

Amice Rappard,

I received your letter, and want to thank you very much for it. How eager I am sometimes to see something of your work. As regards "Arti," I think that these gentlemen are up to their usual tricks again – one of those things that won't change, which used to be and will always be what they are now. I congratulate you on their refusal. I cannot tell you anything about a similar experience of my own, for the simple reason that I don't even dream of exhibiting my work. The idea leaves me absolutely cold. Now and then I wish some friend could have a look at what I have in my studio – which happens very seldom; but I have never felt the wish and I think I never shall – to invite the general public to look at my work. I am not indifferent to appreciation of my work, but this too must be something silent – and I think a certain popularity the least desirable thing of all.

A short while ago I collected all the studies I have done since the time of your visit or thereabouts. I found about a hundred figure drawings of men, women and children, not counting what I have drawn in my sketchbook. Although the number does not matter so much, I just mention it to show you that I am trying to push on energetically, and yet I am looked down upon, and considered a nonentity, by fellows who are certainly working less hard than I am – which by the way leaves me pretty cold – and nobody here pays the slightest attention to my work.

And from this you will see that, though what is happening to me is not exactly the same as your experience, it is after all tweedledum and tweedledee.

On the other hand I am of the opinion that whoever wants to do figures must first have what is printed on the Christmas number of Punch: "Good Will to All" – and this to a high degree. One must have a warm sympathy with human beings, and go on having it, or the drawings will remain cold and insipid. I consider it very necessary for us to watch ourselves, and to take care that we do not become disenchanted in this respect, and I therefore think it of little importance to meddle in what I will call "painters' intrigues" and to assume any attitude toward them other than defensive. I always think of the old proverb, "One does not gather figs from thorns," as soon as I realize that some people believe they will be stimulated by their intercourse with artists. I believe Thomas a Kempis says somewhere, "I never mingled with human beings without feeling less human." In the same way I think one feels weaker as an artist (and rightly too) the more one associates with artists. Only when artists seriously combine to cooperate on a task that is too much for only one man (for instance Erckmann-Chatrian in their works – or the artists of the Graphic for the Graphic) do I think it an excellent thing. But in most cases it turns out to be much ado about nothing.

If I said just now that at times I wish I could see your work, on the other hand I often wish you could see mine too. The reason is that I think I could profit by your opinion, and also that you would see that the separate drawings are gradually beginning to form a whole, and also that we might talk things over and try to find a way of making some money out of them.

Not without some trouble I have at last discovered how the miners' wives in the Borinage carry their sacks. You may remember that when I was there I did some drawings of it – but they were not yet the real thing [F 994, JH 253]. Now I have made 12 studies of the same subject.

Look, the opening of the sack is tied up and hangs down. The points at the bottom are joined together, and in this way you get a very funny-looking sort of monk's hood. (At the points 1 and 2 the hands grasp it.) I often made a woman with such a sack pose for me, but it never turned out right. Now a man who was loading coal at the Rhine railway junction has shown me.

This week I came across a volume of Punch for 1855 and also one for 1862. In the former there is a cartoon by old Swains which is indescribably noble in character. The Czar of Russia of that time had, I think, in a "speech from the throne" referring to the Crimean War that was then going on, declared that Russia had two generals on whom she could depend, namely the winter months January and February. Now it happened that in the month of February of that same year his Majesty the Emperor fell ill, having caught a cold, and died.

Now you see in this cartoon, probably drawn by Tenniel, the old emperor on his deathbed, and General February turned a traitor is standing near this deathbed – in the shape of a skeleton dressed in general's uniform; the deathbed as well as the phantom near it are covered with snow and glazed frost. It is glorious, and, if such a thing is possible, I think its sentiment even more profound and serious than that of Holbein's "Death Dance."

C. R. [Robinson], whose beautiful cartoon I sent you, is rather uneven in his work, by which I mean that his figures, though they are always well drawn, do not always move one. But now I have found another cartoon that is nearly as beautiful as Caldecott's "Afternoon in Kings Road" – a long row of figures looking over a low fence at a collapsed bridge.

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Do you have the Dagnan and the Montbard about which I wrote you – “Charmeur au Jardin des Tuileries” and “Arab Beggars” – you know they are at your disposal. I have found another beautiful sheet by Emslie, “The Rising of the Waters,” a peasant woman with two children on a half-flooded meadow with pollard willows.

I assure you, every time I feel a little out of sorts, I find in my collection of wood engravings a stimulus to set to work with renewed zest. In all these fellows I see an energy, a determination and a free, healthy, cheerful spirit that animate me. And in their work there is something lofty and dignified – even when they draw a dunghill. When you read in that book about Gavarni, with reference to his drawings, that “il sabra jusqu’à 6 par jour” [he dispatched up to six a day], and you think of the enormous productivity of most of those men who make these “little illustrations” – “those things you find on the reading table of the South Holland Cafe,” you know – you can’t help thinking that there must be an extraordinary amount of ardour and fire in them. And I think, having this fire within oneself and stirring it up continually is better than having the arrogance of those artists who disdain looking at it. I think that bit of reasoning of your friend, or rather your critically critical (how can one express it?) visitor, about the “impermissible line” highly curious and characteristic. Will you be so kind as to convey to him, at the first opportunity, my profound respect for his wisdom and competence, although I have neither the privilege nor the pleasure of knowing his Honor, for I am not wholly unacquainted with men of that ilk, and so...

Just ask your friend of the impermissible line whether he wants to object to the “Bénédicté” by De Groux or the “Last Supper” by Leonardo da Vinci – in which compositions the heads are also placed in a nearly straight line. Do you know “Midsummer Night’s Dream” by Harry Furniss, showing some people – an old man, a street urchin, a drunk – spending the night on a bench under a chestnut tree in the park? This sheet is as beautiful as the most beautiful Daumier.

Don’t you think Andersen’s Fairy Tales are glorious? – he is surely an illustrator too!