

The eventful life of Etablissements Lemaire & de Vernisy in rapidly changing times

The company Etablissements Lemaire & de Vernisy was involved in the silver production sector in Brussels for at least 65 years, from 1919/1920 to 1984/1989. The company was officially formed in 1920 by Georges Lemaire, Théodore Bisschop and Edmond de Vernisy under the name G. Bisschop, Lemaire et Cie. Increasing success meant that three years later, in 1923, G. Bisschop, Lemaire et Cie was made a public limited company, Etablissements Lemaire & de Vernisy, with a view to boosting turnover. Engineer Georges Lemaire remained in charge of policy and the technical side of the business, while on an artistic level the emphasis shifted from Théodore Bisschop to Edmond de Vernisy. The capital letters B and L separated by an African violet on the maker's mark were replaced by the letters L and V.

The years which followed were characterized by successive expansions and changes of address in a bid to accommodate the growing number of employees and new machinery. The various facilities which the company acquired and built, together with the production catalogue distributed on a wide scale, reflect all this activity, from which it appears that Lemaire & de Vernisy was rated alongside well-known Brussels companies like Wolfers Frères, Delheid Frères and Altenloh. By the end of the 1930s the company had evolved from silver workshop to silver factory, and profitability – under pressure from the prevailing trend for commercialization – had taken precedence over the quality and the unicity of the silverware.

After a short upturn in the wake of the Second World War, the tide gradually began to turn for Lemaire & de Vernisy. Like other Brussels silver establishments at the beginning of the 1950s it, too, was faced by a progressive decline in its silver production, resulting from high silver prices, a shortage of raw materials and the advent of silver-plated metal and stainless steel. With the sale of imported cutlery in silver-plated white metal Etablissements Lemaire & de Vernisy endeavoured to respond to this latest trend and to cushion the fall in sales of silver cutlery which had been its staple for years. However, this diversification did not offset the fall in sales of silverware.

After the death of Edmond de Vernisy, in 1959 Fernand Helbo became Georges Lemaire's new partner. The company again underwent a change of name and was rechristened Lemaire & Helbo, whereby the letter V on the maker's mark was replaced by the letter H. The change of name to Lemaire & Helbo was accompanied by a reorganization and reorientation of the business. Fernand Helbo expanded sales by importing gift articles in silver-plated metal and stainless steel. With this new sales policy Lemaire & Helbo once again hoped to stave off the falling silver production and to push sales figures back up; alas to no avail.

Around 1960 Lemaire & Helbo had to close its factory complex and move to a smaller workshop which then housed both the sales and the production facilities. This meant reorganizing and cutting back the activities and the production of silverware eventually ceased. Lemaire & Helbo became a jewellery workshop with the emphasis eventually on the sale and production of rings and particularly seamless wedding bands. This change of tack also proved fruitless and with the death of Georges Lemaire, Fernand Helbo decided to invest in a new company, setting up Helbo et Cie alongside Lemaire & Helbo. In 1984 Lemaire & Helbo went into liquidation and, despite Fernand Helbo's best efforts, Helbo et Cie was not blessed with a long life either. The business was sold in 1989.

Julie Lenaerts