

Zanetti & Agnew

Zanetti & Agnew was one of the most important firms of carvers and gilders making barometers in Manchester. The Museum's collections include examples of barometers made by the company.

Vittore Zanetti was born in Italy on the shores of Lake Garda towards the end of the eighteenth century. Nothing is known of his early life, but he came to England and set up a business in Manchester as a looking-glass maker and print seller at 87 Market Street Lane, probably in 1803. His business prospered and, by 1813, he had moved along the street to larger premises at number 94. In 1810, he had taken on an apprentice, Thomas Agnew. Thomas was born in 1794 in Liverpool and was apprenticed to a Mr Stokes who was probably a carver and gilder. A year later, when Thomas' mother and stepfather moved to Manchester, he was released by Mr Stokes and apprenticed to Vittore Zanetti.

Zanetti was one of a small group of about 10 craftsmen in Manchester who specialised in carving and gilding. He had a large trade in making frames for mirrors and pictures, and in the manufacture of barometers, thermometers and hygrometers. According to Thomas Agnew, Vittore Zanetti had "been very successful in business having amassed a considerable fortune".



In 1816, a partnership was proposed between Zanetti, Dominic Bolongaro, also a carver and gilder, and Charles Joshua Ronchetti, a barometer and thermometer maker. However, Thomas Agnew had just come into some money and persuaded Zanetti to take him into partnership instead. Six months before this, Thomas had written: "I now have a very good salary.... I have the principal management of the business and have no doubt of ultimately succeeding if I am assiduous and attentive." The firm prospered under the new partnership and provision was made for Vittore's son Joseph to enter the firm in 1825. Zanetti & Agnew was making a profit of more than £2,000 a year. Thomas married Jane Lockett in 1823. She was the daughter of a successful Salford businessman. Their first son William was born two years later and their second son Thomas in 1827.

In 1826, Zanetti & Agnew moved to new premises at 14 Exchange Street. Their old shop was purchased for what was generally regarded as 'an exorbitantly high price' to make way for the extension of Pall Mall through Wright's Court into Market Street. In 1828, Vittore Zanetti retired to a small estate he had bought on the Isola dei Pescatore on Lake Maggiore in Italy. The business became known as Agnew & Zanetti with Joseph as the junior partner.

In 1835, Joseph left the business and set up on his own at 100 King Street as a carver and gilder, looking-glass and picture-frame maker, print seller and publisher. He also sold mathematical, surveying and mining instruments, barometers, thermometers and hygrometers. Instruments could be repaired on the premises and made to order. Joseph ran the shop for about eight years. After his death in 1842, it was taken over by his wife, Ann, who ran the business for another 10 years. She had a son, Joseph, who gave his occupation in the 1851 census as a carver and gilder. Records do not show why he did not take over the business; by 1881 he had become a warehouseman.

Thomas Agnew began to change the direction of his business. From being a craftsman, antiquaire and print publisher, he developed into a picture dealer concerned primarily with English pictures. In the mid-nineteenth century, Manchester manufacturers and merchants were accumulating large fortunes and the demand for works of art was increasing. These new collectors preferred signed contemporary pictures to dubious Old Masters and Thomas, who recognised this, became a successful art dealer. In 1840, Thomas took on his eldest son, William, as an apprentice for six years. He was to be taught the profession of carver and gilder and picture dealer. The second son, Thomas, joined the business two years later. In January 1850, both sons were taken into partnership and the firm became known as Thomas Agnew & Sons, as it still is today. The business became very prosperous and profits rose sharply.

Five years later, the company commissioned Roger Fenton, a founder of the London (now Royal) Photographic Society, to go to the scene of the Crimean War. There was great public interest in the war, especially after W. H. Russell's accounts appeared in *The Times* and highlighted gross mismanagement and appalling conditions. The Government therefore authorised the expedition as it felt that the resulting photographs would give some reassurance. On Fenton's return, the photographs were shown to Queen Victoria and Napoleon III of France, exhibited in London and published by Agnew's.

In 1857, Agnew & Sons were "engaged during the Art Treasures Exhibition (held in Trafford Park, Manchester) in the collecting of works from all parts of the United Kingdom" which they undertook "with remarkable success". Two years later, a gallery was opened in Liverpool and another at Waterloo Place in London. A new gallery on Old Bond Street, the firm's present premises, eventually replaced this. The Liverpool premises were closed in 1909 and the Manchester premises in 1923. Thos. Agnew & Sons concentrated its business in London and is now a successful art dealer of international importance.

For more information:

Read Agnew, G. *Agnews 1817-1967*. London: Bradbury Agnew, 1967.
Wetton, Jenny. *Scientific Instrument Making in Manchester, 1790-1870*.
Manchester, UK: The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, 1993.