

Mongrel Media
Presents

A Penn & Teller Film
Produced by Penn Jillette

Tim's Vermeer

Nominee, Best Documentary
Critics Choice Awards 2014

Official Selection
Telluride Film Festival 2013
Toronto International Film Festival 2013
New York Film Festival 2013
80 mins

Distribution



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High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html>

Summary

Tim Jenison, a Texas based inventor, attempts to solve one of the greatest mysteries in all art: How did 17th century Dutch Master Johannes Vermeer ("Girl with a Pearl Earring") manage to paint so photo-realistically -- 150 years before the invention of photography? The epic research project Jenison embarks on to test his theory is as extraordinary as what he discovers.

Spanning a decade, Jenison's adventure takes him to Delft, Holland, where Vermeer painted his masterpieces; on a pilgrimage to the North coast of Yorkshire to meet artist David Hockney; and eventually even to Buckingham Palace, to see the Queen's Vermeer.

Principal Cast
(in order of appearance)

TIM JENISON

PENN JILLETTE

MARTIN MULL

PROFESSOR PHILIP STEADMAN

DAVID HOCKNEY

DR. COLIN BLAKEMORE

Filmmakers

Director TELLER

Produced by PENN JILLETTE

Producer FARLEY ZIEGLER

Executive Producers PETER ADAM GOLDEN

GLENN S. ALAI

TIM JENISON

TELLER

Editor PATRICK SHEFFIELD

Director of Photography SHANE F. KELLY

Composer CONRAD POPE

Re-Recording Mixer LARRY BLAKE

Who is Tim?

Tim Jenison was the visionary behind the desktop video revolution. Jenison founded NewTek in 1985, and led the way in the development of a series of highly successful products, including DigiView (one of the first video digitizers for a computer), DigiPaint, and the Video Toaster®. Tim Jenison saw the personal computer as the mode for incorporating his various interests: electronics, music, film and video. Prior to setting out on the journey this film depicts, Tim had a foundation in the science of digital art. However, he had never painted before and certainly did not consider himself to be a painter.

The Mystery of Vermeer

During the late 1650s, Vermeer and other Dutch artists began to place a new emphasis on depicting figures within carefully composed interior spaces. Vermeer's works are small and rare. Of the 35 paintings attributed to him, all of them are admired for the detail in which he rendered the effects of light and color. Little is known for certain about Vermeer's career. His earliest signed and dated painting, *The Procuress* (1656), is thematically related to a Dirck van Baburen painting that Vermeer owned and that appears in the background of two of his own paintings. After his death Vermeer was overlooked by all but the most discriminating collectors and art historians for more than 200 years. Only after 1866, when the French critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger rediscovered him, did Vermeer's works become widely known.

Tim's Vermeer is not the first look into Vermeer's likely use of optics in his works. Professor Philip Steadman (seen in the film) caused a sensation in the art world in 2001 when he published his book *Vermeer's Camera*. Steadman investigated the suspicions of art historians who suggested Vermeer used a camera obscura, an optical device that could project the image of sunlit objects placed before it with extraordinary detail. However, Steadman's experiment used a technique known as "reverse perspective" which produced startling results. He found that six of the Vermeer paintings he analyzed depicted the same room, the painter's studio in Delft, and the geometry of the six was consistent with their being projected on to the back wall of the room using a lens and then traced.

These findings were not intended to challenge Vermeer's genius but rather to show how, like many artists, Vermeer was able to use technology to paint his extraordinary compositions more accurately. Nevertheless, Steadman's book caused a storm of controversy, dividing art historians while convincing many scholars in the history of science, technology, optics and photography.

Art vs. Science ... that is the question

The questions posed by this discovery all come back to the debate of whether the use of these technologies negatively impacts Vermeer's reputation as an artist. Some would say that this was cheating. Others would say that this was innovation. David Hockney, author of *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering Techniques of the Old Masters* (seen in the film), attributes some of the controversy to the contemporary separation of art and science. Hockney reminds us that in Vermeer's time art and science were much more closely intertwined, for example Vermeer's neighbor was a master microscope maker who could have taught Vermeer about optics. Some speculate that using technology such as the camera obscura, a device akin to a modern photographic camera, would make Vermeer less of an artist. Though today, we consider individuals who are highly skilled in photography to be great artists. How can the two beliefs be held simultaneously? Questions remain that if Vermeer had used optical technology, why would there be no written records of it? Possibly the paintings themselves tell the story.

It's about the process, not the product

The film takes the viewer on the journey of Tim Jenison's experiment to test theories of how the great seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Johannes Vermeer, was able to capture light in his paintings with such photographic quality. This experiment, as with all others, begins with a hypothesis, a question. Tim's questions stem from the over 100 years of speculation and controversy surrounding claims that Vermeer used a camera obscura to create these famous images. However, quickly Tim determines that the camera obscura alone was not sufficient to capture the range of color and tones that are the heart and soul of Vermeer's paintings. How could the technologies of Vermeer's time have been combined to assist him in capturing light variations that are not visible to the naked eye?

The film explores how Tim came up with, and then tested, his idea of using a mirror to allow the artist not only to trace the shapes but to precisely duplicate the color of real objects. Using a combination of a camera obscura and two mirrors – equipment that would have been easily available in Vermeer’s Holland -- Tim created a device (depicted above) that allowed him to paint in the same manner as Vermeer. Tim Jenison, a man who had never painted before, with the use of his device, attention to detail, and patience, was immediately able to paint with astonishing, Vermeer-like accuracy. Each time it worked it surprised all who witnessed it. It was as if it were a magic trick.

Tim next set about selecting one of the Vermeer pictures, then replicating the scene depicted in the painting and the conditions under which Vermeer painted, as closely as possible. Tim chose *The Music Lesson*. In his warehouse in Texas, Tim handmade the lens, hand crafted the paint and pigments, calculated and designed the room, built replicas of the furniture and all of the objects in the room, etc.

The film depicts the massive undertaking of this process, and all that had to occur before Tim could even pick up a paintbrush. Tim discovered that using the device did eliminate some of the decision making for the painter such as: what color to use, when to adjust the tone quality and where to start and stop a line. However, it was far from an easy process. Painting with this method required a certain level of obsession in the painter’s attention to detail. It was slow, meticulous and often backbreaking work for the painter and the models. Tim spent 130 days painting in this manner.

His results – and the startling evidence he uncovered in the process – could change the history of art forever.

Cast Bios

Tim Jenison is considered the visionary force behind the desktop video revolution. Jenison founded his technology company, NewTek, in 1985, and led the way in the development of a series of highly successful products, including DigiView (one of the first video digitizers for a computer), DigiPaint, and the Video Toaster®.

Jenison learned about technology and electrical equipment from his father, who ran an electrical engineering firm. At an early age, he learned to play the piano, and his keyboard talents propelled him to leave college to join a rock band—where, of course, he continually worked on ways to improve the sound equipment.

Jenison was one of the early enthusiasts for personal computers. By the late 1970s, he saw the computer as the integrating medium for his various passions: electronics, music, film and video. He decided that forming a company was the best way to fuel his endeavors to create sophisticated, yet affordable video software tools that everyone could use and enjoy.

David Hockney, born July 9, 1937 in Bradford, England, is an artist whose work in a variety of mediums has been exhibited around the world, most recently at a major exhibition of his landscape paintings and multi-camera films at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 2012 which then traveled to Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and Museum Ludwig, Cologne. “David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition” opens at the de Young Museum in San Francisco October 26, 2013.

Crew Bios

Teller (Director) has been the smaller, quieter half of renowned magic duo Penn & Teller since 1975.

An Emmy, Writers Guild Award, Obie and Drama Critics Circle winner, Teller with partner Penn Jillette, has enjoyed successful runs on Broadway, sold-out world tours and is the current longest-running headline act in Las Vegas.

In 2008, Teller conceived and co-directed a bloody, supernatural thriller-inspired stage version of Shakespeare's "Macbeth," that toured the East Coast to raves from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. In 2010 he co-wrote and directed the critically acclaimed Off-Broadway hit "Play Dead." Conceived as an ode to the classic midnight spook shows of the mid-20th Century, he again received raves from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* and earned a Drama Desk nomination for "Unique Theatrical Experience." Most recently, he consulted on the magic and effects for the Geffen Playhouse production of "The Exorcist."

Teller has starred in his own television series and specials, including the hit Showtime series *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!*, has written five books and has a prolific career as a magic consultant for live theater, television and films.

In 2013, Penn & Teller received their very own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Penn Jillette (Producer) is a cultural phenomenon as a solo personality and as half of the world-famous Emmy Award- winning magic duo and Las Vegas headliners Penn & Teller.

His solo exposure is enormous: from *Howard Stern* to *Piers Morgan*, from *Oprah* to *Glenn Beck*, to the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He has appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*, *MTV Cribs*, and *Chelsea Lately*, and hosted the NBC game show *Identity*. As part of Penn & Teller, he has appeared more than twenty times on *David Letterman*, as well as on several other TV shows, from *The Simpsons*, and *Friends* to *Top Chef* and *Jimmy Fallon*.

He cohosted the controversial Showtime series *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!*, which was nominated for sixteen Emmy Awards and was the longest-running show in the history of the network. He most recently cohosted the Discovery Channel's *Penn & Teller Tell A Lie* and was part of the most recent cast of NBC's *Celebrity Apprentice*.

Together since 1975, Penn & Teller's live show spent years on Broadway and is now the longest-running headliner show in Las Vegas where it plays nightly at The Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino. In 2013 the pair was once again awarded Las Vegas Magicians of the Year.

Penn's latest book is *God No! Signs You Might Be An Atheist and Other Magic Tales*, which spent six weeks on the New York Times Best Sellers list upon its release.

His new podcast, *Penn's Sunday School*, was the No. 1 downloaded podcast on iTunes during its debut week and was named by iTunes as Best New Comedy Podcast for 2012.

As a philanthropist, his efforts have resulted in raising thousands of dollars for Las Vegas-based charities AFAN (AID for AIDS NV) and Opportunity Village. The annual "Penn & Teller's 13 Bloody Days of Xmas" continues to be the most successful blood drive in the Vegas Valley resulting in an average of 4000 pints donated every holiday season.

In April of this year, Penn & Teller were given their very own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Farley Ziegler's (Producer) latest project is as producer of *Tim's Vermeer*, the most recent film from Penn and Teller, directed by Teller and produced by Penn Jillette, about inspiring inventor and indefatigable explorer Tim Jenison and his pursuit to paint a Vermeer. She previously worked with Penn Jillette and Teller, producing with Penn the hit comedy documentary, *The Aristocrats*. With producing partner Christina Ricci, she created and ran Blaspheme Films, their production company. As a production executive at Single Cell Pictures, she was instrumental in bringing Charlie Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* to the screen. She served as story editor and creative executive for director Sean Penn at Clyde Is Hungry Films.

Prior to that, she collaborated with Peabody-Award winning monologist Joe Frank to create his series for National Public Radio, "In the Dark." She began her career in film as assistant to director David Fincher, working with the director at Propaganda Films on his groundbreaking commercials and music videos.