

# The New Cooper Hewitt Experience

## Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York City

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A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features one to three critiques of a current or recent exhibition.

It's hard to explain the Cooper Hewitt without talking about the mansion. The Smithsonian Design Museum, as it is also known, takes up residence in the former home of Andrew Carnegie, facing Central Park on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. I first visited as a teenager in the early 1980s, and while the exhibition details escape me, I maintain a distinct memory of the dark-wood moulding and elaborate glass-walled conservatory.

Decades and dozens of visits later, I became more aware of the limitations of the space. While exhibiting contemporary design in a century-old residence can produce moments of serendipity, the Cooper Hewitt always lacked for floor space, and the weight of its environment could sometimes overwhelm the ideas and objects on display. The museum recently underwent a multi-year renovation, not only to restore and expand the space, but to reimagine ways to tell the story of design using its collection, its history, and new technology (fig. 1).



fig. 1.  
The newly-  
renovated  
Cooper  
Hewitt  
juxtaposes  
old and new.



fig. 2.  
The  
third-floor  
gallery's  
open  
layout.

fig. 3. The former Carnegie family library.



## The Galleries

Entering the museum through its imposing front door flanked by bold, modern graphics, it's apparent that things have been polished up. The entry hall has been reconfigured with digital signage and a sleek new admissions desk (designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro). In addition to selling tickets, the admissions staff must distribute and explain the "Pen," a new tool for digital interpretation (more on this later). On my most recent visit, the team seemed to have mastered the logistics of the Pen. The downside: a large rolling cart of pens seems permanently parked behind the desk, and the membership staff was relocated to an inexpensive folding table in the middle of the hall. The process works well, but it's a hiccup in what is otherwise a beautifully designed entry experience.

The staff recommends that visitors start at the top of the museum and work their way down. The third floor, previously inaccessible to the public, is now a huge, open space that allows the bulk of the museum's footprint to support a single temporary exhibition; when I visited, it was *Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio* (fig. 2). Stripped of period detail, some may decry the gallery as generic, but it gives

the museum tremendous flexibility; the large-scale models and prototypes in the Heatherwick exhibition simply would not have fit into any of the pre-renovation spaces.

Walking down to the second floor, the same footprint of space is now split into six distinct permanent exhibition galleries, roughly defined by the mansion's original floorplan and its elaborate woodwork. It's exciting to see the restored Carnegie family library (fig. 3) and the juxtapositions of old and new, but the overall effect of the space is cramped and confusing. Wayfinding is minimal, perhaps in deference to the integrity of the historic space; I didn't realize I was in the *Recent Acquisitions* gallery until I was on my way out.

One of the strongest of the second floor galleries, *Making Design*, presents groupings from the permanent collection

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organized by theme: line, form, texture, pattern, and color (fig. 4). But crammed into a single room, it feels more obligatory than important, which is a shame, because it's the only one of these permanent exhibitions that hints at the process and meaning of design.

## The "New Experience"

The Cooper Hewitt has introduced an ambitious digital strategy to expand the presence of its collection throughout the museum and beyond. Central to this is a series of digital interactive tables placed throughout the museum (fig. 5), which present visitors with a variety of design-centric activities. These integrate with the museum's digitized collection (representing 92 percent of its holdings), which has been immaculately photographed and annotated.

To top it all off, there's "The Pen." This is a custom, handheld interactive device assigned to each visitor. On the interactive tables it functions as a stylus, and throughout the galleries, it allows visitors to "save" any object they see to an online account using NFC technology (which enables digital devices to communicate when placed in close proximity). On my most recent visit, staff at the large interactive tabletop near the



fig. 4. The Making Design gallery.

entrance provided guidance and technical support. Visitors got the hang of the Pen pretty quickly—especially children, who didn’t hesitate to experiment with the devices—though some found it easier to simply use their fingers.

The tables are easy to use and navigate, and people seemed to truly enjoy the process of discovering content. A stream of images from the collection floats across the tabletop, incorporating objects from adjacent galleries whenever possible. Visitors can “grab” an image and drag it to a virtual workstation at the edge of the screen. Here they can read more about the object, zoom in to view detail, and explore related objects. The beautifully designed interface presents “tags” for each object (e.g. “colorful,” “pattern,” “textile,” “1950s”); visitors can tap each tag to bring up more objects that share the attribute.

On my first visit, I found this frustrating—I wanted more. The Cooper Hewitt had put a massive effort into digitizing its collection, and I couldn’t do a proper search or even cross-reference multiple tags, to browse, for example, textiles from the 1950s. Then, I lightened up, and found that the simplicity of the system was leading me to discover objects I would never have found otherwise. On my last visit, completely by happenstance,

I stumbled upon the work of Lois Ehlert, a Caldecott Medal-winning children’s book illustrator with whom I was unfamiliar, when a sliver of a colorful image caught my eye.

Later, when visiting the museum’s website to retrieve my saved images, I learned that the entire digital collection is searchable online, with robust cross-referencing and annotation. While part of me wishes I had access to all this information during my visit, I appreciate the strategy of keeping museum guests focused on the collection objects rather than their phones.

One of the most popular tabletop activities invites visitors to try their hand at designing an object (fig. 6). After selecting the object type (building, hat, lamp, etc.), the visitor draws on a grid with the Pen or a finger; as they draw, their lines are transformed into a 3D rendering in a separate view. There was an immediacy to the activity that kept visitors engaged, and I watched some visitors spend several minutes refining their creations.

As a designer, however, the experience disappointed me. Designing any object involves questions of function, engineering, and craftsmanship, none of which are represented here. Instead, the process is reduced (figuratively

and literally) to an aesthetic gesture. This experience could be all the more compelling with some simple design constraints, or with computer-aided simulation to show how well the visitor’s creation would work in real-world conditions. Then again, that may be too deep an experience for a multi-function digital interactive, or even for a single museum visit.



fig. 5. A digital interactive table.



fig. 6.

A visitor creates a design using the Pen.

Along these lines, the *Process Lab* gallery (recently displaced to make way for a temporary Pixar exhibition) incorporated some successful hands-on design activities. It tasked visitors to create their own lamps using binder clips and an assortment of materials, and let them see how their choices affected not only the lamp's appearance but its dispersal of light. It was a few tools away from becoming the kind of maker space we increasingly see in science centers. Which raises an interesting question about how the Cooper Hewitt defines design...

### Is It Just Art?

On a recent visit, I overheard a couple discussing an elaborate wall hanging by Czech textile designer Luba Krejci. One was trying to explain that the object was produced through detailed lacework. Her companion seemed stuck. "Is it just art?" he asked.

And it's a reasonable question. Can a design object just be beautiful, without any functionality or message to communicate? The Cooper Hewitt's collection would say "YES!" At its core, it is decorative art, built around the Hewitt sisters' century-old collection of drawings, wallcoverings, and textiles, presented in a mansion that was as much a luxury object as a functional home. Maybe the museum wants to maintain some of the mystique around design as an artistic, expressive endeavor. But conversations about contemporary design inevitably involve research, context, sustainability, and purpose.

A small gallery in the basement devoted to the museum's renovation addresses these questions directly, pointing out the core challenges (technology, communication, preservation, etc.) faced by each of the architects and designers who contributed to the museum's reimagining. Primarily graphic panels,

the exhibition includes a display case filled with prototypes of the Pen (fig. 7). It's a rare instance where the design process of a collection object is demystified. Before the sleek, state-of-the-art pen in our hands became real, there were a series of clunky, awkward, impractical attempts. I wanted to learn more.

With its new environment and "New Experience," the Cooper Hewitt has the collection, the space, and the digital platforms to talk about design in a multitude of ways—as art, industry, engineering, and aesthetics. I look forward to watching it leverage its powerful history to spark interest and inquiry in the future of design. ■

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fig. 7.

A display of Pen prototypes.

