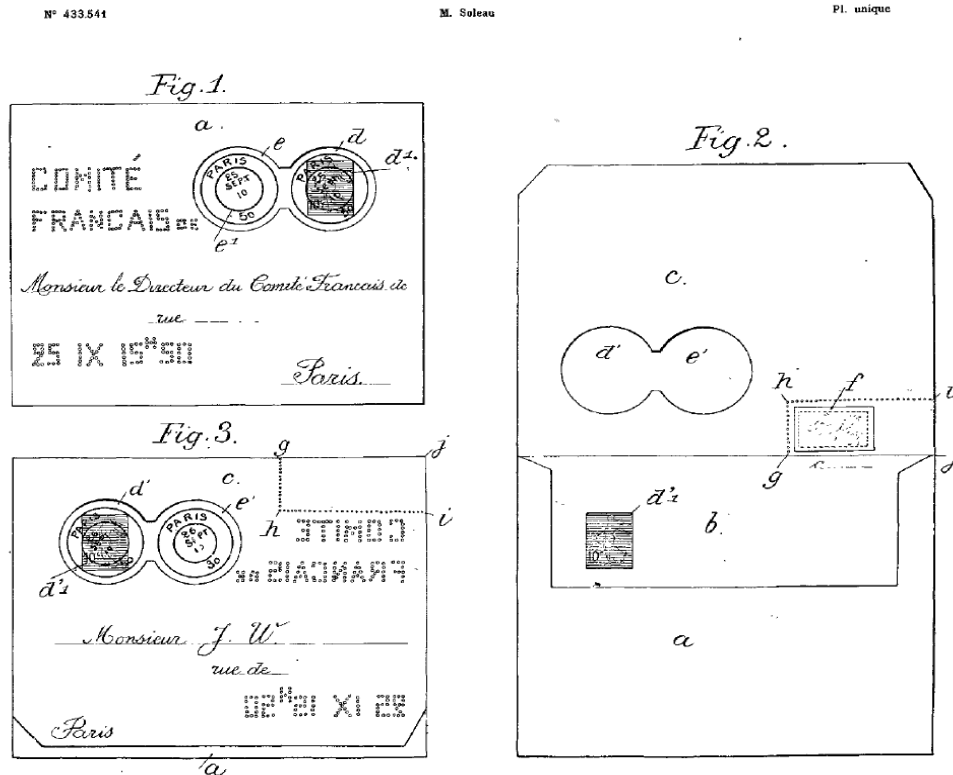


## Evidence, Enveloped

Something on Proof, Priority and Patents (but not necessarily in that order)



As an everyday object, the envelope—“a flat paper container with a sealable flap, used to enclose a letter or document”—is ubiquitous to the point of invisibility. “Invisibility,” therefore, refers both to an inability to cognitively *see* the material object, but also to the promise of hiding something from sight. Inspired by micro-history, or “the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object, or a single event” (Szijártó 2013, 4), this paper opens the sealable flap to one such container: the *enveloppe Soleau*.

Manufacturer of bronze ornaments and Vice-President of *l'Association Internationale pour la Protection de la Propriété Intellectuelle* (AIPPI), Eugene Soleau (1852-1929) received his patent for “Mode de protection et de timbrage à date des documents, dessins, etc., tenus secrets,” on October 28, 1910. A century later, in 2018, the French *l'Institut national de la propriété industrielle* (INPI) sells Soleau’s namesake envelope—both in its more familiar material form but also dematerialized as an *e-Soleau*—for €10. But what do you get for your money? A two-compartment envelope designed to carry duplicate proof of anteriority in almost any intellectual creation, postage paid for transportation to the Director of the INPI. Once delivered to this place of authority, the envelope is laser-stamped, one copy subsequently returned to the sender, one is kept at the INPI. Valid for five years (with a possible extension of five more for an additional cost), only the sender can

ask for the envelope to be opened and its contents revealed. The *enveloppe* Soleau is legal only in France, and offers no ip protection.

In fact, pretty much everything about the *enveloppe* Soleau seems to place it as an oddity *outside* the ip system. And yet, as this patented envelope circulates—between an infinite number of senders and the single possible recipient—it carries with it an enveloped story of shifting categories: private/public, disclosure/concealment, proof/property, categories that lie at the heart of the ip system. My paper suggests reading the *enveloppe* Soleau as an “inscription” (Callon 1991), the ANT-term for the process of translating interest into material form. Placed on Mario Biagioli’s “secrecy-openness spectrum” (2012, 219) where knowledge and inventions “[...] cannot start in the open but need to be moved into openness” (ibid., 220), I am interested in what the *enveloppe* Soleau might be able to tell us about the process of “moving into openness.” How do we understand the inside/outside of information, priority, proof, patents, and the timing of disclosure?

Drawing on insights from media archeology and document studies, especially concerning the material traces of knowledge-production (Gardey 2008; Gitelman 2014; Hull 2012; Krajewski 2001; Visman 2008); this study attempts to contribute to an interdisciplinary body of research situating patents as texts, documents, and classification devices (Bellido and Kang 2016; Biagioli 2006; Bowker 1992; Burke 2016; Kang 2012; Myers 1995; Pottage 2001).

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