees they were receiving, the number of women and children, how much money they'd collected, how many refugees found work, and whether this was a temporary or a long term engagement.⁴ The board for employment of the Belgians in Great Britain was also located

1 This article was first published as Caterina Verdickt, "The Case of Elisabeth De Saedeleer: The Influence of Welsh Hospitality in the Great War on Belgian Modernist Interior Design," *British Art Journal* 15, no. 3 (2015), 93–98.

2 Peter Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War*, (New York; London: Garland, 1982), 2–4 and 9.

3 Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee*, 50; Pierre Purseigle, "A Wave on to Our Shores': The Exile and Resettlement of Refugees from the Western Front, 1914–1918," *Contemporary European History* 16, no. 4 (2007), DOI: 10.1017/S0960777307004109, 431–432.

4 Report of the Local Committee, Department of Manuscripts, inv. no. ex 1176, National Library of Wales (or NLW), Aberystwyth.



Fig. 1. Belgian Refugees in Antwerp, 1914.
Courtesy of Flanders Fields Museum.



Fig. 2. Fredo Franzoni,
The Landing of the Belgian Refugees, 1915,
oil on canvas, 212 x 284 cm.
Courtesy of Folkestone Library,
Folkestone Town Council.

in London, having its offices at Hotel Cecil, the Strand. In 1915, for instance, a large number of Belgians did not find employment and problems concerning their maintenance emerged.⁵ Owing to the scattered events of the War, one cannot speak of a general logical and well conducted cultural policy. These artist-refugees went ashore in the UK and were then dispatched all over the country. They ended up in London, Glasgow, Devonshire...

However in Wales, the situation was completely different and one can affirmatively state that indeed a deliberate policy was pursued. To illustrate this we turn to the case of Elisabeth De Saedeleer (1902–1972).

How a Belgian Artistic Family Ended up in Wales

Elisabeth De Saedeleer, the second daughter of the prominent Belgian artist Valerius De Saedeleer (1867–1941), left her home shortly after the outbreak of the war. She and her family fled from Sint Martens Latem, a village near Gent, together with two other artists, Gustave van de Woestijne (1881–1947) and George Minne (1866–1941), and their families to Zeeland. There they were stranded in the small village of Sint Anna ter Muiden. Here they met Raphael L. Petrucci (1872–1917), an Italian with a French mother, who lived in Brussels as he was attached to the Solvay Institute. Before coming to Sint Anna ter Muiden Petrucci had just had a visit from Fabrice Polderman (1885–1948), a Belgian professor working in Cardiff. Polderman told Petrucci that Belgian artists were welcome in Wales.

Fabrice Polderman himself was sent by David Davies (1880–1944) of Aberystwyth with a specific message: 'invite Belgian artists into Wales, where they would not only be able to continue their work but also bring a specific talent to the Welsh people'.⁶

Confusion or a misunderstanding arose here, though, because the painters and their families believed they would go to Cardiff. They expected to meet up with friends such as painter Emile Claus (1849–1924) and writer Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916), but that never happened. This particularity is confirmed by writer Jozef Muls (1882–1961) and Emile Claus. Emile Claus a well-known Belgian painter, and also a refugee, ended up in London. He recalls fleeing the London noise and travelling to Cardiff in search of his friends, Minne, De Saedeleer and Van de Woestijne. But 'I did not find my friends' testified Claus to Jozef Muls, a Belgian professor who lived in Oxford during the war.⁷

Now in order to get this company of Belgian artists to Aberystwyth, another friend of the Davies family, Professor Herbert John Fleure (1877–1969) –a professor in Geography, Anthropology and Zoology at the University of Aberystwyth– was sent to London to await the three families at Euston station then accompany them to make sure they arrived safely. So to their great surprise the families ended up in Aberystwyth and not in Cardiff, as Gustave van de Woestijne wrote to his friend Jozef Muls.⁸

Nevertheless, the arrival of the Belgian artists was mentioned enthusiastically in the local newspapers of 7 October 1914:

⁵ Emile Van der Velde, *Letter by Emile Van der Velde to Rev. E. Aman Jones, in name of 'Bureau pour la protection du travail Belge à l'étranger'*, November 9, 1915, Department of Manuscripts, inv. no. ex 1176, NLW, Aberystwyth.

⁶ Moira Vincentelli, "The Davies Family and Belgian Refugee Artists and Musicians in Wales," *The National Library of Wales Journal* 22, no. 2 (1981), 228–230.

⁷ Jozef Muls, *Het rijk der stilte: De kunst en de oorlog*, (Antwerpen: Maatschappij voor goede en goedkoope lectuur, 1920), 91–92; Cyriel Buysse, *Emile Claus, mijn broeder in Vlaanderen*, (Gent-Bussum, s.d.), 31.

⁸ Gustave Van de Woestyne, *Letter by Gustave Van de Woestyne to Jozef Muls, June 2, 1915*, Box Gustave van de Woestijne, inv. no. 16 284 Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten Brussel (or KMSKB), Brussels, Archief voor Hedendaagse Kunst in België (or AHK).



Fig. 3. Exhibition of Belgian Art 1915. Courtesy of NMGW Cardiff.

A contingent of Belgian refugees reached Aberystwyth on Saturday by the express train from Euston and received a hearty welcome by inhabitants... It is stated that the adults are distinguished professional teachers, musicians and painters of a high station in life.⁹

Why were these Belgian artists so desired in Aberystwyth? The answer to this question has to be sought with the Davies family of Aberystwyth: David, Gwendolyn (1882–1951) and Margaret Davies (1884–1963) were the grand-children of David Davies (1818–1890), a Victorian industrialist. The sisters became philanthropists who used their fortune derived from mining to support Welsh social and cultural life. They were interested in the arts, music, literature and education. At the beginning of the war, the Davies family decided to invite Belgian artists in Wales to stay there. They saw an opportunity in the War events and hoped to inject local cultural life with the expertise of the Belgians.¹⁰

According to Vincentelli, Gwendolyn wrote to J H Davies in October 1914:

My sister and I together with Professor Tom Jones went to Alexandra Palace the week before last in search for refugees. Our original intention was to get people of the artisan or trades people class but we found that Roman Catholics are most vigilant and are preventing these people as far as possible from being taken into protestant homes [sic].¹¹

⁹ Vincentelli, "The Davies Family," 226, where she quotes *Aberystwyth Dispatch*, *Cardigan Bay Visitor* and *Directory*, 7 October 1914, 1, col. 8.

¹⁰ Carolyn Stewart, "Een experiment in cultuurbeleid: Het mecenaat van Gwendoline en Margaret Davies en de Belgische kunstenaars in Wales 1914–1918," in Robert Hoozee, Caterina Verdickt and Eric Rowan, *Kunst in Ballingschap: Vlaanderen, Wales en de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Gent: Pandora, 2002), 40–45.

¹¹ Vincentelli, "The Davies Family," 226, where she quotes Gwendoline Davies, *Letter by Gwendoline Davies to J.H. Davies, October 4, 1914*, Department of Manuscripts, J. H Davies MSS, M 1991, 30, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

This tension caused by the differences between Catholics and Protestants, between the hosts and the guests was significant. John Vyrnwy Morgan (1860–1925) wrote about the Belgian Refugees in his chapter "Belgians in Wales" in *The War and Wales* (1916). He elaborates on the noble nature of the Welsh, on the racial inferiority of the Belgians, especially concerning the religious differences between the Belgians and the Welsh. He states explicitly that the Belgians are indeed inferior to the Welsh.¹²

The Davies' tried to overcome these religious and social differences and as stated before, aimed at inserting into Welsh art the influence of the invited Belgian artists, so that a much desired Welsh artistic revival could be initiated. They had socio-cultural and politic motives for promoting Welsh art, as a nationalistic art, in order to revive it. The sisters had already organized an exhibition in 1913 at the National Museum and Galleries in Cardiff.

With this Loan Exhibition, where their art collection was presented to the public, they wanted to show high quality art to the public in the hope of inspiring that public. In the same spirit they sought to attract the Belgian artists. Gwendoline wrote to Thomas Jones (1870–1955) that she was very hopeful and that she anticipated that great things would happen in Wales.¹³

In 1915 an Exhibition of Belgian art, which travelled through the UK and was shown in Cardiff, can also be seen in the same philosophy (Fig. 3). This exhibition was held in cooperation with Sir William Goscombe John (1860–1952) (Fig. 4). John was a member of the board of directors of the National Museum and saw to it that the mentioned exhibition came to Wales.¹⁴ From October 1914 many exhibitions with Belgian art were being held throughout the country. These exhibitions were held in order to raise awareness of the Belgian cultural heritage and to show at the same time what kind of culture the Germans were destroying on the continent. For instance, an Artists War Fund exhibition was held at Dicksees in London, 7 Duke Street. The aim of this expo was to raise funds for the Prince of Wales National Relief fund. Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) and George Clausen

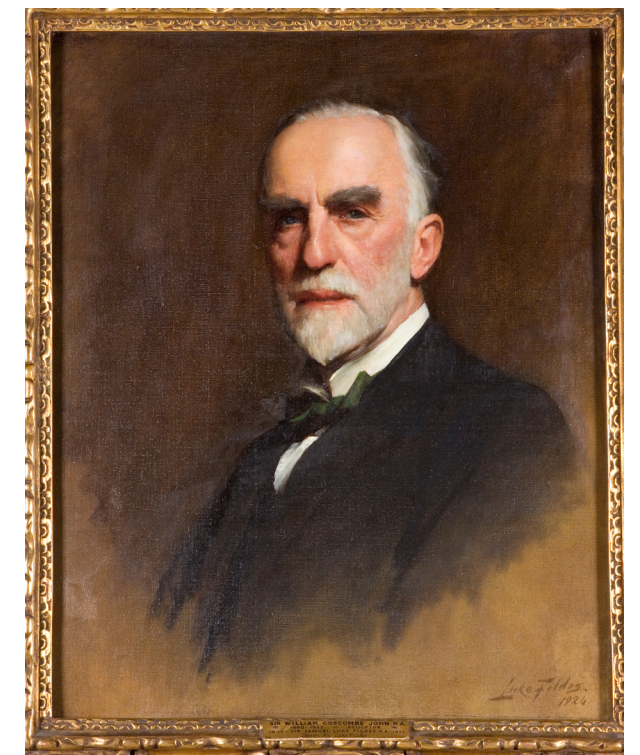


Fig. 4. Samuel Fildes, *Sir William Goscombe John*, 1924, oil on canvas, 67,6 x 55,2 cm. Courtesy of NMGW Cardiff.

¹² John Vyrnwy Morgan, *The War and Wales* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1916), 160.

¹³ Oliver Fairclough (ed.), *Things of Beauty: What Two Sisters Did for Wales* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 2007), 62–63.

¹⁴ Eric Rowan, "Kunst in Wales rond 1900," in Hoozee, Verdickt and Stewart, *Kunst in Ballingschap*, 26–27; Stewart, "Een experiment," 48.

(1852–1944) contributed to this show.¹⁵ In November 1914 a first collective exhibition of “Belgian Masterpieces” in London was held. This time the show was set up in specific aid of Belgian artists in need. Over 100 works of art made by well-known artists were on show at Mac Lean Gallery at 7 Haymarket. These works of art were smuggled in to Britain and passed through German lines, the article in the newspaper mentioned.¹⁶



Fig. 5. Valerius De Saedeleer and family in front of Tynlon. Courtesy of Archives Businarias Maarkedal.

In Aberystwyth at the beginning of the War a special committee was organized for the Belgian war refugees. This illustrates that the ideas of the Davies’ were being supported by the town’s inhabitants. The first meeting of this committee was held on 28 October 1914, in the city hall. They agreed to meet on a weekly basis on Mondays, hence showing their engagement. The committee housed 130 Belgian refugees in Aberystwyth, among them some renowned Belgian musicians, who gave 22 concerts during the first year of their exile period, thus realizing another cultural dream of the Davies sisters.¹⁷

The Davies sisters generously housed their artist-refugees- guests, who were warmly welcomed. The Minne family and van de Woestijne family were housed in Llanidloes. The De

Saedeleer family was happy to stay in a house called Tynlon in Rhydyfelin (Fig. 5). The father Valerius started working immediately after his arrival and quickly established himself in the art circles of Aberystwyth.

Reaction of the Public on the Arrival of the Belgians in Aberystwyth

The *Welsh Outlook*, a magazine founded and financed by David Davies in order to focus on Welsh cultural life, published an article on the arrival of the Belgian artists:

Probably no part of the Kingdom outside London, has so many distinguished Belgians among its guests as are now to be found in Wales. At their head stand [sic.] Emile Verhaeren, who is

staying at Llynarthan. A few miles away at Barry is Emile Claus, Belgium’s best known painter. At Aberystwyth we have another able sculptor M. Minne... with him at Aberystwyth De Saedeleer, Van der Woostyne (sic) and L. Petrucci – all well-known names in art circles on the continent.¹⁸

As stated before, the presence of these artists was seen as a good opportunity to enhance Welsh cultural life. Vincentelli identified the author as Fabrice Polderman, a Belgian professor who had secured a position at the university college in Cardiff. Gustave van de Woestijne would later paint his portrait during the War while Polderman lives in Birmingham. The editor Thomas Jones, who was a good friend of the Davies family, spent a few days in Belgium in September 1914 together with Fabrice Poldermans and W. J. Burdon Evans.¹⁹

Yet, and this was also mentioned by Vincentelli, Polderman wrote in the *Welsh Outlook*:

The study of painting and sculpture is in a deplorably backward condition in Wales. Shall we take full and immediate advantage of the unexpected presence in our midst of this brilliant group: take counsel with them: give them facilities to exercise their genius: give our young art students the chance of seeing them at work? What will the three colleges do? And the Art Academies? And the Art Schools? The opportunity is unique but we may be too parochial to seize it.²⁰

How Did the Family Maintain Itself?

Of course the family needed to adjust to their new environment, but from the beginning of 1915 Valerius De Saedeleer wrote positively to his friend about his Welsh situation: ‘I am working quite well here. I have my family with me in a beautiful country and a nice home, I am as happy as I can be, far away from Flanders and the horrible war.’²¹ The addressed friend is Jozef Muls who was at that time living in Oxford, where he in turn maintained himself in the best of ways. He too organised an exhibition of modern Belgian arts, and for this he invited Valerius De Saedeleer to send some new Welsh works. *The Vale of the Reidol, Tancastell Farm, Sweet solitude of Cardigan* and

¹⁵ *Standard*, October 28, 1914.

¹⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, November 24, 1914; Paul Buschmann, “Belgian Artists in England, second article,” *The Studio: An Illustrated Magazine of Fine and Applied Art* 67, no. 263 (February 1915), 46.

¹⁷ Members of the committee were Miss Palchett, Gwendoline Davies, Mrs. Mendham, Mrs. Morgan, Mrs. Parr, Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Denton, and Mr. E D Jones as the secretary, Reverend Falker Wilcock, Mr. Rhys Jones, Mr. Williams, Reverend PH Lewis and Chairman Rees Jones. This committee received a letter from the Belgian born Mr. Laoureux, who stayed in Aberystwyth asking the committee whether they could shelter the family of the Belgian composer Dupuy. Minutes of the meetings of the Belgian Refugee Committee, Department of Manuscripts, M, MS 2639c, NLW, Aberystwyth.

¹⁸ F.B., “Notes of the Month,” in *The Welsh Outlook* 1, no. 11 (November 1914), 457, quote has been published by Vincentelli, “The Davies Family,” 227.

¹⁹ Vincentelli, “The Davies Family,” 228.

²⁰ F.B., “Notes of the Month,” 457.

²¹ Valerius de Saedeleer, *Letter from Valerius de Saedeleer to Jozef Muls, April 15, 1915*, Archief en Museum Vlaamse Cultuurleven - Letterenhuis, Antwerp dossier S 1155.



Fig. 6. Valerius De Saedeleer, Marie Joseph, their friend Louise and Monica on Aberystwyth beach. Courtesy of Archives Businarias Maarkedal.

Recollection of Beautiful Flanders were first shown to the public at this exhibition. He sold the first three of the four works.²²

In Aberystwyth itself Valerius De Saedeleer became somewhat of a local celebrity (Fig. 6). Valerius De Saedeleer payed many bills with his paintings. He had personal exhibitions from 1916 onwards. In February 1916 he exhibited his work in Alexandra Hall at the university college. He also worked as assistant to the drawing master of the university Daniel Rowland Jones (1875–1924).

In 1918 Valerius was also appointed as the future head of the arts and crafts centre, which was another project of the Davies sisters. The founding of the centre had been an idea of Professor

Fleure and the Davies sisters, who donated 5000 pounds towards it. Their main goal was to establish a centre for the arts and crafts in the heart of Wales. Their project was supported by Thomas Jones, who would be assistant secretary of the new coalition cabinet in 1916, and by David Davies, who became private secretary to Premier Lloyd George (1863–1945) in 1916.²³

Initially the Davies sisters put a lot of effort and energy into the Belgians but after a while they redirected their war interests towards more political and social activities. They volunteered as nurses and worked for several years in a canteen in Troyes.²⁴ However, their efforts did have their merits and did affect cultural life indirectly. This was especially true of the daughters of Valerius De Saedeleer.

Marie and Elisabeth De Saedeleer learned their techniques in Wales. They met a former employee of William Morris (1834–1896), who suggested that the girls should take up weaving.²⁵ The second daughter, Elisabeth, would get acquainted with Mary 'May' Morris (1862–1938), who also trained her in tapestry weaving. It is unclear whether she met with Mary Morris in London or in Wales. But several sources mention their acquaintance.²⁶

After a while the girls work became successful, so much so that Valerius de Saedeleer thought about starting a training centre for tapestry weaving. Thus professor Fleure wrote to Thomas Jones in October 1918: 'The De Saedeleer family could really organize weaving a winter work for a village and would like to do so.'²⁷

In this period Valerius De Saedeleer and his family met Jacob de Graaff (1873–1947), a wealthy Dutch entrepreneur who resided in London during the War and who collected many works of art by Belgian artists. De Graaff previously met Gustave van de Woestijne at an exhibition in London in 1916. Before De Graaff met the Belgian artists, he was keen on nineteenth century French art. However, after meeting Hippolyte Daeye (1873–1952), Léon De Smet (1881–1966) and Gustave van de Woestijne in London, he learned about modern art and specifically modern Belgian art. Because of this acquaintance De Graaff bought work from Constant Permeke (1886–1952), Van de Woestijne and De Saedeleer during the war. He in return introduced the Belgian artists to London Society, bought them tickets to the theatre and took them out. He took Gustave Van de Woestijne, for instance, to see the show 'Baby's in the Wood'.²⁸ It is Gustave van de Woestijne who introduced Valerius De Saedeleer to Jacob De Graaff late 1918. He wrote in a letter to De Graaff that De Saedeleers work was on show at the Grosvenor Gallery in New Bond Street and in the same letter he asked if De Graaff would mind viewing his friend's work and if possible buying one.²⁹

From the beginning of 1919, De Saedeleer started a written correspondence with De Graaff himself. He invited De Graaff to an exhibition in Aberystwyth of his work and that of his daughters, who made tapestries after the design of their father.³⁰ Whether De Graaff made the journey to Aberystwyth to see the exhibition is unclear but he did invite the girls to London not much later. In February 1919, Jacob De Graaff invited the De Saedeleer sisters to visit him at his London house. Gustave van de Woestijne, who was Elisabeth's godfather, agreed to accompany them on their trip which was planned for March 1919.³¹ De Graaff helped them out on several occasions by investing in their art and craft, so that they could buy supplies, thus responding to De Saedeleer's plea for

22 Valerius de Saedeleer, *Letter from Valerius de Saedeleer to Jozef Muls, April 23, 1915*, Archief en Museum Vlaamse Cultuurleven - Letterenhuis, Antwerp, S 1155; *Exhibition of Belgian Art* (Oxford, 1915), 5.

23 Stewart, "Een experiment," 50; Herbert John Fleure, *Letter by Professor to Thomas Jones, October 10, 1918*, DM, Thomas Jones Papers, CLASS W 7, no. 26, NLW, Aberystwyth, quoted by Vincentelli, "The Davies Family," 233.

24 Stewart, "Een experiment," 51.

25 Luc Haesaerts, "De Tapijtkunst van de gezusters De Saedeleer," *Onze Kunst: Geïllustreerd maandschrift voor beeldende en decoratieve kunsten* 22, no. 9–10 (1925), 45; Vincentelli, "The Davies Family," 231.

26 Susan Day, *Art Déco and Modernist Carpets* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 63; Elisabeth De Saedeleer, *De Handweefkunst: Het Kunstatelier Elisabeth De Saedeleer* (Brussel: Het Kunstatelier, 1974), 6; Jean Teugels, "Le Studio De Saedeleer," *Sélection: Chronique de la vie artistique et littéraire* 5, no. 4 (1926), 276; Elsje Janssen, "Creating Textiles in Belgium during the 20th Century: A Large Weaving Manufacturer, a Small Textile Studio and a Contemporary Textile Designer," in *Creating Textiles: Makers, Methods, Market: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, Inc. New York, NY, September 23–26, 1998* (Earlville, MD: Textile Society of America, Inc., 1999), 267; Ingrid De Meuter, *Kleur voor wand en vloer: Het weefatelier Elisabeth de Saedeleer (1902–1972)* (Oudenaarde: Stad Oudenaarde, 1993), 11.

27 Herbert John Fleure, *Letter from professor to Thomas Jones, October 10, 1918*, DM, Thomas Jones Papers, Class W, vol. 7 letter 26, NLW, Aberystwyth, quoted by Vincentelli, "The Davies Family," 231 and 233.

28 André Kraaeynga, *De collectie De Graaff- Bachiene: Schilderijen, beeldhouwwerken, tekeningen en grafiek* (Heino: Hannema-de Stuersfundatie, 1992), 11.

29 Jacob de Graaff was a close friend of David Van Buuren, they met on a regular base at the Le Centaure and Giroux Galleries in Brussels, see Françoise Lechien Durant, *Museum David en Alice van Buuren: Huis van herinneringen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1995), 101; Gustave van de Woestijne, *Letter from Gustave van de Woestijne to Jacob De Graaff, November 19, 1918*, Dossier Gustave van de Woestijne, inv. no. 50 716, KMSKB, Brussels, AHK.

30 Valerius de Saedeleer, *Letters from Valerius de Saedeleer to Jacob De Graaff, January 28, 1919*, Dossier Valerius de Saedeleer, inv. no 50 599, KMSKB, Brussels, AHK.

31 Gustave Van de Woestijne, *Letter from Gustave Van de Woestijne to Jacob De Graaff, February 20, 1919*, Dossier Gustave van de Woestijne, inv. no. 50 722, KMSKB, Brussels, AHK.



Fig. 7. Gregynog, home of Gwendoline and Margaret Davies.
Courtesy of Collection Rhian Davies.

help. De Saedeleer had been writing that Marie had already been working under commissions for a couple of months, yet in unbearable circumstances.³²

In April 1919 the University of Aberystwyth held festivities, during which Valerius De Saedeleer exhibited his work. This event was successful; in addition the daughters' work was sold. Later on Valerius De Saedeleer reported that his daughters' had almost enough orders to work completely independently. At that time they all were quite enthusiastic and positive about the weaving activities and the new arts and crafts centre in Aberystwyth. Later on, in 1920, Valerius De Saedeleer decided to ask Jacob De Graaff for a loan, since at this point the family still wanted to stay in Wales and invest in their lives and work there.³³

Professor Fleure wrote to Miss Davies on 16th March 1920: 'If the De Saedeleer family wants to stay I am only too glad to agree. They are valuable to the country. On the other hand I cannot urge them to stay under the circumstances created by Thomas Jones [sic.] non-election.'³⁴

Progress in the establishment of the centre for weaving techniques was difficult: Valerius De Saedeleer wanted to wait and initially did not want to return to Belgium. Yet the Centre never achieved its full promise: Valerius De Saedeleer had been promised the position of head, but that did not happen because one of the initial founders, Thomas Jones was not re-elected and so the

Centre lost one of its principal advocates. The plans for establishing the centre of arts and crafts in Aberystwyth were delayed yet again and so Valerius De Saedeleer decided to move back to Belgium. Professor Fleure also stated that it was for this reason that Valerius De Saedeleer left Aberystwyth.

A year later the Davies sisters went to live in Gregynog Hall (Fig. 7), in Montgomeryshire, with the original intention of turning it into a rural centre for arts and crafts. By funding the establishment of both a Department of Art and an Arts and Crafts Collection at The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, the sisters envisaged that the two ventures would lead to an arts and crafts revival for Wales.³⁵

Back in Belgium

When the De Saedeleer family moved back to Belgium in 1921, they established themselves in Etikhove and named their new home Tynlon after their Welsh one. The first project they undertook was the founding of an arts and crafts centre in Etikhove, which would become a centre of weaving techniques in the Modernist Belgian era, thus building on what they had learned in Wales.

The tapestry studio was set up next to their father's atelier and initially Marie and Elisabeth took charge of the workplace together, but Marie De Saedeleer stopped her weaving activities due to personal circumstances Luc Haesaerts wrote, although he did not specify what those were.³⁶

The studio was organised along the lines directly derived from the Arts and Crafts movement wrote Susan Day.³⁷ Elisabeth would transfer the designs to the actual size required and painted the sample cards herself. At this atelier she started working with the designs of artists such as Edgar Tijtgaat (1879–1957) and Gustave van de Woestijne -Zon (Fig. 8) and Schaal (Fig. 9) for instance-, and of architects such as Albert van Huffel (1877–1935), who had been commissioned to contribute to the reconstruction of Belgium. In the tapestry made in this period many flora and fauna motifs were used, as were vivid colours and butterflies - for example *Spring* by Albert Van Huffel.³⁸

Elsje Janssen judged that her use of central lockets and arabesques can be compared with textiles designed by, and show the influences of the traditions of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts weaving techniques.³⁹ In 1925 Belgian art critic Luc Haesaerts commented in *Onze Kunst* on the De Saedeleer tapestry on show in Gallery Renis in Antwerp from 27 December 1924 to 15 January

32 Valerius de Saedeleer, *Letters from Valerius de Saedeleer to Jacob De Graaff, February 25, 1919 and March 29, 1919*, Dossier Valerius de Saedeleer, inv. no. 50 600 and 50 602, KMSKB, Brussels, AHK.

33 Valerius de Saedeleer, *Letters from Valerius de Saedeleer to Jacob De Graaff, March 4 1919 and January 29 1920*, Dossier Valerius de Saedeleer, inv. no. 50 601 and 50 614, KMSKB, Brussels AHK.

34 Herbert John Fleure, *Letter from Professor Fleure to Miss Davies, March 16, 1920*, T Jones Papers, Class W Vol. 7, 68, NLW, Aberystwyth, quoted by Vincentelli, "The Davies Family," 233.

35 Stewart, "Een experiment," 52; Fairclough, *Things of Beauty*, 82–89.

36 Luc Haesaerts, "De Tapijtkunst van de gezusters De Saedeleer," *Onze Kunst* 42, no. 9–10 (1925), 46.

37 Day, *Art Decò*, 63.

38 N.N., "Vlaamse Tapijtweefkunst van de gezusters De Saedeleer," *Elseviermaandschrift*, no. 1 (1926), 149–150; Nairy Vrouyr, *Art Déco* (Antwerp: Vrouyr, 2010), 17.

39 Janssen, "Creating Textiles," 267.



Fig. 8. Gustave van de Woestijne, ex. by Elisabeth De Saedeleer, *Zon*, 1925, cellulose and wool, 172 x 212 cm. Courtesy of Collection Vrouyr Antwerp.



Fig. 9. Gustave van de Woestijne, ex. by Elisabeth De Saedeleer, *Schaal*, 1925, cellulose and wool, 103 x 169 cm. Courtesy of Collection Vrouyr Antwerp.

1925.⁴⁰ In the next edition of *Onze Kunst*, Haesaerts devotes a complete article to the art of the sisters. He explains their origins, techniques, design and innovations. In the same article, Haesaerts elaborates on the techniques the sisters employed and of their novelty compared to the old weaving techniques.⁴¹

During the 1920s and 1930s –the Modernist years par excellence– the studio of Elisabeth De Saedeleer and her sisters' became well known for their vivid and colourful knotted floor coverings, mural carpets and fabrics for scarfs and table cloths.⁴² Studio de Saedeleer searched for the ideal formula for the design of tapestry: a floor carpet is, according to them, a component of the entire interior design and has to fit in as such. They did not see a tapestry as a separate independent work of art. The bases for the composition of design are the measurements and the tightness of the knots. Elisabeth worked in a pictorial manner creating depth by using colour.⁴³

The demure carpets were knotted and not inlaid as was customary in Flemish traditions. The sisters used by preference vertical weaving looms because they offered more control. Haesaerts describes the used techniques exhaustively in his article.⁴⁴

40 Luc Haesaerts, "Tapijten der juffrouwen De Saedeleer," *Onze Kunst* 41, no. 1–2 (1925), 70–80.

41 Haesaerts, "De Tapijtkunst van de gezusters," 45–58.

42 Janssen, "Creating Textiles," 267.

43 De Meuter, *Kleur voor wand*, 12.

44 Haesaerts, "De Tapijtkunst van de gezusters," 47–51.

Karel Van de Woestijne, a contemporary renowned art critic had also visited the studio and wrote in positive words about the art of the daughters of Valerius de Saedeleer.⁴⁵ 'A good carpet is not a personal victory: it is in essence a designated enrichment of a beautiful interior, equally to a piece of furniture, a platter or a well cut mirror.'⁴⁶

Haesaerts reflected on the novelty of these tapestry and judged imported tapestry from the east to be the remains of the past, from a time that had lost all sense for architecture and decorative arts. Architecture had become an art of adjusting style upon style, he wrote and when decorating a house one would apply every one of those styles. Tapestry also suffered from this crisis of logical and constructive impotence. But after the war things changed wrote Haesaerts. 'Our Time will have its own style; midst searching and errors/failing we'll see her grow and first and foremost she seems to be logical.'⁴⁷

The De Saedeleer carpets used to be very highly esteemed. They made six pieces of every design. Each carpet had its own number and the signature of the designer and of the maker/ the sisters.⁴⁸ Elisabeth's work was installed in the famous National Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Koekelberg designed by Albert Van Huffel, one of Belgium's most famous art deco monuments. In her career Elisabeth made tapestry after the designs of artists such as Ossip Zadkine, Michel Seuphor, Marc Chagall and André Llothe.⁴⁹ 'Quelle est en Europe la firme qui puisse se targuer d'avoir mis sur pied un catalogue si brillant?' wrote Georges Marlier in *Art et Décoration* in 1928.⁵⁰ 'A l'heure où la jeune peinture belge suscite partout une légitime admiration, l'activité du Studio De Saedeleer vient enrichir d'un apport précieux le tableau de la vie artistique en Belgique.'⁵¹

In 1927 Elisabeth De Saedeleer was asked by founding director Henri Van de Velde to teach at La Cambre, one of the major art and designs schools in Belgium. Here she found herself in the core

45 'Er zijn ontwerpen van Elisabeth de Saedeleer, die mooie schilderijen maakt; er zijn aanminnige ontwerpen van haar jongste zuster, de pas veertienjarige Godelieve; er zijn aristokratische van Gustaaf van de Woestijne en Assyrische, maar toch zoo leuk-Vlaamsche van den jongen beeldhouwer Leplae; er zijn geestig-fantastische van Edgard Tytgat enforsch-decoratieve van Jules Boulez; er zijn ontwerpen van den rechtstreeksche medewerker van de juffrouwen De Saedeleer, den kunscriticus Paul Haesaerts, die bewijst, dat hij de techniek van het tapijtweven meester is; er is er een - en dat zal u genoeg doen - van Jan Sluyters, dat eerlang wordt uitgevoerd,' in Karel Van de Woestijne, *Verzameld journalistiek werk: Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant september 1925 – november 1926*, edited by Ada Deprez (Gent: Cultureel Documentatiecentrum, 1994), vol.14, 151–152.

46 'Een goed tapijt is niet eene persoonlijke overwinning: het is hoofdzakelijk de aangewezen verrijking van een schoon intérieur, net als een meubel, een schotel, een goed-geslepen spiegel,' in Van de Woestijne, *Verzameld journalistiek werk*, 150.

47 'Onze tijd zal zijn eigen stijl hebben; temidden van het gezoek en de vergissing zien we hem stilaan opgroeien, en hij schijnt in de eerste plaats logisch te willen zijn,' in Haesaerts, 'De Tapijtkunst van de gezusters,' 53.

48 Haesaerts, 'De Tapijtkunst van de gezusters,' 57.

49 De Meuter, *Kleur voor wand*, 22 and 81.

50 Georges Marlier, "Les tapis De Saedeleer," *Art et Décoration: Revue mensuelle d'Art Moderne* (September, 1928), 84.

51 Marlier, "Les tapis De Saedeleer," 88.



Fig. 10. Elisabeth De Saedeleer at La Cambre, second lady from the right, 1927.

Courtesy of Collection A. AM. Brussels.

of the Belgian artistic modernist life of the 1920s and 1930s (Fig. 10). She became colleagues with her godfather Gustave van de Woestijne and with Albert Van Huffel who were also teaching at La Cambre. She was in charge of the textile program: where she taught cloth, floor and mural tapestry thus taking up what she had learned in Wales and transferring it to her students.

Caterina Verdickt

Antwerp University – Faculty of Design Sciences



Caterina Verdickt is an art historian and conducting a Phd, *The Realm of Silence. Consequences of the Belgian artistic migration towards Great Britain during the Great War on post war Belgian interior design*, at the University of Antwerp. She was co-curator of the W. H. Berger Prize nominated exhibition "Art in Exile. Flanders, Wales and the First World War", when she worked at the Museum of Fine Arts in Gent for Robert Hoozee. She has been liason officer for the Vlaamsekunstcollectie in Belgium. At the moment she teaches History of Interior Design 1850–1950 at the Faculty of Design Sciences, Antwerp University.

E-mail: caterina.verdickt@uantwerpen.be