

Tim's Vermeer: Art and technology

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Directed by Teller

Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), one of the world's great painters, was a major figure in the "Golden Age" of Dutch art in the seventeenth century, an age that also produced Rembrandt, Frans Hals and many other extraordinary artists. Only 35 or so of Vermeer's paintings are known to exist.

An entertaining 80-minute documentary, *Tim's Vermeer* centers on the attempt by Texas inventor Tim Jenison to explore the possibility that Vermeer used optical devices to help achieve his intricate interweaving of light, color and proportion.

Narrated by illusionist Penn Jillette (Vermeer's paintings "glow like the image on a movie screen") and directed by his partner in magic, Teller (born Raymond Joseph Teller, 1948), the film records Jenison's relentless 1,825-day undertaking to reproduce Vermeer's masterpiece, "The Music Lesson" (1662-65).

Jenison, an appealing, eternally inquisitive (and highly gifted) tinkerer and computer graphics developer, founded the company NewTek and is successful enough to have the time and resources to indulge himself in this particular obsession.

Jenison launched his project after reading two books: painter and photographer David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* and architecture historian Philip Steadman's *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces*. Hockney and Steadman, both British, appear in the film. Their books have generated a debate in the art world over whether early masters like Vermeer used optical machinery, such as the camera obscura.

"I'm not a painter," claims Jenison, but he nonetheless quickly learns how to use a brush with considerable skill and how to copy an image, essentially by placing a small 45-degree-angle mirror on a movable stand. The results are impressive.

According to a November 29, 2013 article in *Vanity Fair*, Jenison's research lasted five years. "He went to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. 'Looking at their Vermeers,' he says, 'I had an epiphany'—the first of several. 'The photographic tone is what jumped out at me. Why was

Vermeer so realistic? Because he got the *values* right,' meaning the color values. 'Vermeer got it right in ways that the eye couldn't see. It looked to me like Vermeer was painting in a way that was impossible. I jumped into studying art.'"

The movie chronicles the great effort and ingenuity Jenison brings to his investigation, including numerous trips to Delft in the Netherlands, during which he learns to speak Dutch. At one point, he begs the authorities at Buckingham Palace (the Queen's residence) in London for a chance to see the original "The Music Lesson." When the request is eventually granted by Palace officials, he is allowed 30 minutes to view the painting. The experience leaves Jenison shaken and emotionally proclaiming that "reproductions don't do it any justice at all."

In his no-holes-barred fashion, Jenison transforms a portion of a San Antonio, Texas warehouse into an exact replica of the chamber in the Vermeer painting. He recreates the original room using 3D mapping to plot the space, and reproduces the furniture, the floor tiles, the rafters and the north-facing windows as seen in the original painting. He learns how to grind versions of the lenses and pigments used in Vermeer's time.

Human models are kept still by painful-looking clamps that hold their heads in place—Jenison's daughter, the stand-in for Vermeer's young music student, takes a Diet Coke break in her seventeenth-century garb. Like "watching paint dry," Jenison develops his reproduction slowly and with great patience (over the course of several months), making optical device adjustments and discoveries along the way.

Hockney and Steadman jury the final result. They are obviously impressed by Jenison's craftsmanship, particularly by the exactness of many of the details (such as the stitching on the rug), but one senses they are not entranced with the painting as art.

And why should they be? *Tim's Vermeer* is, just that, Tim Jenison's "Vermeer." In fact, the movie is not about Vermeer. It is about Tim Jenison—a fascinating and unusual subject, who ends up acknowledging that "The Music Room" is Vermeer's exclusive composition and invention.

As to the question of Vermeer's use of optical devices, art

historian Erik Larsen (*Vermeer*) takes for granted what *Tim's Vermeer* tries painstakingly to prove: "In fact, certain distortions in form and composition, reflections and treatment of highlights leave no doubt that Vermeer did not eschew the help of what contemporary science had to offer in the artistic field The flourishing of experimental as well as theoretical activities in the natural sciences in Protestant Holland encouraged artists to find mechanical devices constituting a shortcut in the rendering of perspective possible. Theoretical treatises were available, but the possibility of replacing calculations with a gadget opened up new horizons for the simple craftsman."

Optical devices were not the only, or most important, phenomena new to Vermeer's age. The art of the Dutch "Golden Age" is impossible to explain without reference to the new, capitalist social relations. If the optical devices had been available to painters several hundred years earlier, they wouldn't have been of any use: the medieval artist was not interested for the most part in the individual or the details of everyday life, or at least such art would not have received any support from the patrons of the day in the nobility and church. Revolutionary bourgeois society broke up the old relationships into atoms, as Marxists have explained, and gave them unprecedented flexibility and mobility. Dutch painting reflected and emerged as part of this process.

Arnold Hauser in *The Social History of Art* argues that the new, unpretentious middle-class naturalism was an attempt to explore the spiritual qualities of everyday life, in a style that sought "not only to make spiritual things visible, but all visible things a spiritual experience. The intimate easel painting, in which this conception of art is embodied, became the characteristic form of the whole of modern middle-class art—no other is such an expression of the bourgeois spirit with its untiring psychological inquisitiveness and its limitations at the same time."

Teller's film is silent on the historical issues ... no great surprise.

The documentary raises a related issue. David Hockney, quite rightly, points out that art and science were once closely related, especially in the Renaissance. *Tim's Vermeer*, however, goes so far as to assert that "art and technology are the same." This may simply be a loose means of making a point, and neither Jenison nor certainly Hockney argue openly that art is *reducible* to technology, but the question remains an open one.

Such a conclusion, if it were drawn, although it might sound quite "materialistic" and down-to-earth, would be quite wrong. Intuition, as Soviet literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky insisted in the 1920s, is central to the creation of the artistic image. There is nothing mystical here. Voronsky explains that intuition is nothing but the truths about the

world, discovered by previous generations, which have passed into the sphere of the human unconscious. "Intuition," he writes, "is present both in the artist and in the scientist, but with the scientist it occupies a subordinate position, and with the artist a dominant one." ("On Art")

Trotsky puts this another way, when he explains (in "Class and Art") that the expression a great artist of the past gave his or her feelings "is so saturated with the artistic, and generally with the psychological, experience of centuries, is so crystallized, that it has lasted down to our times."

This experience of centuries cannot be reproduced merely by technology. As if he were directly speaking to the creators of *Tim's Vermeer*, Trotsky observes in *Literature and Revolution* that "If one is to regard the process of poetic creation only as a combination of sounds or words ... then the only perfect formula of 'poetics' will be this: Arm yourself with a dictionary and create by means of algebraic combinations and permutations of words, all the poetic works of the world which have been created and which have not yet been created." The great poet, however, Trotsky points out, proceeds another way, "by subordinating the selection of words to a *preconceived artistic idea*."

Dutch painting meant a great deal to Hegel, and he wrote about it extensively. He conveyed beautifully the manner in which the artists' intuition and spirituality shone through: "What in nature slips past, art ties down to permanence: a quickly vanishing smile, a sudden roguish expression in the mouth, a glance, a fleeting ray of light, as well as spiritual traits in human life, incidents and events that come and go, are there and are then forgotten—anything and everything art wrests from momentary existence, and in this respect too conquers nature."

Any discussion of art that leaves these questions out is inevitably a limited one.



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