



The museum's archives were rich with material for the "Hidden Women" guided tour. Thekla Hiorth, the first woman to drive a car in Norway, operates a Locomobile in 1902. Her father, barely visible, stands behind the vehicle while an unknown boy stands in front. Photo courtesy Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology

Hidden Women

By *Tone Rasch*

In March 2018, the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo, Norway, debuted a guided tour that reveals and acknowledges the significant contributions of women to science and technology. The Hidden Women tour debuted for International Women's Day (March 8) and continued through the summer.

Hidden Women is the latest in the museum's offerings seeking to broaden its reach and engage a wider audience. Over the past few years, the museum has made a conscious shift to increase its relevance by positioning itself at the center of current events, political issues, and thoughtful discussion. Starting with the award-winning exhibition *TING—Technology & Democracy*, which ran from April 2014 through December 2015, the museum has explored aspects of technology as related to a democratic society and encourages

visitors to examine the conscious and unconscious choices we make regarding the presence of technology in our lives.

Starting in 2017, the #MeToo movement pushed gender to the forefront of the agenda and opened up opportunities for talking about women's experiences. Women constitute half of the world's population, and talking about women's presence in society should not be very controversial, but certain social structures remain stubbornly intact.

UNNAMED, UNRECOGNIZED

To focus on this mismatch between women's contributions and the lack of acknowledgment of those contributions, the museum decided to create a special guided tour. A short examination of the exhibits by the curators revealed that women are rarely depicted, and when they are, it is in traditional positions. In the industrial exhibits, for example, images show women employed in weaving mills; in the communication exhibit, images depict them working in the telecommunication business. Both occupations were regarded as acceptable for women 100 to 150 years ago; however, none of the captions included their names. The men shown in images in these exhibitions are often listed by name and identified as owners, directors, or inventors.

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“Is it possible to say that technology and science are particularly male in content, and that this is the reason for the male dominance of these exhibits? I am afraid not.”

am afraid not. Research has shown that most museums are biased, whether visibly or invisibly, toward a male perspective. University of Gothenburg research fellow Annika Bünz highlighted this in an examination of archeological exhibitions in Sweden. Rebecca Machin, curator of the Leeds Museums and Galleries in Leeds, England, came to the same conclusion after an examination of the Manchester Museum’s natural history exhibits.

UNCOVERING THE HISTORY

Women’s histories do exist, and some deeper investigation of oral histories and artifact histories can unearth them. Using simple means to tell a story, the Hidden Women tour takes visitors through the historical objects in the museum’s permanent exhibitions, viewing them through the lens of women’s unacknowledged contributions to those fields. The tour reveals stories of remarkable women and their work, usually previously unknown to visitors.

A few examples covered in the tour are:

- a loom from the Hjula weaving mill, which was managed by company executive Dorthea Biseth

- a jet airplane flown by the first Scandinavian female flyer, Turid Widerøe, in about 1970
- an early car driven by Norway’s first female driver, Thekla Hiorth.

The stories of women’s achievements and lives are many, but we limited the tour to nine of these hidden women. The tour is geared toward adults, but children can participate in a feminist animation workshop in the makerspace in the science center.

SERVING A WIDER AUDIENCE

The guided tour received attention from the media, and NRK, Norway’s public broadcasting company, created a radio program about women and museums. The coexistence of historical collections and a science center within the museum provides opportunities for different types of participation and approaches: While the museum’s traditional aim is to exhibit the history of technology and science through authentic objects and highly vetted narratives, the science center is much more open to experimentation. Together they can serve a wider audience and appeal to different learning styles and interests. ■

Tone Rasch (tone.rasch@tekniskmuseum.no) is a curator at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo, Norway. For more information about “Hidden Women,” visit www.tekniskmuseum.no/nyhetsartikler-siste-nytt/1523-skjulte-kvinner.



Each visitor cast a vote with a wooden block at the discussion at the opening of the *TING—Technology & Democracy* exhibition. Photo by Håkon Bergseth, Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology

TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY

The exhibition *TING—Technology & Democracy* celebrated two special anniversaries: of the Norwegian constitution (200 years) and of the establishment of the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology (100 years). Combining the concepts of technology and democracy, the museum focused the *TING* exhibition on how technology has been a condition for democratic participation, while at the same time, democratic resolutions create and regulate technology. The

Children used voting cubes to create buildings, towers, and bridges. Photo by Håkon Bergseth, Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology



The wall turned into a screen, showing a movie designed to prepare visitors for the technology and democracy discussion. Photo by Håkon Bergseth, Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology

exhibition was a cooperation between the museum, the designers Ralph Appelbaum Associates, and Tamschick Media+Space.

The exhibition was structured around two meanings of the word “thing”—*ting* in Norwegian: an object (modern usage)



The discussion room at the *TING—Technology & Democracy* exhibition, showing the shelf with 100 objects and the round blue table. Photo by Manfred Vogel, RAAV Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology

and a meeting or a matter/concern (Old English). Norway still uses the word *ting* in the name of its parliament and courts.

For the exhibition, the “objects” were to be museum artifacts and the “meetings” were to be animated discussions about those objects. The exhibition had to be carefully designed to stimulate discussion, so the space consisted of a round table set in front of a curved wall holding 100 objects in built-in shelves. These 100

objects were carefully curated from the museum’s collection, highlighting its 100th anniversary celebration. To stimulate discussion, museum staff moderated sessions for groups of visitors.

Visitors chose eight of the 100 objects as a group by voting with wooden cubes. Short movies, lively discussions, and more voting led to interesting conclusions about different aspects of the objects’ presence in a democratic society.