

THE MAGIC LANTERN OF ANTONI SOLARO, CHIMNEY SWEEP

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Little is known about the business practices of the first producers of magic lanterns. Research in local Dutch newspapers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveals the story of the Swiss-born Solaro family in Leeuwarden. They were among the first in the Netherlands to mention their use of the peepshow box (Dutch: *Illuminatiekast*) and the magic lantern in their advertisements.

In 1756 Antoni Solaro (snr) came from Cavigno in the Maggia valley near Locarno (Switzerland) to Leeuwarden.¹ In the local newspaper, the *Leeuwarder Courant*, he advertised on 7 February 1756 that he sold 'Donderglas' (a forerunner of the barometer used to measure atmospheric pressure) and that in May he planned to move to Nieuwestad – a street running beside a canal in the old town of Leeuwarden – next to the house of the former city councilor and master brewer Van der Veen.² The local weighing house was also in Nieuwestad. On 16 April 1756, when he was 26 years old, Antoni Solaro paid 6 Dutch guilders for his citizenship.³

Leeuwarden is the capital of the Dutch province of Friesland. The town held the court of the Orange family that had been appointed as stadtholder, the head of the provincial government. During the nineteenth century the city walls were demolished but when Antoni Solaro settled in Leeuwarden it was still a fortified town. Friesland had a university in the city of Franeker about 15 kilometers from Leeuwarden. Local scientists ordered their instruments, most often of their own design, from the regional instrument makers.

In 1764 Antoni Solaro was the first Italian to be granted the exclusive right to sweep the chimneys of all public buildings in the city of Leeuwarden, for the yearly reward of 30 guilders.⁴ Later he was also appointed as the local chimney sweep for the harbour

4. House for chimney sweeps, St Jacobsstraat, Leeuwarden



1. Magic lantern slide with chimney sweep (collection G. Sebus)



2. View of the city of Leeuwarden, by Antoine-Ignace Melling, 1812



3. View of the Nieuwestad in Leeuwarden by Elias Pieter van Bommel, 1854

city of Harlingen about 30 kilometers from Leeuwarden. Italian chimney sweeps were known all over Europe for the quality of their work. They employed young children who were able to clean chimneys that were too narrow for grown men. The children lived together and were offered a good education as craftsmen. Antoni Solaro probably employed children from his homeland. They were lodged together in a house in Leeuwarden at the corner of St Jacobsstraat and Auckemastraatje

NOTES

1. Vriesema, Maaike & Goot, Annelies van der; Friesland, wees zacht voor mij: nieuwkomers in de provincie door de eeuwen heen, Friese Pers Boekerij, 2006, 37.
2. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 7 February 1756, 4.
3. *Burgerboek Leeuwarden*, 16 April 1756.
4. Antoni Solaro came from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland.



5. A magic lantern showing the battle between Dutch and English ships near Cadiz in 1781 by Carel Frederik Bendorp (I), 1782

(straatje = alley). A female caretaker and the pupils of sculptors, spectacle makers or umbrella makers also lived in the house.

The use of peepshow boxes (later the magic lantern) accompanied by a handheld barrel organ was a speciality from the French-Italian region of Savoy.⁵ Savoyards were known all over Europe for their entertainment; sometimes they showed prints or lantern slides of newsworthy events such as the sea battles



6a. Sea battle near Cadiz between Dutch and English ships in 1781 by Matthias de Sallie



6b. Sea battle near Cadiz, 1781

7. Chimney sweep by Mathias de Sallie, Jacob Perkois, Johannes Huibert Prins, 1772–91



between the Dutch and English navy which took place in 1781 during the time Antoni Solaro was living in Leeuwarden.⁶

The Solaro family came from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, almost next to Savoy. Antoni Solaro's use of peepshow boxes or the magic lantern was part of his regional tradition.

Sweeping chimneys was only possible during the months when they were not in use. During the winter the Solaro family had to look out for other activities. Perhaps that explains why on 19 November 1768 Antoni Solaro advertised his services as a producer and retailer of meteorological instruments:

ANTONI SOLARO, Italian chimney sweep in Nieuwestad in Leeuwarden produces and sells all sorts of barometers, thermometers, peepshow boxes with illuminated prints, optical mirrors, prints of the most important cities and sights in Europe, camera obscura, spectacles and magnifying glasses. At his house you can see a peepshow and demonstrations of glass melting and blowing, a quarter guilder per person. Those who want to see the peepshow in their own houses, can address their enquiries to the house in Nieuwestad.⁷

By 1764 Antoni was already offering stucco and plaster for sale and in 1770 he became a member of the local merchant guild.⁸ In 1772 he acted as an agent for

5. David Robinson, Stephen Herbert and Richard Crangle, eds, *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern*, Magic Lantern Society, 2001, 265–6.

6. R.B.Prud'homme van Reine, Jan Hendrik van Kinsbergen 1735–1819, *De Bataafsche Leeuw*, 1990, 139.

7. Leeuwarder Courant, 12 March 1768, 4. For his activities as an instrument maker see <http://www.dwc.knaw.nl> accessed 24 September 2015.

8. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 28 April 1764, 7.



8. Peepshow Box (Illuminatiekast),
Museum de Lakenhal, Leyden

the Italian stucco worker Jacobus Pessa,⁹ and in May of that year was selling pink flower bulbs.¹⁰ According to the frequent advertisements he placed in the *Leeuwarder Courant* he also sold toys imported from the German city of Nuremberg and stocked musical instruments such as violins and oboes, mathematical instruments, umbrellas and parasols, maps, a magic lantern, meteorological instruments, fireworks and English paintings in frames. He produced telescopes, microscopes and magic lanterns in his own workshop.

Antoni Solaro was married to Helene Zanino (also written Sanino).¹¹ The couple had three sons, who were all active in the family's workshop. Antoni Solaro died in Leeuwarden in 1794.

The eldest son Antoni Solaro (jnr) was born in Leeuwarden in 1760. The date and place of his death are unknown. In 1788 Antoni (jnr) placed an advertisement in the *Leeuwarder Courant*.¹² He explained that he had been travelling throughout France and Italy and now wanted to stay with his parents in Leeuwarden. He offered his services as a sculptor and woodcarver. Between 1788 and 1791 Antoni (jnr) carved the woodwork on the organ case of the church in the village of Bozum, consisting of a statue of King David playing his harp and music-making angels.¹³ His work was of exceptional quality. He probably also helped his family with the cases of their barometers and thermometers.¹⁴ In August 1790 he was renting a house in Bagijnestraat on the corner of Nieuwe Steeg in Leeuwarden owned by the sculptor P. Roeland.¹⁵ Antoni's biographer stated that he became depressed because of the lack of regular commissions and this was the cause of the dissolute behaviour which led to his early death.¹⁶

Their second son, Guillelmus Maria Solaro (1763–1814), was active in the family workshop.¹⁷ He also served as a Roman Catholic priest in the Willibrordus church in Leeuwarden. Guillelmus Solaro died in Leeuwarden, 12 October 1814, at the age of 51.¹⁸

The youngest son, Joseph Maria Solaro (1765–1818), was born in Leeuwarden in 1765.¹⁹ In 1794 he succeeded his father as chimney sweep for the cities of Harlingen and Leeuwarden but after four years Harlingen offered the position to another local Italian, who combined his new role with that of the head of the local fire brigade.²⁰ Joseph Solaro also made meteorological instruments. Around 1800 he moved to Amsterdam, where he worked in association with Donatus Butti. Later he returned to Leeuwarden, where he died on 19 August 1818.



9a. Optical print of the sea battle near Doggersbank between the English and Dutch navy in 1781



9b. Optical print of theatre, Amsterdam, by P.Y. Liender

9. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 4 April 1772, 8.

10. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 8 May 1782, 5.

11. See <http://www.dwc.knaw.nl> accessed 24 September 2015.

12. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 16 February 1788, 6.

13. See <http://www.kerkboazum.nl> accessed 24 September 2015.

14. See <http://www.dwc.knaw.nl/biografie/scientific-instrument-makers/> accessed 24 September 2015.

15. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 2 January 1790, 8.

16. Entry for 'Anthonius Solero' in A.J. Van der Aa, *Biographisch Woordenbuch der*

Nederlanden, part 17/2, 827–8, <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/vdaa/> accessed 24 September 2015.

17. <http://www.dwc.knaw.nl/biografie/scientific-instrument-makers/> accessed 24 September 2015.

18. Overlijdensregister 1814 [register of deaths], Leeuwarden, Aktenummer A441. https://historischcentrumleeuwarden.nl/genealogie/q/text/solaro?sort=datum_i&tdirection=asc accessed 24 September 2015.

19. See <http://www.dwc.knaw.nl/biografie/scientific-instrument-makers/> accessed 24 September 2015.

20. See the entry for Solaro <http://www.kleinekerkstraat.nl> (GAH44) accessed 24 September 2015.



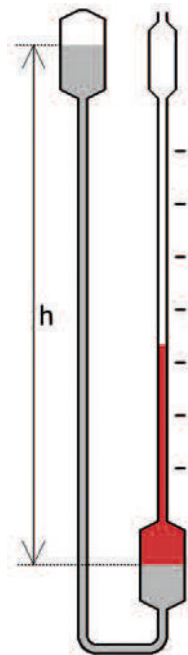
10. wood carvings at the Bozum organ front by A. Solaro jnr

The Solaro family in Leeuwarden may also have had relatives in the city of Groningen. In 1770 a Jan Solaro, living in Schuitendiep in Groningen, advertised his skills as chimney sweep in the local newspaper, the *Groninger Courant*.²¹ In 1777 Jan Solaro was offering pink flower bulbs for sale, just like his namesake in Leeuwarden,²² and seven years later acted as a merchant for Brabant lace and a variety of other knick-knacks. From 1784 onwards Jan Solaro also offered meteorological instruments for sale and promised to repair old ones.²³ Being a glass smelter and blower he offered illumination glasses – cheap glasses filled with candle wax or oil – for sale in November 1799 to be used for a local festivity.²⁴

There were other family ties between the Italian communities in Groningen and Leeuwarden. Antonio Solaro acted as a witness during the baptism of his nephew Anthonius Valentinus Zanino in Groningen on 23 March 1773.²⁵ The Solaro families from Groningen and Leeuwarden were both active in instrument making and in glass melting and blowing. They used their skills to produce lenses for use in magic lanterns, peepshow boxes, microscopes and telescopes.

The Solaros were active in producing meteorological instruments, signing their work as a mark of its quality. Cornelis Drebbel had invented the 'Donderglas' in Holland in 1610. It was a cheap and generally not very precise instrument. In 1643 the Italian Evangelista Torricelli devised a barometer based on the same principle but using mercury in place of water. His barometer was modified by the Dutch scientist and inventor Christiaan Huygens, combining both liquids in a so-called 'double barometer'. Judging from their advertisements, the Solaro craftsmen probably used an adaptation of Huygens' design, known as a barometer with 'contrarolleur'. The production of meteorological instruments in the Netherlands was dominated by Italian craftsmen. The barometers the Solaro craftsmen produced are found in historic scientific collections in the Netherlands and are highly prized when they appear at auction.

Looking at the activities of the Solaro family in Groningen and Leeuwarden we may conclude that these Italian craftsmen often worked in the tradition of the family. Their business practice was to sweep chimneys during the summertime and to produce meteorological instruments during the winter. They also produced and sold mathematical instruments for local (amateur) scientists, but that could only have been a limited part of their earnings. They had a good understanding of optics and produced spectacles, microscopes, telescopes and, last but not least, magic lanterns. They acted as merchants selling stucco, plaster, flower bulbs and luxury textiles. As if that were not enough they also gave performances with their peepshow boxes or magic lanterns on their own premises or at the homes of their customers. The peepshow boxes and magic lanterns with their illuminated prints and slides were also sold to rich customers.



12. Huygens barometer (grey= mercury, red=water)



11. Weatherglass



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13a. Barometer, made by A. Solaro, Leeuwarden
 13b. Barometer made by J. Solaro Leeuwarden
 14. Dutch walnut cistern barometer, J. Solaro Leeuwarden, c. 1800, with engraved pewter scales, signed J. Solaro, Leeuwarden, 135 cm high,

21. Opregte *Groninger Courant*, 6 February 1770, 2.
 22. *Groninger Courant*, 11 April 1777, 2.
 23. *Groninger Courant*, 27 June 1784, 2.
 24. *Groninger Courant*, 13 December 1799, 1.
 25. Burgerlijke stand Groningen, register of births 23 March 1773.