

Dear Theo,

My warm thanks for your registered letter as well as for the little roll. I found Buhot's paper in it, but I should like to have had some explanation along with it, for instance, with what must one draw on this paper? Perhaps you will tell me that later.

Renouard's "Enfants Assistés" are splendid, also his new drawing, "Banc des Accusés," though the latter is less important than, for instance, his large prints of the "Prison Mazas." I am very glad to have them and thank you heartily.

You will have received a copy of a lithograph by now. Frankly, it was a misprint, but I sent it to you because a few parts were exactly the way I intended the whole to be.

This time the autographic ink blotted badly and it had to be fixed later, and black spots were everywhere. But look, for instance, at that left leg with the muddy shoe. This proves that this process can express material and can give characteristic effects. The hands and the head are bad, but in the print of the other old man they were the parts which were best. I again witnessed the transferring to the stone and the printing and I must tell you that I think great things can be done with this process.

Today I was at Van der Weele's, who was rather pleased with the little old man with his head in his hands; he intends to try it himself. Sometimes he does wonderful things. He gave me four of his etchings, a sheepfold, calves in the underbrush, two sand carts and an ox plough, and I hope to get some more later when he has new prints made of them.

He does not seem to have a great liking for Tersteeg, for without my telling him anything about the man, and while we were discussing the studies by V. d. W. himself, he said, Oh well, as soon as I do this or that and go to Tersteeg, he will make this or that unpleasant remark. I think this is true, and I really regret very much that this is the way things are. I would much rather have been mistaken in my opinion of Tersteeg, but I am afraid he is accustomed to discouraging many persons who deserve better. How tiresome such matters are.

Yesterday I received a letter, not from Rappard but from his father, who tells me R. is sick. I do not know what ails him – perhaps, perhaps, it is what you and I know also.

I infer this from some expressions in his last letter when he told me to continue the experiments in lithography, and said that he himself felt so low that he couldn't do anything. What a pity, isn't it? It is so hard when one has to give up work for such a foolish reason as indisposition.

If I do not get news of his recovery soon, I have a good mind to go and see him. Recently we have corresponded rather frequently about our work; he has become quite enthusiastic about collecting wood engravings, for instance, and I think it quite possible that we shall become more and more interested in each other.

At Van der Weele's I saw an excellent sketch of Breitner's, an unfinished drawing – perhaps it cannot be finished; it represents officers in front of an open window, bent over and deliberating about some map or battle plan. Breitner really has got a job at the high school in Rotterdam – a lucky thing for him. But I think after all it is preferable if one can manage to do without such jobs and give all one's time to one's work. There seems to be something fatal in occupying such positions; perhaps it is the very cares, the very dark, shadowy side of an artist's life which is the best of it. It is risky to say so, and there are moments when one speaks differently; many are drowned by too heavy cares, but those who struggle through will profit by it later.

You write about the question of making drawings in a smaller size. I appreciate your speaking of that matter more calmly than others, who have said the same thing to me in quite a different way, and told me, If you don't work in a smaller size, this and that will happen. I think it preposterous and superficial to talk that way, and I can't believe what they say is true.

Do you know what I think? All sizes have their advantages and disadvantages; in general, for my own study I decidedly need the figure with rather large proportions, so that the head, hands and feet will not be too small and one can draw them vigorously.

So for my own practice I use the size of Exercices au Fusain by Bargue as an example; one can easily take that size in with one glance, and yet the details are not too small. But most artists use a smaller size. I have done it this way from the very beginning – sometimes a little smaller, sometimes a little larger; and as far as my own study is concerned, I should be acting contrary to my conviction if I changed.

But though my attention centers on drawing the human figure on a good large scale – a thing which is exceedingly difficult, I assure you – this doesn't mean that I am absolutely bound to it. And so in answer to what you write, I shall ask you a question, Have you a particular work in mind? Has anybody told you something, for instance, like, If those figures were half the size, these drawings might be used for this or that? And if you know something or other about such a thing, for my part I should take the trouble either to reduce the figures I already have to half-size or draw new ones on a smaller scale.

Without a definite reason I should think it less important than with one.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

If I send you a few figures, for instance, half the size of the former ones, and you should try to show them, though unable quite to tell me yet to whom or to what end, that would be reason enough for me to make them. What I said just now is only to show you how I have tried to keep some system in my work from the very beginning; I have set a kind of rule for myself – not to become the slave of that rule, but because it helps one to think more clearly.

It is not at all difficult, for instance, to reduce a certain figure to half-size; sometimes, however, it loses something essential – sometimes the figure gains by it, too. At all events, I'll send you a few before long, but if you have something particular in mind, tell me what it is – it may help me in choosing my figures.

Once more, thanks for what you sent. What I wrote in my last letter about the plan of publishing prints for the people is a thing I hope you will consider sometime. I myself have no fixed plan yet, seeing that in order to have it clearly before me, I have to do things in connection with the drawings themselves and with the process of reproduction. But I have no doubt of the possibility of doing such a thing, nor of its usefulness; nor can I doubt the possibility of finding people who would be sympathetic to it. Well, I think it might be done in such a way that no one would regret having contributed to it.

With a handshake,  
Ever yours, Vincent

While I am writing to you, I read your last letter once more, especially what you say about the size; I will give you an example of an artist whom you know, Théophile Schuler, who illustrated the works of Erckmann-Chatrian. One sees clearly from those small illustrations that he could work very well in a small size, though one can see it even better from the things he made at the time for *L'Illustration* and *Magasin Pittoresque*, among others, the *Album des Vosges*, to which Brion and Jundt also contributed.

I think, however, that one would be very much mistaken in believing that such a thing as, for instance, the print "Le Bénédicité" [Grace before Meat] (a family of woodcutters and farmers at table) was made in one fell swoop. No, in most cases the solidity and pith of the small size is only acquired after much more serious study than those who think lightly of illustration work would suppose. Oh, boy, you are one of the best informed of the art dealers I know, and you speak about it with so much more truth and feeling than most of them; but if you knew the drudgery those little things have cost – as, for instance, the prints in the *Album des Vosges* or those first things in the *Graphic* – I think you would be awed by it.

With me, at least, it is such that whenever I learn more about the life and works of people like Schuler, Lançon, Renouard and so many others, I perceive that what is seen of them is only a little wisp of smoke coming out of their chimneys, and that within their hearts and studios there is a big blaze. It is the same with an artist's illustration work as it is with a little church spire in the distance, it looks small and insignificant, but when one gets nearer, it proves to be quite an imposing edifice – I mean, only a small part of their work comes before the public.

Well, some pictures make a big splash in their enormous frames, and later one is astonished because they leave such an empty, unsatisfied feeling; in contrast to this, some simple wood engraving or lithograph or etching is sometimes overlooked, but one comes back to it and becomes more and more attached to it, and feels something grand in it.

I know a drawing by Tenniel representing "Two Dominies" (of course this is not the English title, but it is the subject): one is a city dominie, large, pompous and imposing; the other is rather shabby, a simple village curate, apparently the father of a large and poor family. I often think that one also finds those two types among painters; many illustrators belong to the village clergymen group of painters, whereas perhaps persons like Bouguereau and Makart and many others belong rather to the former type.

Whether I personally have to work on a large or a small scale is immaterial to me, but what the illustrations demand is only part of what I ask of myself. Of myself I decidedly demand that I can draw the figure of a size such that head, hands and feet do not become too small and the details remain distinct. I cannot do this nearly as well as I have set myself to do it, and for that very reason I must not relax on this point. If I exact this, I demand no more of myself than many others do. So, for instance, about that series of drawings I am now working on, I do not know what the definite form or size will be. After long reflection I decided on the size of that little old man with his head in his hands, but when it comes to printing, I can of course reduce the size of these cartoons. And the practical reason for drawing the figures on a rather large scale is proved, for instance, by the *Exercices au Fusain, de Modèles d'après les Maîtres*, published by Goupil and Co. I started with them, and up to now I have found no better guide to studies from the living model. This publication was intended to bring healthy ideas about study into the schools as well as and especially into the studio. I have listened to what Bargue says in his examples; though my work is far from being as beautiful as his, I believe the examples indicate a straight road in keeping with what other artists, including Leonardo da Vinci, have taught before. At all events, it gave a certain method to my ideas about drawing, which makes the work more systematic than it would be if one put

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

no method into one's work. You see, this is a thing which I may not let go of, but I repeat, I can reduce the size of any figure among my studies if it's desirable.

I must say, I am very eager for you to see all the things which I've made since last summer together. How about those drawings which you wrote me you sent via the Rue Chaptal? I have not received them yet, but I suppose they are still with you, because very shortly after that you wrote me that Buhot had seen some of them. Of course I am in no immediate hurry for them, and only ask in case they were left behind somewhere. And if you think it better to keep them with you so you can show them to someone some time or other, I have nothing against it, but I wish you could make a new choice out of the whole collection.