

ICOM Bursary Conference Report -Helen Pooley, History of Science Museum

Association of Science and Technology Centres (ASTC) 2025 San Francisco

(Friday 5th September and Saturday 6th September)

Friday 5th September

- **Visits to the Computer History Museum and the Tech Interactive**

This day-long trip to visit museums in the Silicon Valley area was an opportunity to find out more about different approaches to displays and visitor engagement and also for discussions over lunch with colleagues from other institutions internationally.

- 1) The **Computer History Museum** was particularly interesting because, like the History of Science Museum, it focuses on the historical aspects of science.

The highlight was a visit to the 'Revolution: The first 200 years of computing' exhibition funded by Bill Gates. Many of the types of objects in their collection can also be found in HSMs collections, and it was fascinating to see how they told their stories through their displays which included many interactive elements.

The key themes to each gallery were clearly displayed on large numbered plinths which was helpful for orientation and arranged largely chronologically. The opening gallery shared some key developments in the history of computation through objects, with a large interactive display about the Chinese abacus and a section on some of the people and objects that developed mathematical knowledge.

The photographs show

- how large scale images were used to capture the attention of the non-specialist visitor as a backdrop to exhibits

- videos were used alongside objects to give context and show objects in action (these were largely image rather than sound based)

- lots of hands on opportunities were offered e.g large scale abacus, heavy duty flip-books showing how a visitor could use the abacus

- additional contextual imagery and objects

- seating ideas

- design ideas with objects and themes inspiring design detail

- eye catching presentations showing the evolution of objects and other display ideas

- cultural context and applications of science in art and everyday life, allowing visitors to connect to objects

- use of quotes on walls

- gallery benefactors board

From a public engagement programming perspective

-volunteers were well informed, engaged and used lots of additional material during talks (handing around objects, asking questions)

-we were able to get hands on with an 1960s computer and print out our own names (adult activities were very popular among our group)

-I collected some examples of trails and information sheets

2) The Tech Interactive was more of a hands-on science centre arranged thematically. It had a clearly articulated vision, 'to inspire the innovator in everyone'. It was interesting to see how they were experimenting with AI to develop interactive displays with their 'Dream Garden'.

Their family public engagement programme was particularly interesting from an HSM perspective. They had a 'Bio Design' studio where they did creative projects based on biological properties of plants (e.g mushroom bricks/petri-dishes art with plant dyes). We learnt that the space was used by students from Stanford University, who as part of their programme took part in drop-in events with the public. I later spoke to Erica Barrueto (Chief of Staff, VP of Exhibits) to find out a bit more about this as it was interesting to see how in this case a non-university museum was interacting with students and departments.

They also had a hands-on area for children of different ages that was zoned into an under 5's area; an activity area for primary aged children. and a tech challenge area for older children. They had a nice activity in the primary aged area which involved considering the cultural aspects of the moon. The activity involved being invite to imagine and draw what they saw on a transparency of a photograph of the moon (creature/object etc), pin up the image; think of a story to go with their picture and then use boxes that were set up to create a puppet story. Very simple but effective and could be done at a family drop-in at HSM.

- **Evening networking event at Moscone Conference Centre**

An opportunity to meet colleagues from different institutions including the Clay Museum in West Virginia, Sacramento Museum of Science and Curiosity, the Director of MOD in Adelaide, a future-focused museum aimed at people age 15-25 and part of the University.

Saturday 6th September

- **Presentation at Lightening Session: Accessibility in Exhibits and Programs**

The session comprised of 4 presentations (including one by myself together with my co-host from RAL Space) that looked at different aspects of developing practice to create more inclusive and accessible spaces in museums.

We found out more about the monthly sensory drop-in sessions being run in the Children's Museum of Sonoma County for under 5's; a programme in Japan at the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation, that like us worked with neurodivergent students, in this case with a partner from industry to to create a prototype light-up abacus; and the development of a display that shared the experience of people with hearing loss through the creation of short animated films.

We had a full room with lots of questions directed towards us. People were particularly interested in hearing about how HSMs inclusive backpacks are available for all families to use and also how they

related to museum objects and contemporary science rather than solely being sensory backpacks designed to be used independently of museum displays.

- **Exhibit Hall stalls, posters and networking**

The hall included well over 150 exhibitors and a poster-display sections.

Highlights included meeting the engagement team from the New York 'Intrepid Museum' who create holiday clubs for young neurodivergent people and representatives of the STEM educational network who shared some ideas for resources.

It was also useful to see the range of interactive exhibits on display e.g microscopes, objects from the Gallileo group and also examples of 'museum of the move' designs.

- **Visit to the San Fransisco Exploratorium and networking event**

This was an opportunity to visit the large hands-on science centre in San Fransisco.

I took photographs of many interactives that link to our collection (eg gears, praxinoscopes, zoetropes, map tables, microscopes, camera obscura). They also had interesting spaces including a tinkering studio, a small maths cinema (in a box that was part of a larger space).

Summary

Overall this was an excellent opportunity to share the public engagement work of HSM with an international audience; develop professionally by meeting new contacts and finding out how different organisations are working to make their museums more inclusive; to scope ideas for displays, interactives and engagement with visitors for Vision 2024, the exciting re-imagining of the History of Science Museum. I am looking forward to sharing my experiences with the staff at HSM, colleagues across GLAM and a blog post for the museum. I would like to thank ICOM for funding this wonderful opportunity

Helen Pooley

September 2025