About the Exhibition

This Getty Research Institute exhibition explores the complex and surprising lineage of our contemporary media devices.

Today's constantly proliferating optical technologies did not magically appear. Everything from PDAs to talking robotic toys have an ancestry. For centuries, humans have produced their own examples of "cutting-edge" and "high-tech" gadgets to intensify visual perception. No matter what the device or the time of their invention, the objects in Devices of Wonder embodied human knowledge and stretched the imagination.

Several hundred interactive devices from the 1600s through the 1900s are on view at the Getty Museum from November 13, 2001, through February 3, 2002. You can examine and play with a selection of these devices, on the special exhibition Web site.

Here are the exhibition's main themes:

Wunderkammer
In the 1550s, a new kind of collecting emerged among wealthy Europeans. Inspired by advances in science and territorial expansion, collectors assembled an array of artificial objects and natural specimens into small, museum-like displays. These chambers of wonder (Wunderkammern)—and smaller cabinets of wonder (Wunderkabinette)—provided occasions for intellectual amusement, meditation on God’s creation, and the display of wealth and status.

Little Epiphanies
When the microscope was invented in the 1600s, it offered a glimpse into a formerly invisible world of minute things. No wonder the microscope became the must-have gadget for early collectors. For scientists and children alike, microscopes provided sudden and unexpected insights.

Interior Reflections
We take mirrors for granted now, but at the time of their invention in the late 1500s, these shiny glass objects and the images they trapped inspired awe. Even in the 1800s, when mirrors brightened interiors of homes throughout Europe, the power of reflection continued to enchant. Mirrors that distorted the world by enlarging it or multiplying it became fashionable fixtures in the homes of collectors.

Alternative Realities
Using sophisticated mathematics, Renaissance artists began to devise amazing puzzles and visual tricks. One such invention was anamorphosis, in which a distorted image could only be seen in correct perspective from a certain vantage point or through an optical device.

Special Effects
Today when we think of special effects we usually think of the cinema. But one of the earliest forms of special effects was introduced by the Diorama. Built in Paris in 1822, the Diorama was a two-screen theater in which lighting, paintings, and the movement of the audience combined to create special effects.
Artificial Life
Lifelike, complex machines have tantalized inventors and collectors for centuries. Almost in competition with nature, such artificial life has continued to be a driving force in technology. In the 1700s, early forms of artificial life shocked audiences with their ability to perform complicated tasks, such as playing musical instruments. Those devices anticipated today’s hugely popular robotic children’s toys.

Shadow Show
Who hasn’t been amused or frightened by the sight of a shadow? When cast creatively, shadows distort the three-dimensional world around us. Devices used for the projection of shadows transform the filmy darkness into elaborate visual stories. Conducive to dreams and illusion, shadow plays have enchanted audiences for centuries.

Phantomware
As early as the 1660s, projected images were already tantalizing audiences in homes, coffeehouses, laboratories, and theaters. The magic lantern, popular as a form of entertainment and a scientific device in Europe starting in the seventeenth century, anticipated the use of the slide projector in classrooms and at family gatherings.

Dark Chambers
The camera obscura (dark chamber) was a forerunner of the photographic camera. It also helped lay the foundation for motion pictures, because of its ability to capture images suspended in mid-air. It was one of the first ways audiences of earlier centuries viewed moving images in color.

Wraparound Spectacle
Wraparound spectacles (also called panoramas) literally surrounded audiences in the 1800s. These painted creations enveloped audiences in realistic scenes of contemporary battles, cities, and landscapes. The visual storytelling of the panorama laid a foundation for today’s visual and immersive environments.

Home Entertainment
The idea that a home is not complete without objects designated for visual entertainment is not new. Before color television, devices such as lighted peep shows, thaumatrope, and moving image transparencies lured users into alternative realities.

Light and Virtual Substance
For centuries, ingenious artists have realized that light transformed objects, resulting in heightened visual perception. Today, techno-artists create works that take advantage of the digital systems that engulf us. Paradoxically, these virtual technologies often generate a more vivid sense of reality.