



**Media only:** Laura Baptiste (202) 633-8494  
**Media website:** [americanart.si.edu/pr](http://americanart.si.edu/pr)

Nov. 11, 2011

## Fact Sheet

### “Inventing a Better Mousetrap: Patent Models from the Rothschild Collection”

#### Exhibition

“Inventing a Better Mousetrap: Patent Models from the Rothschild Collection”  
Nov. 11 – Nov. 3, 2013

#### Location

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Eighth and F streets N.W.  
Second floor south

#### Description

The exhibition “Inventing a Better Mousetrap” features 32 models illustrating the wide variety of 19th-century patented inventions submitted by inventors from across the United States. All of the models on display are from the collection of Alan Rothschild, whose holdings of 4,000 patent models is the largest private assemblage of American patent models anywhere.

On July 4, 1836, President Andrew Jackson authorized the construction of a patent office building in Washington, D.C. It was designed to celebrate American invention, technical ingenuity and the scientific advancements that the patent process represents. In 1840, the Patent Office moved into the south wing of what is now the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s historic main building. All of the models included in the exhibition were originally displayed in cases 9 feet high, along with some 200,000 others, in the grand galleries on the third floor of the building, which was completed in 1868. American patent law in the 19th century required the submission and public display of a model with each patent application. These scale models in miniature illustrate not only the imaginative fervor of the era but also the amazing craftsmanship required to fabricate these often intricate works of art. Many of the models were constructed by specialized makers in workshops located near the Patent Office.

The models in the exhibition are grouped by category, including domestic life, leisure and machinery. The models are complemented by drawings, illustrations, a rare early patent signed by George Washington and a full-scale model of a “better” mousetrap with questions about its advantages and disadvantages over more conventional mousetraps. The installation also includes a case of “mystery models,” each accompanied by a clue, which will allow visitors to guess their purpose. The exhibition is on display in the museum’s Allan J. and Reda R. Riley Gallery. Charles Robertson, deputy director emeritus of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and specialist in American decorative arts, is the curator of the exhibition.

#### Free Public Program

Rothschild and Robertson discuss the exhibition Thursday, Dec. 1, at 7 p.m. Reception follows.

#### Credit

“Inventing a Better Mousetrap: Patent Models from the Rothschild Collection” is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Reda R. and Allan J. Riley, Niro, Haller & Niro, and Harness, Dickey & Pierce generously support the exhibition.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum, located above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station, is open daily from 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Website: [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).