

My dear Vincent,

You gave me great pleasure by writing me a letter; when one knows nothing one is inclined to think things are worse than they really are. It is bad enough in itself that you have had a crisis, but fortunately I see from your letter that at present you are feeling better. The view from your window – which you give a sketch of – ought to be very fine; in Paris one is sometimes dying for a look at the real countryside – at least you have a fragment of it at your disposal. In the environs of Paris you never see any peasants, and in truth I no longer know the harvest times for wheat and potatoes. It is a fact that in town you meet people who are certainly interesting too, but at times you have had enough of it, and so, as long as you cannot go there, a picture of the true countryside does you good, and certainly at such moments of surfeit à Bodmer<sup>1</sup> will give you as much pleasure, or rather more than some picture done with a scientifically clever technique, but without that true and wholesome something which is to be found in a slice of brown bread. Rousseau too has something of this knowledge. At the exhibition there are pictures of his with bits of forest, in which you can recognize all the species of trees with an undergrowth of true heath and true toadstools beneath. Surely if such fellows are no artists—and one would have to be damned exacting not to take them as such—in any case they are men, and one should wish the world to be full of them.

There you have old Father Pissarro,<sup>2</sup> who, notwithstanding everything, has done very fine things recently, and in them you also find those qualities of rusticity which show immediately that man is more at ease in wooden shoes than in patent-leather boots. A short time ago he lost his mother, who was very old, and yet it was a hard blow for him; he also had an operation performed on one of his eyes, but I do not think it was improved by it. He is continually wearing some kind of muzzle, which bothers him a good deal . . . He has great difficulty selling his stuff, and he has been through hard times, but he is always full of courage. One of his sons is in London, and it appears that they have schools there where one is taught decorative art, and where the pupils are absolutely free to treat the subject as they understand it. The first thing they gave him to do was a frieze composed of brambles. It would be a good thing if they did the same here, for by letting the fellows follow their own inclinations, they would find ornaments drawn from the source of nature, and the result might be a great change in the art of interior decoration, etc. It is a pity that the impressionists are unknown in England; there must be people over there who would like them.

This week Tersteeg sent me eight watercolours by J.H. Weissenbruch, who in parentheses is not dead; they are very, very fine. Although he does not concern himself with details of the vegetation, he knows the character of the Dutch countryside as Daumier knows his barristers – the misshapen trees, the muddy paths across the meadows, and how his skies are like those you see in Holland! I am very glad that Tersteeg has had the courage to buy them from him; he is always the same: he invariably begins by saying No, and then after some time he goes back on it, and often changes his mind. Here where they have understood Jongkind,<sup>3</sup> they will also be able to understand this one. In any case one might try it.

Gauguin has sent me some new canvases. He tells me that he hesitated to send them, because what he is striving for is not in them as he should have wished. He says he did find it in other canvases, which are not dry yet. However, in my opinion it is a certain fact that this consignment is not as good as the one he sent last year; there is one canvas, however, which is a really fine Gauguin once again. He calls it “La Belle Angèle.” It is a portrait put down on the canvas like the big heads in the Japanese crêpons; there is the bust-portrait with its outlines and then the background. It is a Breton woman, seated, the hands folded, black dress, lilac apron, and a white ruff; the outlines are grey and the background of a beautiful blue lilac with pink and red flowers. The expression of the head and the attitude are very well found. The woman is somewhat like a young cow, but there is something so fresh in it, and then again something so countrified, that it is very pleasant to see.

Now I still have to tell you that the exhibition of the Independents is open, and that your two pictures are there, the “Irises” [F 608, JH 1691] and “The Starlit Night.” [F 474, JH 1592] The latter is hung badly, for one cannot put oneself at a sufficient distance, as the room is very narrow, but the other one makes an extremely good showing. They have put it on the narrow wall of the room, and it strikes the eye from afar. It is a beautiful study full of air and life. There are some Lautrecs, which are very powerful in effect, among other things a Ball at the Moulin de la Galette, which is very good. The painters could only send in two pictures each, as the exhibition is held in a much smaller place than the one it was held in till now.

Seurat has sea beaches, Signac two landscapes. There is also a picture by Hayet, the friend of Lucien Pissarro’s, the Place de la Concorde in the evening with carriages, the gas jets, etc. It is something like that picture of the Tumblers [Saltimbanques] by Seurat, but it is more harmonious. We are in good health, I hardly cough any more, and am

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

feeling stronger. Jo too is quite well; one begins to see that she is pregnant, but it does not hinder her yet. One of the sisters is staying with us at the moment. Mother has had a letter from Cor; he is far away already, and was in good health.

Do write me a few words if you feel like it, and once again many thanks for your letter.

Be of good heart; and a cordial handshake, also from Jo.

Yours, Theo

1. See Vincent's letter 605.
2. See Letter T 50.
3. Johan Barthold Jongkind (1819-1891), one of the great precursors of impressionism.