

The Hague, c. 3 – 5 December 1882

Dear Theo,

You have received my letter in which I wrote you how the idea of making figures from the people for the people developed of its own accord while I was working. How it seemed to me that it would be a good thing – not commercially but as a matter of public service and duty – if a few persons combined to do it. Since I wrote you this I have been thinking – not, of course, Who will do this or that? – but, What am I doing toward it? For the simple reason that I am not responsible for the former, but I certainly am for the latter. But this much I can tell you, all the time I was drawing with that purpose in mind the idea got more of a hold on me. That it would be useful to bring about such a thing and that it is not at all necessary to fall into a kind of imitation of other publications for the people, but, on the contrary, that the existence of such papers as the British Workman, for instance, can be a guide in showing how to do it and how not to do it. I do not know if you have read Dickens's Little Dorrit and if you remember in it the figure of Doyce, the man one could take as a type of those whose principle is How to do it. Even if you do not know that splendid workman's figure from the book, you will understand the fellow's character from this one phrase. When the thing he wanted to bring about was blocked by indifference and worse things, and he couldn't go on, he simply said, "This misfortune alters nothing; the thing is just as true now (after the failure) as it was then (before the failure)." And what had failed in England he started again on the Continent, and succeeded there.

What I wanted to say is this. The idea of drawing types of workmen from the people for the people, distributing them in a popular edition and taking the whole as a matter of duty and public service – that and nothing but that – look here, that idea is enough to convince me that even if it didn't succeed at once, one might suppose, "The thing is as true today as it was yesterday, and it will be as true tomorrow."

And so it is a thing which one can begin and continue with serenity, a thing the good success of which one need not doubt or despair of – if only one doesn't relax or lose courage.

I have said to myself that my first duty is to try my very best on the drawings. So that I have now made a few new ones since my last letter on the subject. In the first place, a Sower [F 853, JH 274]. A big old fellow, a tall dark silhouette against a dark ground. Far away in the distance a little cottage with a moss-covered roof and a bit of sky with a lark. The man is a kind of cock type, a clean-shaven face, rather a sharp nose and chin, small eyes and sunken mouth. Long legs with jack boots.

Then a second Sower [F 852, JH 275], with a light brown fustian jacket and trousers, so this figure stands out light against the black field, bordered by a little row of pollard willows. This is quite a different type, with a clipped beard, broad shoulders, rather thick-set, somewhat like an ox, in that his whole frame has been shaped by his labour in the fields. Perhaps more of an Eskimo type, thick lips, broad nose.

Then a Mower with a large scythe on a meadow. The head with a brown woolen cap stands out against the clear sky.

Then one of those little old fellows in a short jacket and big old top hat, which one sometimes meets in the dunes. He is carrying home a basketful of peat [F 964, JH 273].

Now in these drawings I have tried to show my meaning even more clearly than in the old man with his head in his hands. These fellows are all in action, and this fact especially must be kept in mind in the choice of subjects, I think. You know yourself how beautiful the numerous figures in repose, which are done so very, very often, are. They are done more often than figures in action.

It is always very tempting to draw a figure at rest; it is very difficult to express action, and in many people's eyes the former effect is more "pleasant" than anything else. But this "pleasant" aspect must not detract from the truth, and the truth is that there is more drudgery than rest in life. So you see my main idea about all this is – that for my part I try to work for the truth.

It seems to me that the drawings themselves are even more urgent than their reproduction.

I will also be chary of speaking about the matter, as I believe that a small circle of persons often acts more practically than when too many meddle with it. Too many cooks spoil the broth.

How I wish we could be together more. Do you know why I have no doubt that I should be able to do it?

You know the physical law that tells us that an object immersed in a liquid loses as much in weight as the specific weight of the volume of liquid displaced by the object. That is the reason why some objects float and why those which sink are lighter under water than in the air. Something like this – a kind of fixed law of nature – seems to exist in regard to the work, by which I mean that, once well into it, one feels more energy and power than one was aware of, or rather, than one in fact possesses.

You would also experience this if you took up painting. At first it seems something unattainable, hopeless, but later things clear up, and I think you would see this in my work too.

But something which I already wrote you about has proved true, namely Rappard is seriously ill. I have again heard from his father, who doesn't explain what it really is. I want to have as many drawings ready as possible against the time of his recovery, for I should like Rappard to do the same as soon as he takes up his work again. Rappard has something which not everybody possesses, he reflects and he cultivates his sentiment. He can make a plan, he can grasp a scheme in its entirety, he can stick to an idea.

Many others call reflection and concentration inartistic because they at least are not fit for sustained labour. It is a question of both dexterity and quickness, and of perseverance and calm patience besides. Then Rappard possesses another quality which in my opinion makes him quite valuable for such an enterprise. He studies the figure carefully, not just as a touch of colour in a watercolour, but more seriously in its shape and structure.

I often think that I should like to be able to spend more time on the real landscape!

I often see things which I think splendid and which make me say involuntarily, I have never seen such a thing painted that way. But in order to paint it – how to do it – I should have to neglect other things. I should like to know if you agree with me in this, that in landscape much has been neglected – that Émile Breton, for instance, has painted effects (and has continued to work in this direction) which are the beginnings of something new, which seems to me not to have reached its full strength, is understood by few and practiced by even fewer. Many landscape painters do not possess the same intimate knowledge of nature as those who have looked lovingly at the fields from childhood on. Many landscape painters give something which (though we appreciate them as artists) satisfies neither you nor me as human beings. They call Émile Breton's work superficial – that's not true: his sentiment is superior to that of many others, he knows much more, and his work holds true.

Indeed, in the field of landscape painting enormous gaps are beginning to show themselves, and I should like to apply Herkomer's words to it: the interpreters allow their cleverness to mar the dignity of their calling. And I believe the public will begin to say: deliver us from artistic compositions, give us back the simple field.

How much good it does one to see a beautiful Rousseau on which he has drudged to keep it true and honest. How much good it does to think of people like Van Goyen, Old Crome and Michel. How beautiful an Isaac Ostade or a Ruysdael is.

Do I want them back or do I want people to imitate them? No, but I want the honesty, the naïveté, the truth, to remain.

I know old lithographs by Jules Dupré, either by himself or facsimiles of his sketches, but what pith and love is in them, yet how freely and easily they are done.

The real thing is not an absolute copy of nature, but to know nature so well that what one makes is fresh and true – that is what so many lack.

Do you suppose, for instance, that De Bock knows what you know? No, decidedly not. You will say that everybody has seen landscapes and figures from childhood on. The question is, Has everybody also been thoughtful as a child, has everybody who has seen them really loved the heath, fields, meadows, woods, and the snow and the rain and the storm? Not everybody has done this the way you and I have: a peculiar kind of surroundings and circumstances must contribute to it, and a peculiar kind of temperament and character must help it take root.

I remember letters from you, when you were still in Brussels, with descriptions of landscapes like the one in your last one. Do you know that it is so very, very necessary for honest people to remain in art? I do not mean to say that there are none, but you feel what I mean, and know as well as I how many painters are inveterate liars.

“Honesty is the best policy” is applicable here, too, as well as the fable of the tortoise and the hare and Andersen's ugly duckling.

Edwin Edwards, the etcher, for instance, why is his work so splendid, why is he justly ranked among England's best? Because what he aims at is faithfulness and truth. I would rather be Jules Dupré than Edwin Edwards, but, you see, we must have great respect for sincerity: it lasts where other things are proved to be dry chaff. For me Bernier's “The Fields in Winter” in the Luxembourg is ideal.

There is Lavieille, the wood engraver and painter – I just remembered having seen “A Winter Night” by him with a true Christmas sentiment.

There is Mme Collard – for instance, that picture of an apple orchard with an old white horse.

There is Chintreuil and Goethals (I have often tried to think of somebody whose work can be compared with Goethal's beautiful things – I think it is Chintreuil), but in reality I haven't seen much of Chintreuil's work, or of Goethal's, for that matter.

To a great extent the cause of the evil lies in the fact that the intentions of the great landscape painters have been misconstrued. Hardly anyone knows that the secret of beautiful work lies mainly in truth and sincere sentiment.

Many people cannot help their lack of depth, and they act in good faith as far as they have good faith. But I believe you will agree with me on the fact (the more so because this is a question of something which, though it concerns you, has no direct relation to you) that if many a landscape painter who now has quite a reputation had half the sound ideas about nature which seem to come naturally to you, he would produce much better and more sincere work. Think it over, and put this and many other things besides into the balance when, weighing yourself, you say such things as "I should only be mediocre" – unless you use mediocre in its right and noble sense.

Smartness, as they call it here, the word is used so much – I myself do not know its real meaning, and have heard it applied to very insignificant things – is smartness what must save art? I should have better hope of things going all right if there were more people like Ed. Frère or Émile Breton, for instance, than if there were many smart people like Boldini or Fortuny. Frère and Breton will be missed and mourned. Boldini, Fortuny – one may respect them as men, but their influence has been fatal. A fellow like Gustave Brion has left something good – De Groux, for instance, also; if many people were like them the world would be the better for it, art would be a blessing. But Boldini, Fortuny, even Regnault – how did they help us, what progress did they bring? What you say is quite true, "Earnestness is better than irony, no matter how sharp and witty it is." In other words, I should say, "Bonté vaut mieux que malice" [Goodness is worth more than malice], that is self-evident; but many people say, "No, malice, that is it." Well, they will have to reap what they sow.

Adieu, boy, I wanted to write you about those drawings, namely that I hope that idea of prints for the people will help me make some progress. While I am writing you, news has come from Rappard that there is a little change for the better, but he seems to be very ill. I know for sure that he, as well as his father, is interested in those types from the people. As soon as Rappard is up and around again, or at least as soon as his eyes are normal again, I hope to go to see him.

I shall write soon again, and believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent