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An Interview with Margarethe Luther

In the fall of 1953 a reporter of the Flensburg Avis, the Danish language newspaper in Flensburg, came to interview my mother at our apartment in Glücksburg.



The artist working at her drawing table

My mother knew very well how important it is for an artist to have media coverage and, as a good story-teller, she took care to feed the reporter's hunger for the picturesque and unusual details rather than sticking strictly to the dull and literal truth.

I've translated here the oldest surviving newspaper interview, which I have translated from a Danish paper. I added a few clarifying comments in brackets. It appeared one month before she was to participate in an exhibit sponsored by a Danish art association.

Lars C. Luther



Illustration to "The Nightingale". Notice the great extent to which the artist is using lines. This is most evident from the volcano in the background. Because the entire picture is cut out of one piece of paper "all the black is hanging together", but this is done with great finesse.

Friday September 4, 1953

Unique Silhouette Art

A visit with Mrs. Margaretha Luther, Lyksborg, whose
silhouettes have gone out all over the globe * Hers is
such a unique technique that she can't be a member of the
silhouette cutter's association * A life on the run *
The scissors were the first thing to go into her rucksack

Isn't that a beautiful and unusually finely executed woodprint, the one hanging over there, exclaimed the Franciscan monk some time ago when he visited one of the cloisters of his order in Rome, where he saw a picture of St. Francis of Assisi. A brother who was with him answered that it wasn't a woodcut but a silhouette cutting by Mrs. Margaretha Luther, or, to use her maiden and artist's name: Margaretha von Glehn.

Similar exchanges can be heard in different languages many places in the world, in Europe, USA, or Canada, when people first see her work.

Mr. and Mrs. Luther now live with their two sons in a modest two-room apartment in Lyksborg [Glücksburg, Germany] where you will meet a slim, small woman – busy drawing.

“I was born in Reval or, as the town is called in Estonian, Tallinn. That means “Danish Castle” or “Danish Town”. It was founded by Valdemar II. [Valdemar Sejr in Danish - Sejr means “victor”.]

This is the lady's first answer after being asked to talk about her work and herself. “Since then I have traveled a lot,” she continues, “all my life running from Bolshevists and now I am here.”

First and Last Dancing Elf-Girls

Over Mrs. Luther's drawing table hangs her last completed work: Dance of the Elf-Girls.

– When did you first start to cut silhouettes?

– When I was about 14 years old, well, that is now 30 years back. The first silhouette was called the “Dance of the Elf-Girls” too, but it was so poorly done that it is a good thing in a way that it was lost on a flight. Fortunately we only lost dead things, not loved ones on our flights – and no scissors either, she adds with a fine smile and continues a little later: Well, every time we had to leave I have always packed my scissors first to make sure that they would be with me. I wouldn't be able to cut without them, of course. Fortunately they don't take much room.

– The unusual thing about your cuttings is that unlike other silhouette cutters you don't just cut on the outline and work with areas. You cut “holes” into your subjects and work with lines. How did you arrive at this mode of expression? Where did you learn that?

– The only thing that I have been taught is drawing. My teachers were the Russian professor Anatol Kaygorodoff and the Estonian Friedrich Koppel. I have had no real model.

The idea of cutting holes into subjects is my own, and I don't believe that anyone else on earth cuts just this way.

– Your first subject was “The Dance of the Elf Girls”, and your last completed work has the same subject. Are you partial to elves?

– Yes, elves interest me because they belong to the figures of fairytales and legends. These figures – and religious subjects too – are my favorites to work with. I feel that they are best shown in black and white pictures. The people, trolls, and dwarves of fairytales are either black or white in a sense. The same is true for figures of myths and legends. Furthermore in fairytales and legends the “other world” always intervenes in the action forming a bridge between the two worlds, between white and black.”

Clear Language: black on white

– I have been challenged to learn artistic painting, to work with color, nuances, soft transitions, etc. I said No. In my work nothing gets blurred nor is anything painted gray on gray. The contrast between black and white is the concise language I wish to speak.

– Do you belong to a certain school of art?

– I can't really say I do. When I cut flowers I try to reproduce nature, even if it ends up somewhat stylized. My cuttings of religious nature have something in common with Russian church art.

Lili Marleen became a nightmare

– How many silhouettes have you made over the years?"

– I have no idea, but there have been thousands. To figure this out even approximately is impossible. Some cuttings are finished in a few hours' time after I put down the first guiding pencil stroke on the backside of the paper. Others sit there for several days or weeks of work.

The most difficult problem I ever had to face was presented to me in Kiel during the war. A young lady came to me and asked for a picture of a tank for warfare. I had never seen such a monster and had to find one before I could begin to draw and cut it.

One subject that turned into a nightmare after I had cut it several hundred times:

That was "Lili Marleen at the lamppost". After more and more people had seen the first cutting they ordered an exact copy of it. And then there followed more orders in the same manner... "Marleen" rode me like a nightmare, but now fortunately she is history.

Wants to illustrate H.C. Andersen

– Aside from these two cases have you generally been asked to do proscribed work or have you always worked with whatever inspired you at the moment?

– Both. I have made some cuttings according to people's wishes, more or less, others exclusively per inspiration.. One of my greatest wishes is to illustrate H.C. Andersen's fairytales, which I love immensely.

During the conversation she also talked a little about herself and the background of her work. Among her ancestors are a Russian Court architect, a Swiss watchmaker, and a goldsmith who specialized in filigree work. Her [grand]mother was an Englishwoman. She herself was born in Estonia. Today she speaks Danish and her sons go to the Duborg school. [I don't think she ever spoke more than a few words of Danish. I, Lars, went to the Duborg School, and Holger went to the Christian Paulsen School, which were the two intermediate Danish schools in Flensburg.] Once the entirety of the family's possessions was contained in three rucksacks.

Builds on the Heritage of her Family

All through everything she has held on to the artistic heritage she had received. Architecture and filigree work also use lines, but she has gone on and found her own artistic expression understood by all. That her art is unique is clear from the curious fact that the German silhouette cutter's organization has denied her membership because she does not exclusively work with shadow pictures.

One has to admire the knowledge, technique and ability and not least the prodigious work that has gone into all her work. A small woman, but a fine artist.

*

Mrs. Luther will be showing some of her work in the exhibition being arranged by the South Slesvig Art Organization for November here in Flensburg.

parvus

[Presumably "parvus" is the pen name of the author of the article.]