

Letter 240
The Hague, 1 November 1882

Dear Theo,

For the last few days I have been very much preoccupied by something which may possibly interest you, and I think it quite worth while to write you about it in detail. In a letter from Rappard, I received the summary of a discourse by Herkomer on modern wood engravings. I cannot tell you the whole in detail; perhaps you have read the article yourself (it appeared in an English art magazine, perhaps the Art Journal). It dealt particularly with the drawings in the Graphic. Herkomer tells how he himself worked on it with great zeal and enthusiasm, and recalls especially the splendid pages of the first series. He can hardly find words to express how strongly he feels the importance of the work of those original artists. He surveys the progress in technique and process and the difference between the old and the modern wood engravings, etc., etc.

Then he talks about the present time, and comes to the real point of his discourse. He says that the wood engravers are more clever than ever, but I for my part see a decadence when I think of the time when the Graphic started. And he continues: "In my opinion, the fault lies in two things, against which I protest. One concerns the managers and the other concerns the artists.

"Both make mistakes, and these will spoil the thing if they are not corrected."

The managers, he says, ask for things that are done for effect; correct and honest drawing is no longer wanted, complete designs are no longer in demand: all that is requested is a "bit" to cover an awkward corner of a page.

The managers declare that the public requires the representation of a public event or two, and is satisfied if it is correct and entertaining, caring nothing for the artistic qualities of the work.

I do not believe what they say. The only excuse that can be accepted is "a shortage of good draughtsmen."...

Then he comes to the artists, and says how he regrets that nowadays it is all too often the wood engraver and not the draughtsman who makes the pages beautiful. He urges the artists not to permit this, to draw soberly and vigorously, so that the engraver remains what he should be: the interpreter of the draughtsman's work, not his master.

Then his conclusion follows, a strong admonition to all to put their hearts into the job, and not to allow themselves to weaken. There is a note of reproach in his voice, and he speaks with a certain melancholy, as if fighting against what he thinks unbearable indifference.

"To you – the public – art offers infinite pleasure and edification. It is really done for you. Therefore insist on good work, and you will be sure to get it," he concludes.

The whole thing is thoroughly sound, strong, honest. His manner of speaking impresses me the same way as some of Millet's letters. To me it is an inspiration, and it does my heart good to hear someone talk this way.

I say that it is a great pity there is little or no enthusiasm here for the art which is most suitable for the general public.

If the painters combined to see that their work (which in my opinion is, after all, made for the people – at least I think this is the highest, noblest calling for any artist to pursue) could indeed come into the public's hands and was brought within everybody's reach, it could produce the same results as those achieved during the Graphic's first years.

This year Neuhuys, Van der Velden and a few others made drawings for The Swallow, a monthly magazine which costs 7½ cents. There are some good ones among them, but one can see that most of them are done sloppily (not the original drawings but the way of popularizing them) and I hear that this magazine cannot keep going any more than its predecessors. Why not? The booksellers say there is no profit in it, and instead of trying to increase the circulation, they keep it down.

And I think that the painters, for their part, do not take the matter strongly enough to heart.

The answer that many a painter here in Holland gives to the question "What is a wood engraving?" is, "They are those things you find in the South Holland Café."

So they class them with the drinks. And those who make them, perhaps with the drunkards.

And what do the dealers say? Suppose I took a hundred sketches which I happen to have collected to any dealer here; I fear that the only answer I should get would be, "Did you really expect these things to have any market value?"

My love and respect for the great draughtsmen, those of Gavarni's time as well as those of the present, increases the more I come to know their work, and especially since I myself try to make something of what one sees on the street every day.

What I appreciate in Herkomer, Fildes, Holl and the other founders of the Graphic, the reason why they still mean more to me than Gavarni and Daumier, and will continue to, is that while the latter seem to look on society with malice, the former – as well as men like Millet, Breton, De Groux, Israëls – chose subjects which are as true as Gavarni's or Daumier's, but have something noble and a more serious sentiment. That sentiment especially must remain, I think. An artist needn't be a clergyman or a churchwarden, but he certainly must have a warm heart for his fellow men. I think it very noble, for instance, that no winter passed without the Graphic doing something to arouse sympathy for the poor. For example, I have a page by Woodville representing a distribution of peat tickets in Ireland; another by Staniland called "Help the Helpers," representing various scenes in a hospital which was short of money; "Christmas in the Workhouse" by Herkomer; "Homeless and Hungry" by Fildes, etc. I like them better than the drawings by Bertall, or the like, for the *Vie Elégante*.

Perhaps you think this letter tedious – but it all came fresh into my thoughts again. I had collected and mounted my hundred studies, and when I had finished the job, a rather melancholy feeling of "what's the use?" came over me. But then those energetic words of Herkomer's, urging the public not to flag and saying that it is more necessary than ever to keep the hand to the plough, comforted me so, and I thought I would give you a short summary of what he said. A handshake in thought, believe me,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

I hope to hear from you soon. I had a good letter from home.