© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

Letter 181
The Hague, c. 11 March 1882

Dear Theo,
You will have received my letters, I now answer yours, which came this afternoon. According to your wish I immediately sent Tersteeg the 10 guilders I had borrowed from him this week.
I wrote you about C. M.'s order – it happened this way. C. M. seems to have spoken with Tersteeg before he came to see me, at least he began by saying the same things about "earning my bread." My reply came on the spur of the moment, quick, and I believe this is exactly what I said, "Earn bread – how do you mean? Earn bread, or deserve bread? Not to deserve one's bread – that is, to be unworthy of it – is certainly a crime, for every honest man is worthy of his bread; but unluckily, not being able to earn it, though deserving it, is a misfortune, and a great misfortune. So if you say to me, 'You are unworthy of your bread,' you insult me. But if you make the rather just remark that I do not always earn it – for sometimes I have none – well, that may be true, but what's the use of making the remark? It does not get me any further if that's all you say."
So then C. M. didn't talk about "earning bread" any more.
However, the thunderstorm threatened once more, for when by chance I mentioned De Groux's name in speaking about expression, C. M. said abruptly, "But do you not know that in private life De Groux has a bad reputation?"
As you can imagine, C. M. touched a delicate point there, and ventured on slippery ground. I could not stand to hear this said of honest father De Groux. So I replied, "It has always seemed to me that when an artist shows his work to the public, he has the right to keep the inner struggle of his own private life to himself (which is directly and inevitably connected with the peculiar difficulties involved in producing a work of art), unless he wants to confide them to a very intimate friend. I repeat, it is very improper for a critic to dig up a man's private life when his work is above reproach. De Groux is a master like Millet, like Gavarni."
C. M. had certainly never considered Gavarni a master. (To any other but C. M. I would have expressed myself more briefly and strongly by saying, An artist's work and his private life are like a woman in childbirth and her baby. You may look at the child, but you may not lift her chemise to see if it is bloodstained. That would be very indelicate on the occasion of a post-partum visit.)
I had already begun to be afraid that C. M. would be angry, but luckily things took a better turn. To change the subject, I got out my portfolio with smaller studies and sketches. He did not say anything until we came to a little drawing which I once sketched at twelve o'clock at night while strolling around with Breitner, the Paddemoes (that Jewish quarter near the New Church) as seen from the Peat Market [F 918, JH 111]. Next morning I had worked on it again with my pen.
Jules Bakhuyzen had also looked at the little thing and immediately recognized the spot.
"Could you make some more of these views of the city?" asked C. M.
"Yes, I make them for a change sometimes when I am tired from working with the model – there is the Vleersteeg – the Geest – the Fish Market."
"Then make twelve for me."
"Yes," said I, "but this is business, so we must fix a price at once. I have set the price for a small drawing of this size, either in pencil or pen, at 2.50 guilders – do you think that unreasonable?"
"No," he said, "but if they turn out well, I will ask you to make twelve more of Amsterdam, and then I shall fix the price myself, so that you will get a little more for them."
Well, I think that pretty successful for a visit which I more or less dreaded.
Seeing that we agreed, Theo, that I should tell you things spontaneously, in my own way, I describe those little scenes to you just as they happen. Particularly since in this way, though you are absent, you get a glimpse of my studio.
I long very much for your coming, because then I can speak more seriously with you, for instance, about what happened at home.
C. M.'s order is like a ray of hope to me.
I will do my best on these little drawings and try to put some character into them. At all events you will see them, and I think, boy, that there is more of that kind of business to be done. One can find buyers for small drawings at 5 fr. With some practice I can make one every day. And look here, if they turn out well, they will provide me with a crust of bread and a guilder for the model every day. Summertime with the long days is approaching; I make my "soup ticket" – meaning the bread and model drawing – either in the morning or in the evening, and in the daytime I study seriously from the model. C. M. is one buyer whom I

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

found myself; perhaps you will succeed in finding a second, and perhaps Tersteeg, when he has got over his fit of reproaches, may find a third, and then we'll be in business.
Tomorrow morning I will go out to find a subject for C. M.'s drawings. This evening I was at Pulchri. Tableaux vivants and a kind of farce by Tony Offermans. I did not stay for the farce because I do not like them and I cannot stand the close air of a crowded hall, but I wanted to see the tableaux, especially as there was one after an etching which I had given to Mauve, "The Stable at Bethlehem" by Nicolaes Maes (the other was Rembrandt's "Isaac Blessing Jacob," with a splendid Rebecca looking on to see if her trick will succeed). The Nicolaes Maes was very good in tone and colour, but the expression was not worth anything. The expression was decidedly wrong. Once I saw this in reality, not of course the birth of Christ, but the birth of a calf. And I remember exactly how the expression was. There was a little girl in the stable that night – in the Borinage – a little brown peasant girl with a white nightcap: she had tears of compassion in her eyes for the poor cow when the poor thing was in throes and was having great trouble. It was pure, holy, wonderful, beautiful, like a Correggio, a Millet, an Israëls. Oh, Theo, why don't you give up the whole thing and become a painter? You can if you want to, boy; I sometimes suspect you of concealing a famous landscape painter within yourself. Entre nous soit dit, I think you would draw birch trees wonderfully, and the furrows in the field or a field of stubble, and paint snow and the sky, etc. With a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

Say, Theo, won't you think about the idea that there is a famous landscape painter hidden inside you? We both must become painters, court et bon, we will earn our crust anyhow. For drawing the figure one must be more or less of a drudge or a beast of burden, more homme de peine. There's a long, long thought for you – old boy.
Theo, do not become materialistic like Tersteeg. The problem is, Theo, my brother, not to let yourself be bound, no matter by what, especially not by a golden chain.
Quoiqu'il en soit, to be an artist is sounder; the money difficulty especially is very bad, but I repeat, as a landscape painter you would overcome it sometime also. But if you once start, you are bound to overtake me, for figure drawing is more complicated, advances more slowly.
You understand I am completely serious.
Here follows a list of Dutch pictures intended for the Salon.
Israëls', "An Old Man" (if he were not a fisherman, it might be Thomas Carlyle, the author of the French Revolution and Oliver Cromwell, for he decidedly has a head characteristic of Carlyle) is sitting in a corner near the hearth, on which a small piece of peat is faintly glowing in the twilight. For it is a dark little cottage where that old man sits, an old cottage with a small white-curtained window. His dog, which has grown old with him, sits beside his chair – those two old friends look at each other, they look into each other's eyes, the dog and the man. And meanwhile the old man takes his tobacco pouch out of his pocket and lights his pipe in the twilight. That is all – the twilight, the silence, the loneliness of those two old friends, the man and the dog, the understanding between those two, the meditation of the old man – what he is thinking of, I do not know, I cannot tell, but it must be a deep, long thought, something, but I do not know what; it comes rising from a past long ago – perhaps that thought gives the expression to his face, an expression melancholy, contented, submissive, something that reminds one of Longfellow's famous poem with the refrain: But the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts. [Longfellow: "Lost Youth"]
I should like to see this picture by Israëls hanging beside "Death and the Woodcutter" by Millet. I certainly do not know a single picture except this Israëls which is the equal of Millet's "Death and the Woodcutter," or is worthy of being shown with it. And then I feel in my mind an irresistible longing to bring these two pictures together, so they can complete each other. I think what is wanting in this Israëls is Millet's "Death and the Woodcutter" hanging near it, one at one end, the other at the other end of a long, narrow gallery – with no other pictures in that gallery but these two, they and no others. It is a famous Israëls; I could not really see anything else, I was so struck by it.
And yet there was another Israëls, a small one, with five or six figures, I think, a peasant family at mealtime.
There is a Mauve, the large picture of the fishing smack drawn up to the dunes; it is a masterpiece.
I never heard a good sermon on resignation, nor can I imagine a good one, except that picture by Mauve and the work of Millet.
That is <u>the</u> resignation – the real kind, not that of the clergymen. Those nags, those poor, ill-treated old nags, black, white and brown; they are standing there, patient, submissive, willing, resigned and quiet.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

They have still to draw the heavy boat up the last bit of the way – the job is almost finished. Stop a moment. They are panting, they are covered with sweat, but they do not murmur, they do not protest, they do not complain, not about anything. They got over that long ago, years and years ago. They are resigned to living and working somewhat longer, but if they have to go to the knacker tomorrow, well, so be it, they are ready. I find such a mighty, deep, practical, silent philosophy in this picture – it seems to say, “Savoir souffrir sans se plaindre, ça c’est la seule chose practique, c’est là la grande science, la leçon à apprendre, la solution du problème de la vie.” [Knowing how to suffer without complaining, that is the only practical thing, it is the great science, the lesson to learn, the solution of the problem of life.] I think this picture by Mauve would be one of the rare pictures before which Millet would remain standing a long time, and mutter to himself, “Il a du coeur ca peintre-là.”
There were some more pictures – I must tell you that I hardly looked at them – these two were enough for me.