

## Tim's Vermeer



A Review by Garry Victor Hill

Produced by Penn Jillette Teller and Farley Ziegler. Directed by Raymond Joseph Teller. Written by Penn Jillette Teller. Music by Conrad Pope. Edited by Patrick Sheffield. Cinematography: Shane F. Kelly.

Length: 80 minutes. A Sony Pictures Classics Release. Premiere: 5<sup>th</sup> September 2013 at the Toronto International Film Festival. Limited Cinematic releases in 2014. Shown ABC Television 26<sup>th</sup> February 2015. DVD release.

Tim Jenison, an American graphics designer and art lover, became fascinated with the artwork of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). Very little is known about Vermeer: even less is known about his techniques. He seems to have spent much, if not all of his life away from the cultural centres, where artists gained fame and investigation into their lives and techniques. By living in his native city of Delft he and his works gained little more attention than local respectability until reappraisals in the nineteenth century.

Jennison pondered on how that seventeenth century Dutch artist could have created such extraordinarily realistic paintings without the use of photography or film. The work Jennison focused on, 'The Music Lesson' serves as a great example of Vermeer's style. As the frontispiece on the title page here shows, everything within the frame, even the finer details of streaks in marble tiles and the twistings in threads in the strands of tassels are completed with a stunning exactitude. To achieve this Vermeer worked slowly, so how could he have captured the light which suffuses the scene so exactly, as light patterns change by hours, let alone those changes that occur through a single day or weeks? Jennison believed that Vermeer must have used a camera obscura and mirrors. To test his theory he decided to replicate the scene 'The Music Lesson' shows and paint another copy of the picture, despite never having painted.

Jennison believed with modern technology that would be possible. He wanted an exact replica, which sounds like a tautology, but how many replicas are really exact? References to full scale replicas reveals that many replicas are diminutives or enlargements. Even when replicating exact sizes these examples are often made of differing materials from the original or are created using a different technology. Jennison would have none of that: when he said he would make a replica of the painting's scene he meant replica in that word's most exact meaning.

He spent months building the replica of the room depicted in 'The Music Lesson.' He achieved that by getting his twenty-first recreation exactly right through careful planning, which was even more carefully rechecked. These recheckings were not only for shape and size, but for exact colouring and for matching how sunlight affected hues. Dyes were made for the table covering to match the hues Vermeer used. More time, money and energy then went on the furniture, the musical instruments, the mirror, clothes and other assorted objects depicted in the original. This took several months.

Through repeated experiments Jennison succeeded in proving that Vermeer must have used a camera obscura, mirrors and other technology available to a seventeenth century artist to paint this picture in its extraordinary detail. What the voice over tells us at this point is that Vermeer has now become a fathomable genius. Indeed. Jennison then used that technology and modern computers to successfully paint an exact replica of 'The Music Lesson.'

Whatever Jennison intended, his effort and his creation shows us that Jennison is now also a technological genius, but could this be at the cost the esteem given to Vermeer until now? This situation recalls a scene from a Sherlock Holmes story when one of his clients, stunned by Holmes's success in solving a seemingly unsolvable problem, tells him he is mystified by Holmes's genius. Holmes explains his deductive logic in easily comprehended steps. His client then exclaims that now he can see how it is done he realizes that there was nothing to it. By implication both Holmes and his abilities are dropping in his estimation. Holmes then wryly and wisely tells Watson that he decides to keep his methods to himself so as to preserve his reputation.

This immediate loss of wonder with Vermeer's art can be quickly and simply remedied. All the viewer needs to do to appreciate Vermeer's works again must be to look at them without going into analysis and investigation. This returning to a cultural work after investigation and analysis can be a test of what is great culture; does it survive gaining the knowledge of how it was put together? Does it survive knowledge of its creator's personal failings? With Vermeer the last point does not apply: he remains an enigma.

A second point not made by the filmmakers, but blatantly obvious must be that if Jennison can use twenty-first technology to exactly reproduce a Vermeer can Vermeer reproductions become as common as Coca-Cola bottles? At an immediate assessment after a first viewing the temptation for many would be like Holmes's client to shout out something like "There is nothing to it!" or similarly "Anybody can do that!"

Actually as the documentary shows, "anybody" would have to spend over a year of their life researching, investigating and constructing, which adds up to being far from "nothing", just in spent time. This time would mean no income from employment. They would also have to have a great deal of money they are willing to part with; perhaps a million dollars, perhaps more. They would also have to have not only the patience of a saint, but the intelligence of a rocket scientist – and one with an artistic bent.

Okay so all of these requirements narrow the potential field; "anybody" has dropped to a few thousand. Another limitation would be that there may not be much money in duplicating Vermeer, in the art world no such mass demand exists for even the best copies. Forgeries? This may be different. People crave supposed originals and the market demand cares little for veracity, more for the appearance of that. One art joke goes how in his lifetime Courbet may possibly have painted as many as ten thousand pictures, but of those fifteen thousand are in America.

This demand also has strong drawbacks as the television show *Fake or Fortune* clearly demonstrates. Provenance has become a more exacting, sophisticated and prolonged process. In the 1930s a series of Vermeer forgeries were initially accepted; after making fools of former experts those working today will be extremely cautious about verification.

So what of how technology has shown what can be achieved? Where are we heading? In art, writing, music, architecture, history, television programming and virtually every other field of human endeavor twenty- first century technology has created a knowledge explosion combined with creative, easily used technology. In this new world virtually anybody can achieve at levels once reserved for only a few. Will genius seem so wondrous once so many geniuses appear? Will humanity overall rise to new levels of intelligence? Will the reverse happen as the machines do so much of the thinking process? We are too close to the unfolding process to be able to tell to where we are being led.

### Acknowledgements

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