

The Patent Librarian's Notebook

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Patent Models on Display at Harvard

Harvard University's Science Center has a new exhibit of 19th century American patent models. The exhibit, which is called "Patent Republic," is on display until December and features about 75 patent models from the collection of Susan M. E. Glendening, a New York collector.

From 1836 to 1880, The U.S. Patent Office required inventors to submit a model of their inventions with their patent applications. The models were kept on public display at the Patent Office and became a popular tourist attraction. By the 1870s, however, maintaining the collection, which had grown to hundreds of thousands of models, became a serious burden on the office. Some 87,000 models were destroyed by fire in 1877. In the 1890s, the Patent Office began placing models in storage and eventually the office disposed of the collection, with several thousand models going to the Smithsonian Institution and the families of inventors. The rest were sold or discarded.

Patent models were required in other countries during the 19th century, but most had abandoned the practice by 1900. In Canada, patent models were no longer required after 1892, although the Commissioner of Patents reserved the right to request a model. Some countries continued to require models for certain types of inventions. Germany, for example, required models for firearms and skates and Switzerland required models for firearms and watch movements.

Patent models are highly prized by some collectors. In 1979, Cliff Petersen, a retired engineer, bought about 35,000 models with the intent of establishing a museum. In addition to the Glendening collection, other privately-owned patent model collections include the Rothschild Petersen Patent Model Museum, which contains some 4,000 models obtained from the Petersen estate.