

Amice Rappard,

That article by Herkomer interests me very much indeed; many thanks for it. My mind has been full of it since it came, and I hope I shall profit by what he says.¹

But I doubt whether his discourse will be generally understood. I'm afraid that he'll be misapprehended by most people, and that many will draw inferences from his words which he himself did not mean.

What he says is in my opinion thoroughly apt and to the point and serious, but I repeat, one must have some knowledge of the matter – more than most – not to draw entirely false conclusions from his reasoning. Many might infer wrongly from what he says that he rejects and condemns the Americans and the school of Small, but this is not at all the case. He is speaking only of decadence – and not without cause.

He points out that the merit of many wood engravings belongs mainly to the engraver and not to the artist. Thus, he argues, the powers of the artist are dwindling – an insufferable and disastrous state of affairs. I think this is perfectly true – for instance, compare that sheet of Ridley's, "The Miners," which you say you found recently, with the full-page Types of Beauty that the Graphic published at a later date. Or take another sheet of Ridley's which I have, engraved soberly and austerely by Swain – "The Children's Ward in a Hospital" – there I feel the justification for what I've heard people who are supposed to be first-rate connoisseurs contemptuously refer to in these terms, "Oh well, that's the old-fashioned style." And then we remember what Herkomer wanted to say – that old style of engraving, that elaborate, honest, unembellished drawing, is by far the best.

Herkomer says, Take care lest it be lost. When art has lost it, then art will have spinal meningitis or consumption. Yet I don't believe he condemns Small himself, for instance, or Chr. Green and others – I know reproductions of drawings by Herkomer, e.g. the "Bavarian Sketches," which are done in the same style.

But Herkomer will not disapprove of Caton Woodville's "The Distribution of Peat Tickets in Ireland" or Howard Pyle's "Xmas in Olden Times," although Caton Woodville and H. Pyle have both worked for a newer style of illustration, and have overstepped "the marginline."²

As regards this C. Woodville, I am sorry that he has done those enormously large military things, however clever they may be; and I prefer his sheets in the style of "The Peat Market."

That diatribe against Harper's and the Americans, moreover, reminds me of Charles Dickens, who denounced them too – see Chuzzlewit, etc. – but later on, when he saw that people were misinterpreting his words, as if he thought nothing American could be good, he inserted a preface in the later editions of Chuzzlewit in which he reveals his other impressions of America and his experiences on a second trip there. Look at Forster's Life of Charles Dickens, if you have it, and you will see more clearly what I mean.

So with regard to the Americans and the wood engravers of the present day, let us not judge prematurely, and let us remember the old saying, "Beware of pulling out the good wheat along with the chaff." The reproaches he directs against the Graphic and against publishers in general are not uncalled for, as a matter of fact. I abhor words like "pleasing" and "saleable" – they are as bad as the plague – yet I've never met a dealer who wasn't saturated with them. Art has no worse enemies, despite the fact that the managers of the big art-dealing establishments reputedly deserve high praise for their protection of artists.

They don't do the right thing – yet because the public turns to them and not to the artists themselves, the latter are forced to turn to them too – but there isn't a single artist who does not resent them, openly or secretly. They flatter the public, encouraging its worst, most barbaric inclinations and taste. But enough of this! The conclusion that you and I should draw from H. H.'s reasoning is, Draw austerely, be serious, be honest.

Listen, this last letter of yours, and the impression that H. H.'s energetic words made on you as well as me, make me wish all the more that we could see more of each other's work.

At that last splendid exhibition of "Pictura" I was struck by the fact that, although Israëls, Mauve, Mans, Neuhuys, Weissenbruch and many others have remained themselves, one sees signs of decadence among their followers too, and no indication of progress – at least, if one does not look at them individually but rather compares them with an exhibition of that bygone era when the artists who are prominent today were the "rising men." Those "rising men" of today are not what the "rising men" of the previous generation were – more effect and less quality nowadays. I have written about this more than once. I also see a difference between the personalities of the respective "rising men." You know yourself, and you yourself suffer under it, that they look upon you and me as unpleasant, quarrelsome nonentities, and that above all they consider us ponderous and boring in our work and in our persons.

And believe me – whoever has seen the prominent artists of today ten years ago, both as men and as artists, when all of them were much poorer – they have made an enormous amount of money these last ten years – regrets those days ten years ago.

Which induces me to repeat my congratulations for your having been refused by Arti. If you made a great hit under the present circumstances, I should feel less respect and sympathy for you than I do now. I certainly see very clearly that you and I will undoubtedly produce much better work than we do now, and that our present

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work is not bad. Our attitude toward ourselves must remain stern, and we must be energetic, but there isn't a single reason why we should let ourselves be discouraged or put out by what is said of our work by people who believe they know a better style than the one we have adopted, namely drawing, or trying to draw, what strikes us in domestic life, in the street, or in a hospital, etc. If you knew, for instance, what De Groux has suffered from criticism and ill will, it would stagger you. We must not have any illusions about ourselves, but be prepared to be misunderstood, despised and slandered, and yet – even if things become worse than they are now – we shall have to keep up our courage and enthusiasm. I believe it would be a good thing for us to focus our attention on the men and works of former days, say some twenty or thirty years ago, as otherwise it will be justly said of us afterward, “Rappard and Vincent may also be reckoned among the decadent fellows.” This is a harsh dictum, but I mean every bit of it, and I shall go my own way without paying much attention to the present school.

Adieu, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. See letter 240 to Theo of the same date.
2. Vincent used this phrase in the original.