PRESS RELEASE

TEYLERS

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The Grand Illusion
200 years of Virtual Realities
17 February – 1 September 2024

Can we actually believe our eyes? With the dramatic rise of the AI-generated image, this question is more relevant than ever. But it is not new. In the exhibition *The Grand Illusion – 200 years of Virtual Realities*, Teylers Museum takes you back to the nineteenth century, when optical illusions became a mass spectacle. Delve into the roots of virtual reality, augmented reality and deepfakes, and step into the exhibition room of the oldest museum in the Netherlands, which has been transformed into a contemporary house of mirrors. From mirrors and projectors to the digital genius of AI: *The Grand Illusion*, on from 17 February until 1 September 2024, shows the experience of yesterday is not so different from the experience of today. Roll up, roll up for *The Grand Illusion*!

Sensation

A talking head on a table, a ghost appearing on stage, a stereoscope showing the Egyptian pyramids in three dimensions: in the nineteenth century, optical illusions became quite the sensation. People gaped at the grandest and most astonishing optical effects, often created with the latest techniques and developments in science. With spectacular theatre acts and exciting attractions at funfairs, the public's imagination was captured by this new and revolutionary kind of entertainment. Worlds usually out of reach and things impossible, now looking more real than reality: these virtual realities are fascinating.

Palais des Illusions, 1900 Paris Exposition. In the exhibition The Grand Illusion, visitors can enter an interactive space, based on this kaleidoscopic palace of mirrors, which made a great impression at the time.

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Pepper's Ghost and Tupac

The technique behind people as apparitions ('Pepper's Ghost') is still in use and still causes the same excitement and amazement. Think for example of Tupac, who, after his death, suddenly appeared on stage among other artists – 150 years after the invention of this technique. Concerns about the credibility of the realities created were also raised in the nineteenth century. The scientific collection of Teylers Museum holds lots of material containing optical illusions, prompted by a fascination with the workings of the eye. At this interactive family exhibition, you can experience nineteenth-century and contemporary virtual realities. Have a look in the highlight of Teylers: the Kaiserpanorama. Step inside a kaleidoscopic space, look through a VR headset and be amazed by artificial intelligence. On the basis of comparisons with today, *The Grand Illusion* once again poses the topical question: is seeing believing?

Ghost photo: carte de visite for a Pepper's Ghost show by a famous performer, Robin. Paris, ca. 1863, private collector. The drummer was a soldier who had just been killed in the Crimean War.

Acquisition of the Wim van Keulen collection

A selection of highlights from an extraordinary collection of stereoscopic photography, a recent acquisition by the museum, will also be on display at the exhibition. This acquisition comprises several dozen stereoscopes and stereoscopic photos from the earliest period, between 1850 and ca 1865. It is a wonderful addition to the existing scientific collections, in which the predecessors of stereoscopy are already present. The collection, assembled during the life of Haarlem collector Wim van Keulen (1933-2021), enjoys considerable international prestige. Van Keulen collaborated on exhibitions with several museums in the past and leant his material to Teylers Museum on earlier occasions.

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Stereo photo in case by A. Claudet (Collection Wim van Keulen). Ca. 1855-1865. Collection Teylers Museum

Collaborations

The Grand Illusion is the first exhibition in the Netherlands on the intersection of science, technology, theatre and mass entertainment. The Rijksmuseum, Eye Filmmuseum and several private collectors and museums, among others, have contributed objects on loan. A few highlights, such as a mini diorama à la Daguerre, with images with day/night effects, come from the Cinématèque in Paris. Ghent University Museum has lent a phenakistiscope belonging to the Ghent professor Joseph Plateau, who conducted research on sight and is considered to be an important pioneer of film. Prof. Dr Frank Kessler, professor of media history at Utrecht University, Prof. Dr Kurt Vanhoutte, professor of theatre studies at the University of Antwerp, Dr Sabine Lenk, postdoc researcher at the University of Marburg, Prof. Dr Nele Wynants, research professor at the University of Antwerp are all involved in the content development of the exhibition. For public events, Teylers Museum will work with Eye Filmmuseum, Schuur Haarlem and the Rathenau Instituut.

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