

## "BETTER MOUSETRAP" EXHIBIT CELEBRATES U.S. PATENT HISTORY

A Houghton Gallery exhibit that paid tribute to the ingenuity of American inventors and the uniqueness of the U.S. patent system launched the celebration of Peter Cooper's 200th birthday on January 17. Called "A Better Mousetrap: Patents and the Process of Invention," the exhibit featured more than 100 beautifully crafted 19th-century models that had been submitted to the U.S. patent office in support of patent applications. Most of them were loaned to Cooper Union by Cliff Petersen CE'43, an aerospace engineer who owns the nation's largest collection of patent models.

The exhibit attracted crowds of visitors, especially after a lengthy review by Eleanor Blau in the February 5 *New York Times* called it to public attention.

Among the more striking models displayed were a rotary steam engine, a child-activated swing, an adjustable artificial leg designed for Civil War amputees and a brick-making machine capable of discharging the finished bricks. Also exhibited was one of Peter Cooper's many novelty inventions: an egg desiccator that dried eggs as they cooked, producing a powdered food.

The exhibit highlighted important legal developments that have shaped the U.S. patent system—from the permission that a court in Renaissance Florence gave Filippo Brunelleschi to fine his imitators and burn their work to the first patent for a live mouse, granted to Harvard in 1988. A 1790-1990 time line illustrated the factors that affected patent history, such as rhythms of the economy, major discoveries and popular attitudes about individual rights or fear of monopolies.

The General Motors Corporation and *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* magazine cosponsored the exhibit. Jean LeMée, chair of mechanical engineering at the Albert Nerken School of Engineering, was curator. Tori Eggherman A'91 and Nikki Moser A'88, a member of the Art School faculty, were associate curators. Ellen Lupton A'85, Lubalin Center curator and instructor in art history, designed and edited the illustrated 48-page monograph from which the photographs on this page were taken.



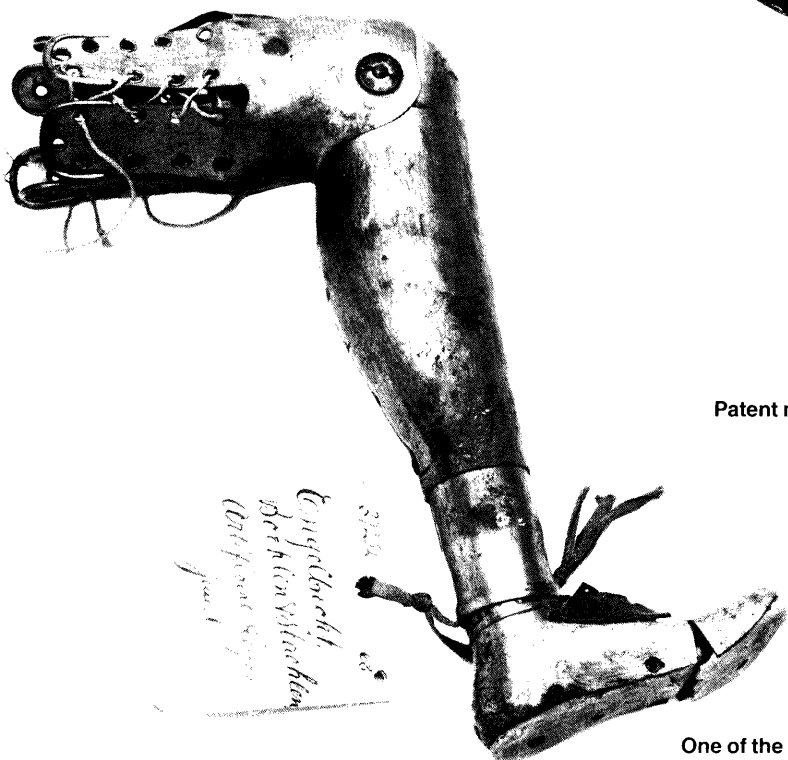
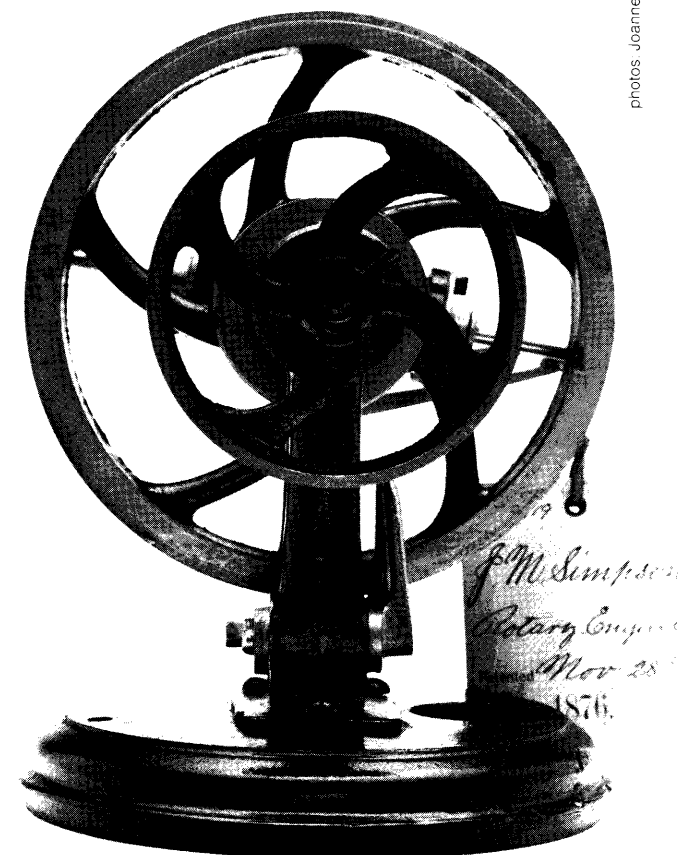
l-r: Tori Eggherman, Jean LeMée, Nikki Moser

Patent model for a brick-making machine



A hatbox shaped like a hat

Patent model for a rotary steam engine, with a minimum of moving parts



One of the many patented artificial legs designed during the Civil War

photos: Joanne Savo