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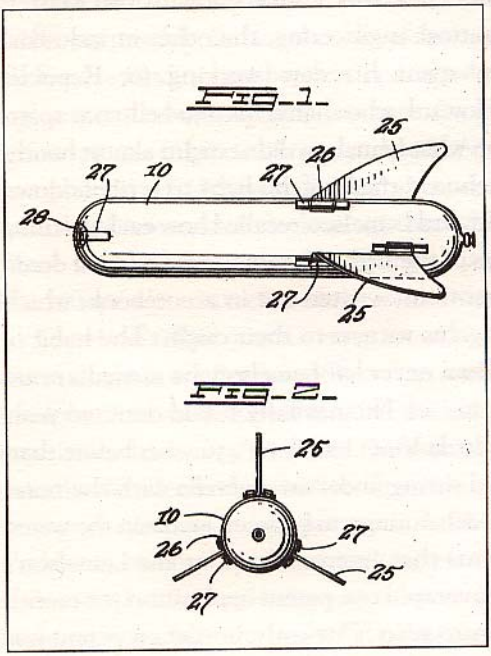
JEROME LEMELSON'S FLYING BALLOON

1922–1997



One of Lemelson's 605 patents was for a flying balloon, officially an "Inflated Aerial Toy." It was granted in 1956.

The first things that great inventors play with are toys — just like all other children. Buckminster Fuller and Jerome Lemelson both spent a great deal of time playing with model airplanes as boys, Jerome flying his in Staten Island, New York, where he grew up. However, while the mature Fuller focused his innovation efforts largely on basic human needs like housing and transportation with a view to saving the world, Jerome Lemelson was more of a free spirit. Jerry, as all those close to him called him, was the kind of inventor who gave his imagination free rein, all day, every day. And what an imagination it was!

After graduating from New York University with two Masters degrees, one in aeronautical engineering, the other in industrial engineering, Lemelson spent his days working for Republic Aviation. His brother Howard, who shared his one-bedroom apartment, shed some light on what Lemelson did at night: almost hourly, night after night, Lemelson turned on the light to scribble down some new revelation. Howard Lemelson recalled how each morning he was shown the results of the night's ruminations — half a dozen or so new ideas for inventions, written out in a notebook, which Howard was asked to sign as witness to their origin. The habit of writing all these ideas down never left Lemelson; he carried a notebook with him always, just as Thomas Edison had done 50 years before him, and Leonardo da Vinci had done 450 years before that. Lemelson is remembered sitting under an umbrella with the notebook in tow on family beach outings, in between jaunts in the water.

The breadth of patents that emerged from Jerome Lemelson's notes is astounding. He averaged one patent application per month for a period of more than 40 years. One early, important patent was prepared and submitted as a 150-page document to the patent office in 1954. It described machine vision, which is a camera on a machine coupled with a digital image to which the machine can compare the live object. This simple concept is used heavily in quality control in modern manufacturing processes, though digital technology makes it possible to now compare 3-D images rather than the 2-D imagery that existed when Lemelson first dreamed it