



# NEWS

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for the Advancement of  
Science and Art

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**"A Better Mousetrap: Patents and the Process of Invention"**  
**Exhibition Explores How Important Technological Discoveries, Economic  
Rhythms, Court Cases Shaped the U.S. Patent System**

**Opens Thursday, January 17, at Cooper Union;  
Symposium Planned Tuesday, January 22, in College's Great Hall**

The Cooper Union will inaugurate its 1991 celebration of the 200th birthday of its founder, Peter Cooper, an inventor, industrialist and philanthropist, with a major exhibition on American inventiveness and the origins--practical, historical and legal--of the U.S. patent system.

Co-sponsored with the General Motors Corporation and American Heritage of Invention & Technology magazine, the exhibition is planned to follow the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Patent Office. It will open Thursday, January 17, at noon in the college's Houghton Gallery, 7 East 7th Street (at Third Avenue), New York.

"A Better Mousetrap: Patents and the Process of Invention" will run through February 15. Gallery hours are Monday-Friday 12-7 p.m., Saturdays 12-5; Sundays, closed. Admission is free. For more information call (212) 353-4155.

A **symposium, "Patent Policy and the Future,"** will be held Tuesday, January 22, at 6 p.m. in Cooper Union's Great Hall, 7 East 7th Street, New York. Panelists will include Edmund L. Andrews, a writer for The New York Times; William Herbert, a patent attorney with Stass & Halsey, Washington D.C.; Robert P. Mergers, professor of patent law, Boston University; and Thomas Penn, engineer, inventor and author.

Consolidated Edison and the New York Council on the Humanities provided additional support for the exhibition and symposium.

The exhibition will feature more than 100 beautifully crafted 19th century patent models, mostly from the Petersen Collection, the largest holding of its kind. These include industrial machines, steam engines, devices for washing clothes and for making war, artificial limbs, a patent on genetically-engineered mice and, yes, even mousetraps. Cooper Union's founder,

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Peter Cooper, a prolific inventor, patented, among other things, an egg desiccator. The device, which is included in the collection, dried eggs as they cooked, creating a powdered food.

A segment of the exhibition will cover important court cases--from Renaissance Florence to contemporary debates over "intellectual property"--that have shaped the patent system. A 1790-1980 time line will illustrate the factors affecting patent history: the rhythms of the economy, the evolution of major scientific discoveries; and the attitudes in different eras to patent law. Featured will be the first recorded patent, awarded in 1421 in Venice to Brunelleschi, for his invention of a hoisting device.

"Patents are a legal system designed to protect the incubation and commercial exploitation of inventions for limited periods," said Jean Le Mee, curator of the exhibition and professor and chairman of mechanical engineering at Cooper Union. "The patent system resulted from the interplay of three forces--knowledge, the economy and the law."

Le Mee also noted that in the late 20th century both science and invention have become big business. "Each has tremendous effects not only on the economies of nations, but, consequently on their policies, politics and ideologies," he said.

John Jay Iselin, president of Cooper Union, called the collaboration of the three co-sponsors a natural and appropriate one. "Cooper Union, founded by an inventor, advances knowledge in science and engineering," he said. "General Motors puts that knowledge to work in myriad ways, and American Heritage of Invention and Technology magazine chronicles the history and process of American inventiveness.

"This exhibition confirms our common ground, as we reflect on the past by anticipating the future, while posing pertinent questions of public policy."

Invention will not be represented solely by the 19th century models, but will include interactive computer programs, an inventors hall of fame (including the designers of the photocopy machine, rocket and transistor), and a video tribute titled "Mothers of Invention."

Associate curators are Tori Eggherman, a senior in the Cooper Union School of Art, and Nikki Moser, a 1988 art graduate and School of Art staff member.

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