

The Harvard Crimson

New Gallery Showcases Old Science

By Kathleen A. Fedornak, CONTRIBUTING WRITER December 1, 2005



Judith Lajoie; George Putnam, whose family helped fund the display; and gallery architect Andrea Leers celebrate the debut of the Putnam Gallery yesterday in the Science Center. The new gallery will house a collection of historical scientific instruments.

Harvard's History of Science department unveiled a new gallery of historically significant scientific artifacts at a dedication event in the Science Center yesterday.

The Putnam Gallery showcases Harvard's collection of centuries-old scientific instruments. The pieces range from a Grand Orrery solar system model with decorative figures cast by Paul Revere to headphones developed at Harvard during World War II.

The gallery is evidence of a recent transition within the History of Science department, from merely studying texts to analyzing scientific tools themselves.

"The Putnam gallery is much more than a collection of tools and a museum piece," department chair Allan M. Brandt said. "It's more of an active learning space."

With only thin glass cases separating visitors from the tools, the observer can closely analyze the pieces.

“It’s great how the thin casings don’t pose very many barriers, amazing how close you feel to everything,” said Elizabeth E. Yale, who is a graduate student in history of science.

The technological progression of ideas moves from the Aristotelian cosmology of the 17th century to “new ideas” by Copernicus and Galileo a few years later and ends with 2002’s cyclotron.

“I love seeing what was considered to be cutting edge at the [different] times,” said Kathy Putnam, whose husband helped fund the project.

Briahna J. Gray ’07 said she liked the artisan approach of the collection. One piece that stood out to her, she said, was a static electricity machine that was built on a bed frame, having been created by a bedmaker.

Another notable piece is the 18th-century orrery—a solar system model—that was wired with the help of Benjamin Franklin after a 1764 Harvard Hall fire destroyed a large segment of the University’s scientific apparatus. Franklin’s connection to the University was through his friend, former University president John Winthrop.

Other details about Harvard’s scientific progression and the field’s overall evolution can be found on the instructional cards next to each artifact.

“What was extraordinary was this college, which was seen as being in the wilderness, had the foresight to gather a collection of scientific apparatus,” said Curator of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments Sara Schechner.

Years in the making, the collection consists of pieces gathered and donated by David P. Wheatland ’22 and other artifacts Harvard has amassed since its 1636 inception.

“David Wheatland had a profound sense in the middle of the twentieth century...[and he] built this splendid collection, which unfortunately, until now, did not have a display space,” Brandt said.

Previously housed in the Science Center basement, among other places, the collection’s historical instruments were only recently brought up to use as teaching tools in the gallery.

George Putnam ’73, whose family helped finance the display, said the gallery exceeded his expectations.

“One of the objectives was to bring these instruments out into the open,” Putnam said. “[But] when we first discussed this, I never envisioned such a prominent space and such well-designed space.”

The gallery space is named after the Putnam family, whose math and science trust funded its construction.

“The stars would not have aligned without the entire Putnam family...and the generosity they’ve shown to Harvard and now the gallery,” Brandt said.

The gallery is open Monday-Thursday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.