

Amice Rappard,

Your very welcome letter came to hand a minute ago, and as I am longing for another chat with you, I am answering it at once.

You write, "Have you many German things?" As it happens, I wrote in a letter to my brother, with reference to some figure studies I had done, practically exactly the same things about Vautier and some other Germans as you do. I told him I had been to an exhibition of watercolours where there were a good many things by Italians. Clever, very clever – and yet they left me with a feeling of emptiness, and I told my brother, Old fellow, what jolly times those were when that artists' club in the Alsace was started: Vautier, Knaus, Jundt, Georg Saal, Van Muyden, Brion, and especially Anker and Th. Schuler, who mostly did drawings that were, one might say, explained and propped up by artists of another kind, namely such writers as Erckmann-Chatrion and Auerbach. Oh, certainly, these Italians are very clever, but where is their sentiment, their human feeling? I would rather see a little grey sketch by Lançon – some rag pickers eating ¹ soup, while outside it is raining or snowing – than those brilliant peacock's feathers by those Italians – who seem to multiply daily, whereas the soberer artists remain just as rare as always.

I mean it, Rappard, I would just as soon be a waiter in a hotel, for instance, than the kind of watercolour manufacturer some of those Italians are.

I do not say this of all of them, but I am sure you will feel as I do about the trend and the purpose of this school. What I say does not imply that I do not appreciate many of them – I mean such artists as have something Goyaesque about them, for instance Fortuny in some things, and Morelli, and at times even Tapero, etc. – further Heilbuth, Zues. Some ten or twelve years ago – I was with Goupil then – I saw these things for the first time; I thought them splendid, and I admired them even more than the elaborate things by the German or English artists, for instance Rochussen or Mauve. But I changed my mind a long time ago, because I think these artists are a bit like birds that can sing only one note, and I happen to be feeling more sympathy for larks and nightingales that tell us more with less noise and more passion. For all that, I don't have many things by the Germans – the fine things of Brion's time are hard to find now.

At the time I made a collection of wood engravings, particularly after the artists mentioned above, but I gave it away to a friend in England when I left Goupil. Now I am mighty sorry I did. If you want something very beautiful, then order from the offices of L'Illustration: l'Album des Vosges, dessiné de Th. Schuler, Brion, Valentin, Jundt, etc.; I think the price is 5 francs, but I am afraid it might be sold out. At any rate it is worth inquiring. It is even probable that the price has been raised now – they won't send it for inspection, so I did not venture to inquire myself.

I know only a few particulars about English black-and-white artists, by which I mean that I could not give a biography of any of them. But generally speaking, as I lived in England for fully three years, I learned much about them and their work by seeing a lot of what they did. Without having been in England for a long time it is hardly possible to appreciate them to the full.

They have quite another way of feeling, conceiving, expressing themselves, to which one must get used to begin with – but I assure you it is worth the trouble to study them, for they are great artists, these Englishmen. Israëls, Mauve and Rochussen come nearest to them – all the same the aspect of a picture by Thomas Faed, for instance, is greatly different from one by Israëls; and a drawing by Pinwell, Morris or Small looks different from one by Mauve; and a Gilbert or du Maurier is different from a Rochussen.

Speaking of Rochussen, I saw a marvelous drawing by him: French generals in a room of an old Dutch town hall, demanding information and papers from the burgomaster and the town councilors. I thought it just as beautiful as, for instance, that scene in Dr. Wagner's house in Madame Thérèse by Erckmann-Chatrion. I know that at one time you did not appreciate Rochussen very much, but I feel sure that, when you see his important drawings, you will like him quite a lot.

For me the English black-and-white artists are to art what Dickens is to literature. They have exactly the same sentiment, noble and healthy, and one always returns to them. I greatly wish you had the opportunity some time to look over my whole collection at leisure. You gain an insight, particularly from seeing many of them together, and the work begins to speak for itself, and you see clearly what a splendid whole this school of artists forms – just as one must read the whole of Dickens or of Balzac or of Zola to understand their books separately. For instance, at present I have no less than fifty sheets about Ireland. Separately one might easily overlook them; but as soon as one sees them together, one is struck by them.

I do not know the portrait of Shakespeare by Menzel, but I'd very much like to see how one lion understood the other. For Menzel's work has this much in common with Shakespeare's, that it is so intensely alive. I have the small edition by Fred and the big one by Menzel. Please bring Shakespeare's picture along next time you come to The Hague.

I haven't got the prints you write about, except Régamey, Heilbuth and Marchetti; I haven't got Jacquet either.

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I haven't anything by Whistler, but at the time I saw some beautiful etchings of his, figure and landscape. The marines by Wyllie in the Graphic, about which you write, struck me too. I know the "Widow's Field" by Boughton; it is very beautiful. My mind is so occupied by all this that I am organizing my whole life so as to do the things of everyday life that Dickens describes and the artists I've mentioned draw. Millet says, "Dans l'art – il faut y mettre sa peau" – yes, art demands the sacrifice of the whole man. I have engaged in the struggle, I know what I want, and drivel about what is called "the illustrative" cannot mislead me. My intercourse with artists has stopped almost completely, without my being able to explain precisely how and why this has come about. All kinds of eccentric and bad things are thought and said about me, which makes me feel somewhat forlorn now and then, but on the other hand it concentrates my attention on the things that never change – that is to say, the eternal beauty of nature. Often I think of the old story of Robinson Crusoe, who did not lose courage in his isolation, but managed to create a round of activities for himself so that through his own seeking and toiling his life became very active and animated.

Well – of late I have also been painting and doing watercolours, and further I am doing a lot of figure drawing after the model and making sketches in the street. Besides, I have rather often had a man from the almshouse posing for me.

Now it is really high time I returned Karl Robert's Le fusain to you. I have read it through more than once, but fusain [charcoal] does not come easily to me, and I prefer to work with a carpenter's pencil. I wish I could see someone doing a fusain – with me it becomes overdone so rapidly, and this must be caused by something that, I think, might be overcome when I saw someone else doing it. Next time you come I'll have to ask you a number of things about it.

All the same I'm glad I've read it, and I quite agree with the author that it is splendid material to work with, and I greatly wish I knew how to use it better.

Perhaps I shall find out someday, together with a number of other things that are still obscure to me.

So I am returning it with many thanks. I am including some wood engravings – among which there are two German ones by Marchal. I think the Lançons beautiful, and especially the one by Green and "The Miners." If you have duplicates, please remember to send them to me.

And the same holds true with regard to letters. And if you read something that strikes you, please let me know it too, for I am practically uninformed about what is being published nowadays – I know something more of the literature of some years ago. When I was ill and afterward I read Zola's books with great admiration. I thought Balzac unique, but now I see that he has successors. But all the same, Rappard, that time of Balzac and Dickens, that time of Gavarni and Millet – how far away it is. For though it isn't so long since these men passed away, yet it's a long, long time since they began, and since then many changes have taken place which in my opinion are not exactly changes for the better. Once I read in Eliot, "Though it be dead, I think of it all as alive." To my mind the same may be said of the period I am writing about. And that is why I am so very fond of Rochussen, for instance. You are speaking of the illustration of fairy tales – do you know that Rochussen did some splendid watercolours of scenes out of German legends? I know a series called Lenore – brilliant of sentiment. But Rochussen's important drawings are not much in circulation; they are to be found, rather, in the portfolios of wealthy collectors. As soon as you put a little vigour into collecting wood engravings you are sure to hear some learned drivel about "the illustrative." But what is happening to the wood engravings? – the beautiful ones are getting scarcer and scarcer, and more and more difficult to get hold of, and eventually people who are hunting for them will no longer be able to find them. The other day I saw a complete set of Doré's pictures of London. I tell you it is superb, and noble in sentiment – for instance that room in the "Night Shelter for Beggars" – I think you have it, or else you will be able to get it.

Adieu, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

Among other things I am working on a watercolour of orphans² – and I have started many other things – so I am very busy.

When I had finished this letter, I went out and came back with another batch of illustrations, namely from the old Dutch Illustration, so that I can add a few more duplicates to the little package.

In the first place three very fine Daumiers, and one Jacque. If you have them already, then please return them to me sometime.

I have always thought "The Four Ages of a Drinker" by Daumier one of the most beautiful things. There is as much soul in it as in a De Groux. I am very glad to be able to send you this sheet; the Daumiers are getting scarce.

Even if you had nothing else by Daumier than this one, the master would still be well represented in your collection. At the time I certainly saw splendid drawings by Frans Hals, and in this particular sheet I found something – aye, everything – of Frans Hals and Rembrandt.

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Further, I am including extremely fine Morins and old Dorés – sheets that are becoming scarcer and scarcer and scarcer.

Of course you have heard, like myself, a lot of cheap talk – with regard to “the illustrative” – aimed at Doré – and of course at Morin too. But I believe that, notwithstanding this, you still like the work of these artists – and yet, unless one is on guard, such things may influence one. Therefore, now that I am sending you these sheets, I don't think it superfluous to tell you that I find in these soiled wood engravings a certain flavour of the days of Gavarni, and of Balzac and Victor Hugo – something of the now almost forgotten Bohème – for which I feel a deep respect, and which, every time I see them again, stimulates me to do my best and to attack things energetically.

Of course I too see the difference between a drawing by Doré and one by Millet, but the one does not exclude the other.

There is a difference, but there is also a resemblance. Doré can model a torso and put together the joints better, infinitely better, than many who revile him with pedantic self-conceit – witness that one sheet which to him was no more than a rough sketch of sea bathers.

I say that, if somebody like Millet had criticized Dorés drawing – I doubt if he would ever have done it, but suppose he had – well, then he would have had a right to do so; but when those who with their ten fingers cannot do a tenth of what Doré can do with a single finger revile his work, then it is nothing but humbug, and it would be more appropriate if they held their tongues and learned to draw better themselves.

It is so ridiculous that nowadays this non-appreciation of drawing should be such a general phenomenon.

Surely you saw in Brussels the drawings by Lynen – how witty and funny and clever they were; if you spoke about them to one of the fellows, he would answer arrogantly and with a certain disdain, Oh yes, they were “rather nice.” This Lynen himself, for instance, will probably always be a poor man, though it is quite likely that he is very active and productive, and will become more and more so. Well, speaking for myself – provided I remain active and productive too – as long as I may have my daily bread, I shall not mind being relatively poor all my life.

Well, goodbye once more; I hope you will like the wood engravings and that I shall hear from you soon. Adieu.
Ever yours, Vincent

1. This is French “*soupe*,” which is eaten rather than drunk.
2. See letter 232 to Theo