

Interactivity at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum  
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## **Link to Exhibit:**

<https://www.cooperhewitt.org/new-experience/designing-pen/>

## **Interactivity at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum:**

The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum's "Pen" tool fits well with the Informatic blog's theme on interactivity because of the way in which it engages users regardless of age. The Cooper Hewitt states that the original concept of the "Pen" was to create a "visitor technology that emphasized play and spoke to the specificities of a design museum". The Cooper Hewitt goes on to state that, "The Pen was pitched as a way to invite visitors to learn about design by designing themselves. Beyond working as a tool for drawing, it would encourage visitors to engage with the works on view in the museum, rather than looking at them through the small screen of the more traditional approach of a 'museum App'."<sup>1</sup>

Although the Cooper Hewitt's Pen is not an exhibit in the traditional sense it is a tool that turns every artifact in their collection into an interactive exhibit by encouraging its visitors to engage in the process of design both mentally and physically. My artifact, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English pendant designed by Charles Horner, is a simple piece that would be hard to exhibit as a standalone object but with the aid of the Pen visitors can engage in the process of creation regarding such a piece without a deep financial or time investment on behalf of the museum.

## **Interactive Features of the "Pen"**

The Cooper Hewitt's "Pen" achieves its goal of interactivity through channels of exploration and discovery. A major feature of the Pen is its ability to save objects that its user has viewed while they have been at the museum and then uploading them to an application so that the user may view these items and information about them after they leave the museum. A feature such as this creates a connection to the museum that goes beyond the physical space and encourages engagement long after a visitor has left. This is a significant feature for the staff at the Cooper Hewitt as many museums find it difficult to keep their audiences engaged after they have left the physical museum space, making the Pen an attractive choice for the staff.

The Pen takes this channel of user engagement one step further by allowing users to "manipulate the objects they have collected, discover related objects in Cooper Hewitt's collection, retrieve contextual information, learn more about designers, design processes and materials, watch and share videos and even sketch their own designs." Each of the options mentioned in the previous sentence are idealistic goals that museums strive to accomplish but rarely can these objectives be done simultaneously. In using the Pen, the Cooper Hewitt puts the power of discovery, exploration, and design into a neat and portable package that engages users in the physical realm and follows up with them in the digital.

The Pen also bridges the gap between the casual museum goer and the academic by promoting activities that are as useful as the user makes them. For example, a child can easily

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<sup>1</sup> "Designing the Pen," The New Experience, last accessed April 2, 2019, <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/new-experience/designing-pen/>

save the items they see on a class field trip and show them to their parents at home displaying a level of ease and accessibility. At the same time a doctorate level researcher can use the pen as a content builder for a written work they are producing, and a design student can try their hand at reproducing the physical objects they saw while touring the museum space. It is the Pen's ability to accommodate different audiences in different ways with the same ease of use that made it such an attractive tool for the staff at the Cooper Hewitt.

## **The Pen and the English Pendant**

My own object chosen for this course, the 18<sup>th</sup> century pendant designed by Charles Horner, benefits strongly from a piece of technology such as this. The pendant is small in nature and unlikely to be handled by the general audience. Because access is so limited the piece becomes that much more difficult to study but a tool like the Pen creates new avenues of analysis. The Pen's interoperability with the high definition screens created by Ideum allows users to take a detailed look at the pendant from multiple angles not accessible if the pendant were presented on a stand or in a case. Even more engaging is the user's ability to explore the process of design in such an object by having the user attempt to sketch the pendant. I believe that this is a particularly powerful tool of engagement as sketching or drawing a three-dimensional object take a certain level of artistic proficiency and it would push users to consider the ways in which art, metalworking, and symbolism intersect in an object that can be seen on a daily basis.

## **Potential Audiences**

The Cooper Hewitt Pen is an interactive tool that makes itself available to a wide range of potential audiences, but two audiences stand out in particular: 1) children of middle school age and younger and 2) college undergraduates. I believe the Pen tool would be useful to younger audiences because of its simplicity and its multiple mediums of engagement from physical artifacts on display to the digital Ideum tables. Younger audiences, especially in the modern era, seek means of engagement that are lively, familiar, and easy to use. The Pen tool is exactly that as it mimics much of the technology children see at home or in school. Smartboards, tablets, and mobile devices are at the forefront of youth engagement and the Pen tool fits into this technological grouping but is able to maintain its integrity as an educational device. Young children and students can curate collections and engage in the design process of any of the items in the Cooper Hewitt's collection without being expressly told to do so. In this way the Pen is not only a direct educational tool between the museum and the student, but it becomes a repository of that student's interests through the codes an educator can retrieve at the end of a visit. These codes would allow an educator to sit down at a later date and sort through, object by object, those things that their students most connected with creating new avenues of learning and communication between student and educator.

I believe the Pen tool appeals to college undergraduates for the same reason it appeals to youth students. The difference in this scenario is the power an undergraduate student has in controlling what they learn. For younger audiences it is up to the educator to promote and make use of the educational capacities of the Pen, specifically those available once a patron has left the museum, but for undergraduate students the power is completely in their hands (quite literally). Students in this age range will quickly see and engage in the learning capabilities offered by the

Pen, but like their youth counterparts they will not see it as a forced learning experience. It is more likely that they will see it as casual pursuit of their interests. A museum like the Cooper Hewitt offers something to nearly every person regardless of their background because the museum's content does not have strict thematic parameters. Therefore, students in the 18-24 age range who already have curated interests are provided with a tool that allows them to delve deeper at their own pace, with their own choice of content. It is the Pen's ability to create depth both at the museum and at home that makes it a powerful tool to an audience such as this. Finally, I believe that the Pen would be a powerful tool to this audience because of their unique place in history. Students in this age range are old enough to remember when many museums did not offer any type of interactivity so when they engage with a tool such as the Pen they can appreciate it not just for its educational value but its inherent representation of a changing landscape within museums.

## **References**

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