

Amice Rappard,

I just received your letter and the sketch of your picture. <sup>1</sup> It certainly is a beautiful subject, and I have nothing to object to in the composition as far as the equilibrium is concerned.

But will you allow me to say one thing? – which I would not say if the picture were finished and therefore difficult to alter, but which I do say because certain alterations that won't affect the lines might be carried out to advantage. Here you are then: the figure in the middle of the picture – the woman with the rake [sic] <sup>2</sup> – is well placed. But the raking of that spot is a matter of such minor importance, in my opinion, that it ought not to be done by a main figure. For this reason I for my part should prefer the central figure – in the foreground – to be the one who carries the bricks (this being an action that would be very expressive here, and motivated by the whole), and I should prefer to give the figure on the second plane (who is now carrying bricks – and who now occupies a secondary place in the composition) a rake to hold in her hands.

Is this possible with regard to the working process? If not, please think about the problem – for it is not unimportant, it seems to me, and might be criticized. It is right for the figure to be standing erect in that place, but wouldn't it be possible to invent a more interesting action – without altering the lines? Don't take offense at this, please – I don't believe it can do any harm to make such suggestions when a picture is in the planning stage. I don't think this means forcing my ideas upon you. Especially if the picture is to be a large one, I consider it most important for the actions to be expressive. I know this is making high demands – I know that the lines and the equilibrium of the lines are paramount factors here.

But these lines may remain beautiful and quiet. Well, it is possible that I am not wrong about this – and your principal figure is at stake – so I did not dare conceal my impression. If it is not asking too much, I want to offer the suggestion that you let one of the women carrying bricks stoop and lay them out, so that the two of them are not doing the same work. But it would come to the same thing, as there would then be two stooping figures. And after all it does not matter so much. But my first observation is what I really mainly feel.

As for my work, that scene of the potato eaters – you saw the lithograph of it – is a subject that I tried to paint, being inspired by the peculiar light effect in that grimy cottage. It is kept in such a low scale of colours that the light colours, smeared on white paper, for instance, would look like ink stains; but on the canvas they stand out like lights because of the great forces opposed to them, for instance by putting on absolutely unmixed Prussian blue. My own criticism is that by paying attention to this, I lost sight of the form of the torsos. Heads and hands, however, were done very carefully; and as they were of the greatest importance and all the rest was nearly entirely dark (therefore quite different in effect from the lithograph), my painting the picture as I did is to be excused to a greater extent than you think. And besides, the real picture differs in design from either the rough sketch for it, which I still have and which I made in that cottage by the light of a little lamp, or from the lithograph.

I want to tell you further that I have drawn quite a number of heads since you were here, and quite a lot of peasants besides: diggers, weeders, harvesters. The thing that occupied my attention, either directly or indirectly, and was the great problem in all this, was colour. I mean the breaking of the colours – mixing red with green, blue with orange, yellow with violet. Always the combination of the complementary colours, their influence on each other – which nature is as full of as of light and brown. Another problem – which engrosses me every day anew – is precisely the one I think you asserted I neglected: rendering the form and its modelling, its great lines and masses – one considers the contours in the last instead of the first place in doing this. Herewith two sketches of smaller compositions – I painted both of them. Lately I have been working mostly on things of a smaller size.

As I go on concentrating my attention on the poor peasants especially, I have to cope with the landscape every blessed day. When Wenkebach came to see me, I had just finished painting some cottages.

In the matter of wood engravings I have literally nothing new except four large compositions by Lhermitte. For me that man is Millet the Second, in the full sense of the term; I adore his work as much as that of Millet himself. I think his genius of the same order as that of Millet the First.

My brother was here; he told me a few things about the talk of the day in Paris now which I think very fortunate – the success of the Eugene Delacroix exhibition. I was further interested in what he told me about Raffaelli, a figure painter, and Claude Monet, a landscape painter cum colourist.

For the rest – you will experience it yourself – it is less a golden age than an iron age for painters – I mean, it is not exactly easy for them to keep alive – no more than that. At least as far as I am concerned it is misère ouverte – but despite that my courage, and perhaps my powers too, are greater rather than smaller than they were before. Don't think you're the only one who considers or considered it his duty to criticize me, you know, even to the limits of total annihilation; on the contrary, it's about the only thing I have encountered so far. For the very reason that you are, or were, not the only one to speak in this way and no other, your criticism is connected with

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other criticism to which I on my part oppose the conviction that my endeavours have a *raison d'être*, and to which I shall continue to oppose it more and more strongly.

The reason why – although I did not insist on what I wanted, but gave in to what you wanted – the reason why I started out by suggesting that you should withdraw your criticism completely was not that I wanted to bend or break your opinions despotically. Nothing was further from my intention, although you took it that way.

There are details that are quite correct – I have made it hot for you on account of plaster-of-Paris drawing, and I freely admit that I am capable of doing it again.

And as for other questions – I cannot always keep quiet under it; now and then it seems to me as though people were touching my body, so much do I feel taken up by the question, and so much is my conviction a part of myself.

It is true that there are faulty things in that lithograph as well as in my other work – certainly there are. But my other work proves so clearly that I render what I see that people cannot be justified, or speaking in good faith, when they judge my work otherwise than as a whole and in a broader way, taking into account my purpose and endeavour – namely to paint *le paysan chez soi*, peasants in their surroundings.

Now you call the aggregate of my work utterly weak, and you demonstrate at great length that its deficiencies exceed its good qualities.

Thus about my work, thus about my person.

Well, I won't accept this – never.

The work in question, the painting of peasants, is such a hard job that the utterly weak won't even attempt it. And at least I have attempted it, and I have laid certain foundations, which is not exactly the easiest part of the job! And in drawing as well as in painting I can sometimes keep hold of certain solid and useful things, a firmer hold than you think, *amice*. But I am always doing what I can't do yet in order to learn how to do it. But writing you about this bores me. So I'll end by saying that the work is difficult, and that, instead of quarreling, the fellows who paint peasants and the common people would do wisely to join hands as much as possible. Union is strength, and what we have to fight against is not each other but those fellows who, even in the present period, are obstructing the progress of the ideas which Millet and others of a past generation fought for and which they pioneered. Nothing is a greater hindrance than this fatal fighting among ourselves.

As for you and me, let's put a stop to it, for our goal is the same.

But my real motive was the wish that your efforts and mine, though not identical, should run parallel and not in opposite directions. And seeing that in the matter of tendency and principle there are enough points of agreement, which I think will be permanent, it would appear to me that your criticism as a whole – when you applied this criticism to me – was inconsistent with the character of your own work.

This much we have in common, that we seek our subjects in the heart of the people; and we further have in common a desire – either as a final purpose or as a means – to obtain our studies from reality. And that means – having much in common. And that we are opposed to each other basically, with regard either to the technique of drawing or the technique of painting, is something I'm not convinced of. You are ahead of me in many things, I don't deny that; still I think you went too far.

But, be that as it may, inasmuch as, if we want to and it is our earnest endeavor, we may be useful and give support to each other – and because union is strength – I deem it desirable for us to remain friends.

And as regards technique, I am still searching for many things; and though I happen to find some of them, still there are an infinite number of things wanting. But for all that I know why I work as I do, and my efforts are planted on solid ground.

I said to Wenkebach only the other day that I did not know any painter who had as many faults as I do – but for all that I was not convinced that I am radically wrong.

At times my case is like this: the product of two negatives is a positive. Take whatever drawing or study of mine you like, especially those that I myself would point out to you with a certain resignation, and – in the drawing as well as in the colour or the tone – there will be errors that a realist would hardly commit...certain inaccuracies which I am convinced of myself – and which under certain circumstances I could point out with keener discernment than others – errors maybe, or imperfections.

And yet I believe that – even if I go on producing work in which people can point out errors – when they want to, if this is their special purpose and point of view – it will still have a certain vitality and *raison d'être* of its own that will hurl the errors into the shade – in the eyes of those who appreciate character and the spiritual conception of things. And it will not be so easy to confound me as they think, despite all my faults. I know too well what my ultimate goal is, and I am too firmly convinced of being on the right road after all, to pay much attention to what people say of me – when I want to paint what I feel and feel what I paint.

Nevertheless it makes life difficult at times, and – I think it quite possible that later on some fellows will regret either the things they said of me or the opposition and indifference which they have pestered me with. The way I see it is this: I withdraw from people to such an extent that I literally don't meet anybody except – the poor peasants – with whom I am directly concerned because I paint them.

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And this will remain my policy, and it is quite possible that I shall give up my studio before long and go live in a peasant's cottage, so as not to hear or see educated people – as they call themselves – any longer.

When I tell you – and I mean it – that I want to remain friends with you, it is because I observe in you an endeavour which I highly esteem. You penetrate the heart of the common people deeply, and you have the will power to carry it through. When I say that we may be useful and give support to each other, I say so because, if you don't give in to convention, you will probably, when you are better known, do even bolder things, and then it may come to a regular light in which the pictures of one school are used as weapons against those of another! And in that case it might be a good thing for a number of painters to act in unison. On the other hand – I don't think it is useless to exchange views and to see each other's work.

Herewith a third little sketch of a study I did yesterday [F 097, JH 876].

Goodbye. I felt impelled to submit the remark on the action of the woman in the center of your composition to your consideration; otherwise I think the composition very sensible and the whole conception sympathetic.

When you see Wenkebach, don't forget to give him my regards.

Ever yours, Vincent

From my little sketch you will see that I take rather great pains to get action into my little figures, to express their being at work, their doing something.

I think it a good thing that at least one figure in your composition is already stooping down – perhaps relatively many vertical lines in the composition would make it more difficult to express the fact that work is actually in progress.

1. See letter 421 to Theo: "... that yesterday I had a letter from Rappard, and that our quarrel is completely made up ..."
2. Probably Van Rappard altered this tool into a long-handled spade because of this remark.