

Anne Marie ten Bokum

Design museum Gent

## *Art nouveau* ladies at work: rediscovered women artists in the collection of Design museum Gent

The European funded project Partage Plus has been a revealing experience for Design museum Gent. The revealing aspect consisted not only of the rediscovery of a part of the *Art Nouveau* collection, but was most prominent in the deeper study of it. Some identifications that had been wandering around for years proved to be wrong; others were confirmed and refined through deeper research.

Design museum Gent has existed for more than 110 years and harbours objects of several well-known national and international designers and producers: Henry van de Velde, Victor Horta, Paul Hankar, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, Philippe Wolfers, Albert van Huffel, Emile Gallé, Daum, Ernest Chaplet, Clément Massier, Adrien Dalpayrat, Lötze Witwe, Josef Hoffmann, Jan Eisenloeffel. But like any other museum, a lot of lesser known, unknown and anonymous designers are stored in the reserves.<sup>1</sup>

Partage Plus has uncovered many a mysterious object in Design museum Gent's reserves, but some were screaming for extra attention and they received it: the objects made by the unknown ladies of the applied arts. No female artist from the *Art Nouveau* period is on display in the museum so they deserve to come out in the open at least virtually.

The present Design museum Gent originates from the Union des Arts Industriels et Décoratifs, founded in December 1903 by a group of Ghent-based industrial entrepreneurs and art lovers. Their intention was to create a *musée des modèles* (a museum of models) in order to help craftsmen, develop and revive crafts and craftsmanship, and promote good taste through beautiful objects.<sup>2</sup> Students and craftsmen were invit-

ed to study objects and pore over model books, from bygone days and from the present.

Although primarily amateurs of period styles the committee members also purposely acquired contemporary furniture and *objets d'art*. Their choice was based on whether an object was useful for the museum's purpose, not on its origin. There is no denying the greater number of male contemporary designers, but this seems to arise rather from the available supply than from a prejudice against female designers. The same applies to the ratio of international to national: Belgian art is underrepresented. However, it must be taken into consideration that part of the old museum collection has vanished over the years. It is not clear if contemporary objects were bought to support a local artist, but it might have been a motive.

The oldest written compilation of objects present in the museum dates from 1909. Two items made by female artists are listed: an ashtray by Julie Sterpin and a vase by Marguerite Van Biesbroeck (fig. 1). The ashtray is now lost, the vase is still in the collection and dates from 1908. A couple of years later the museum purchased a dish or coin tray by Sterpin, dated 1912 (fig. 2). Who were these two women?

Marguerite Van Biesbroeck was born in Ghent on 18 January 1875, a daughter to Louis (1839–1919) who taught history of decorative arts at the Nijverheidsschool in Ghent (Industrial School). Marguerite was first trained as a painter and exhibited at salons in Ghent and Brussels in the early 1900s. Where she received her education is not yet known, but it might be at her father's school. Later she went to study in Brussels at the École de Bischoffsheim, a school founded in 1865 especially for the professional education of girls. Here she attended courses in ceramic painting and

<sup>1</sup> The quantity of objects below museum or heritage quality stored away in the reserves of museums prompts the question how far a museum can and must go in preserving the entire heritage for eternity, considering the present day issues of crises, lack of finances and space, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Quote: "vaklieden te helpen, nieuwe roepingen en kunstambachten

te doen ontluiken, vervallen takken in deze ambachten te doen herleven en de goede smaak te bevorderen door het doen groeien van de belangstelling voor mooie voorwerpen". Museum archive Design museum Gent.



Fig. 1. Marguerite Van Biesbroeck, vase, 1908, painted Limoges porcelain, 12 cm; Design museum Gent, inv. 1456, © Design museum Gent; photo: Studio Claerhout



Fig. 2. Julie Van Biesbroeck-Sterpin, coin tray, 1912, painted Limoges porcelain, 25 cm; Design museum Gent, inv. 1506, © Design museum Gent; photo: A. Demeyere

decorative composition, the latter given by renowned artist and decorator Adolphe Crespin (1859–1944), from which she graduated with high distinction. Certainly from 1907 onwards she was exhibiting painted porcelain, but also works in engraved leather.<sup>3</sup>

At Bischoffsheim the girls were educated in the new ideas on decorative arts that were emerging in Belgium and Europe, coming from the minds of geniuses like Victor Horta (1861–1947) and Philippe Wolfers (1858–1929). But it was not the only professional school for girls. In Brussels there were

also a school in Schaarbeek, the *Ecole professionnelle communale Fernand Cocq*, and the Academy of Fine Arts where classes of decorative painting for women were created.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in other Belgian cities similar schools were founded. The products and objects emerging from these institutions were presented at local, national and international exhibitions, and received overall praise.

In the spring of 1910 Marguerite moves to Brussels together with her parents. Their new abode lies close to the observatory, where her younger brother Georges (1880–1974) works as an astronomer. By that time the family already knows Julia (Julie) Sterpin, born in Bruges on 11 April 1882. The two women organised an exhibition of their painted ceramics at Marguerite's parental home in Ghent in 1910. How they came to know each other is not yet known, but maybe through their education at Bischoffsheim. Their style of painting is very related.

The friendship proved to be fertile because Julie married Georges and bore him at least two children. Georges was offered a position at Yerkes Observatory in Williams Bay (Wisconsin, USA) in 1915; his wife and children made the transatlantic migration in 1917.<sup>5</sup> After the death of their father his sister followed them with their ageing mother. Marguerite also found work at the Observatory and was a much esteemed employee until her death in 1965. Julia Van Biesbroeck-Sterpin died a few years later, in 1969. Further research into their lives, their education and their artistic production needs to be undertaken.

As the archive of the early years of the museum are scarce, no list of yearly acquisitions is available. The report on the year 1913 relates that the committee held a shopping spree at the International Exhibition in Ghent that year. They explicitly went to the Palais des Travaux Féminins (Palace of Female Works) to buy contemporary bronzes, engraved leatherworks and “des riens ravissants” (ravishing trifles). Details of what was bought was not recorded.<sup>6</sup>

Ten years later the museum reopened in its new abode, the Hotel de Coninck, where it is still located. An inventory of the rooms was drawn up, stating the room, the type of object, its material, and the maker if known, but without notes on acquisition. Still it gives an idea of what the museum had in

<sup>3</sup> Exposition Générale des Beaux-arts, Brussels, 28/8-10/11/1907, cat. no. 224 and 225.

<sup>4</sup> Courtesy of prof. dr. Werner Adriaenssens.

<sup>5</sup> Passenger records “Van Biesbroeck” on [www.libertyellisfoundation.org](http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org).

<sup>6</sup> Museum archive Design museum Gent.

store once. Beside the great lot of antique objects and furniture there was a considerable collection of modern works. From female artists there were objects in leather, wood, brass, painted porcelain and smaller ceramics.

One of those smaller ceramics is a little vase by Blanche Wallet-Josse (fig. 3). Originally, it stood on a stand in forged iron by Emile Robert, which is now lost. Possibly the set was bought at the Ghent 1913 exhibition. Apart from her living in Paris around 1914, nothing substantial has been found on Blanche Wallet-Josse so far.



Fig. 3. Blanche Wallet-Josse, vase, ca. 1913, earthenware, 11.30 cm; Design museum Gent, inv. 1547, © Design museum Gent; photo: A. Demeyere

Among the objects in leather figure two boxes by Marguerite de Félice (fig. 4). They are just small but very delicately tooled. More leatherwork by de Félice (leather cushions and handbags) still await further research.

Marguerite de Félice was allegedly born in Paris in 1872, where she died in 1933. Yet she is also noted to live in Bordeaux around 1900–1905.<sup>7</sup> By the first world war she was famous for her leatherwork. During the war she joined the opposition to the importation of German wares and turned to making toys and doll's houses to counter the German toy-monopoly. In 1917 *The Studio* reporting from Paris devoted three pictures to her doll's rooms and wrote these words of praise:

<sup>7</sup> Museum archive Design museum Gent.

"Having commenced to take part in the toy movement with self-made dolls' houses, shops, and so on, this artist, whose excellent leather-work was well known to habitués of the *arts-decoratifs* sections in the Paris Salons, has now made a bolder departure in ensembles for night and day nurseries, indoor and outdoor furniture, the town, the country, the seaside. Her wide experience in all matters connected with applied arts, extending from the joiner's to the glazier's crafts, from textile fabrics to 'art' paper, and embracing all the secrets of carving, inlaying, stencilling, embroidery, and so forth, finds happy expression in all the details combining for results at once artistic and practical, modern and in good taste."<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 4. Marguerite de Félice, box with nail decoration, ca. 1912, wood covered with leather and iron nails, 11.20 cm; Design museum Gent, inv. 1608, © Design museum Gent; photo: A. Demeyere

In 1913 Marguerite de Félice was vice-president of the so-called International Art Union, the Art Section of the Student Union of the British-American Young Women's Christian Association, founded in 1909.<sup>9</sup> Its object was to further the advancement of art among women. With this intention, the Union organized two exhibitions a year in Paris – one in the spring and one in the autumn – in this way affording an opportunity for young artists to make their work known.

Similar associations to promote women in the arts saw the light in Belgium in the early years of the previous century. There was for instance Henriëtte Bosché, a teacher at the already mentioned *Ecole professionnelle communale Fernand Cocq* and innovator of art education, who founded the first association for female decorators.<sup>10</sup> There was the *Société L'Art*

<sup>8</sup> "The Studio", vol. 72, no. 295, 15 October 1917, p. 80–81.

<sup>9</sup> "American Art Annual", vol. 10, 1918, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> Courtesy of prof. dr. Werner Adriaenssens.

au Foyer, which sought to direct female artistic talent in search of earning a living towards interior decoration and applied arts.<sup>11</sup> And then the Société Les Arts de la Femme, founded in 1908 under the patronage of Queen Elisabeth, “pour faciliter aux femmes des métiers d’art la vente rémunératrice de leurs travaux” (to facilitate the remunerative sale of products by women active in the applied arts).<sup>12</sup> Les Arts de la Femme had its own exhibition rooms in Brussels, where the achievements of female designers were on sale at a fair price for both buyer and seller.

Marguerite Van Biesbroeck and her sister-in-law Julia Sterpin were members of Les Arts de la Femme, as can be derived from their presence on their stand at the Ghent International Exhibition of 1913. The labels on the bottom of Sterpin’s coin tray and on another vase by Van Biesbroeck are most likely from the exhibition-shop of Les Arts de la Femme. The labels indicate the address of the maker and the price. This could mean that the young Design museum also bought objects in Brussels at Les Arts de la Femme.

Originating from the country where the Van Biesbroeck family found their new home is a pretty dainty letter lady that was hidden away in the reserves of the museum, as a part of over 1000 objects belonging to a bequest of various types and quality of objects. The author’s name was not known till research in view of Partage Plus uncovered the identity. The unknown “W. Hering” transformed into Elsie Ward Hering, born as Elsie Ward in Fayette, Missouri (USA) in 1872. Until her death in 1923 she was a deserving sculptor of statues great and small, including portraits and statues for public spaces. Of her letter lady several versions exist which have been sold these past years (fig. 5). Like in many other cases, her biographical facts are scanty and need more research.

Elsie Ward Hering was one of the last *Art Nouveau* ladies to enter the museum collection – it was in 1987 – after a long period in which this style was neglected. With the revival in

<sup>11</sup> <http://digistore.bib.ulb.ac.be/2013/ELB-ULB-DL2864764-1908-f.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Museum archive Design museum Gent.



Fig. 5. Elsie Ward Hering, letter stand, ca. 1900–1923, bronze, 30 cm; Design museum Gent, inv. 87/1162, © Design museum Gent; photo: A. Demeyere

*Art Nouveau* acquisitions in the 1980s the interest in women artists did not revive, neither in the museum nor outside in art historical research. Also apparent is the lack of comprehensive studies in the field of education for girls and young women, and the promotional societies. This defect needs amending by giving proper attention to female works of applied arts, based on their artistic merit and versatility. Design museum Gent endeavours to set up a research track on female designers in Belgium, in collaboration with universities, academies, students, researchers and museums. The Fine Arts already have a tradition in this subject, so it is high time the applied arts catch up. Don’t all museums have one or more unknown ladies in their reserves?