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Interactive Technology

Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum Pen

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

The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum reopened in 2014 after being closed for three years for renovations.¹ Part of the redesigning of the museum involved the installation of touchscreen tables and the introduction of an electronic Pen.² The Pen "allows visitors to draw on digital display tables and to download and save items throughout the museum to a personal web account linked to their Pen".³

Features of the Technology

During the renovation, Copper Hewitt installed "4K [resolution] touchscreen tables where visitors can pull up high-res images and information on items from the museum's collection – many that aren't exhibited."⁴ The seven tables vary in size, "with the largest tables being able to accommodate simultaneous users."⁵ The tables are accompanied by an electronic stylus or "Pen." Users need only "tap the Pen on a placard, and it'll 'collect' the information."⁶ The Pen can "collect" information to be viewed and manipulated on the touchscreen tables, but the interactivity does not end there. The Pen also connects the user to a personal web account and, once home, "users can access a dedicated website that contains all the objects collected."⁷ The Pen and tables allow users to "explore and manipulate 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."⁸

Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center

The introduction of this Pen is incredibly exciting because it is a versatile tool and the information users can gain access to through the Pen can be updated and changed to

¹ Nikki Erlick. "20,000-Year-Old Artifacts, 21st Century Technology," *The Verge* (2017): <https://www.theverge.com/2017/5/6/15563922/museums-vr-ar-apps-digital-technology>.

² Les Shu. "Van Gogh vs. Candy Crush: How Museums Are Fighting Tech with Tech to Win Your Eyes," *Digital Trends* (2015): <https://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/how-museums-are-using-technology/>.

³ Nikki Erlick. "20,000-Year-Old Artifacts, 21st Century Technology," *The Verge* (2017): <https://www.theverge.com/2017/5/6/15563922/museums-vr-ar-apps-digital-technology>.

⁴ Les Shu. "Van Gogh vs. Candy Crush: How Museums Are Fighting Tech with Tech to Win Your Eyes," *Digital Trends* (2015): <https://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/how-museums-are-using-technology/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Designing the Pen." *Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum*, last modified July 15, 2014, <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/new-experience/designing-pen/>.

accommodate both users and the museum. This is particularly useful in the case of a museum, like the Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center, because it is a small organization that relies on donations and whatever is purchased for use in the museum is something that should be adaptable so the association can allocate their funds wisely and get the most for their money. The Pen is a wonderful tool because it connects to technology while giving a break from the phone and having to view things on a tiny screen. Another bonus of using this technology instead of a smartphone app is that the Pen puts control into the hands of all museum visitors, especially kids who would have to borrow a parent's phone and probably share it, which restricts use.

In terms of implementation at Walt Whitman, since it is a small museum, they would probably only need one large touchscreen table that allows for simultaneous users and that table could be located in the Interpretive Center. Since the Pen requires only a tiny placard in order to collect the information on an object, small placards could be installed in the Birthplace house without interfering with authentic look of the house and objects within it. Then when visitors return to the Interpretive Center they can engage with the objects on the touchscreen table. The tables would be able to show the objects, more detail about how the objects were made and what they were used for, information on how these objects operated, and, in some cases, activities to go along with the objects. This would also be an excellent opportunity for users to gain access to many objects which are not on display anywhere in the museum.

In the case of my selected object, the spinning wheel, when the Pen connects to the table it could give information on what the spinning wheel was, how it was made, and how it was used. It would also provide not only text, but video showing how it is put together and how the pieces work. There could be a more interactive feature in which the user could control the actual spinning of the wheel and the digitally displayed "person" working the wheel. To make the "person" spin the large part of the wheel, the user would drag the Pen in circles over the large spinning part of the wheel. Then by dragging the Pen over the next part of the wheel, the wool would start to get strung through and spun. After the wool is spun, the user can explore options of what the wool would have been used to make (i.e.: clothing, blankets, etc.). The user could then choose something to "make" with their wool and design the color, pattern, and style. This would enable the user to learn not only about how a spinning or walking wheel worked but be able to see the process from start to finish and arrive at a final product.

Audiences

Children could benefit because it would be a more fun way to interact with the objects. Kids like to create and see how things work, so getting the chance to interact with the objects and see them in action is much more engaging than having someone just talk to you about it. Plus, kids get excited over new things and the design table is something a little different from what they encounter in their everyday lives.

Adults could benefit because, like the kids, they could learn more information about the objects and engage with the artifacts even after they've left the museum. The Pen would also be beneficial to children and adults alike because, as opposed to using a smartphone app, parents would not have to relinquish control of their phones to their children and adults visiting the museum with multiple children would not have to referee battles over who gets to control the technology.



Screenshot taken from <https://www.theverge.com/2017/5/6/15563922/museums-vr-ar-apps-digital-technology>

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