

Letter 252
The Hague, c. 11 December 1882

Dear Theo,

I just received your registered letter and thank you warmly for it. I want to begin with the following. I enclose a copy of the Graphic, Christmas, 1882.

Read it carefully, it is worth while.

What a colossal institution, isn't it, what an enormous circulation. This much stated, what else?... Among other things, that Hubert Herkomer's words contrast strangely with those of the Graphic editors. The latter say: "Checking our books, we find that besides our professional artists, we have no less than 2730 friends scattered all over the world, sending us sketches or elaborate drawings."

H. Herkomer speaks of a "shortage of good draughtsmen."

And in general his words are exactly the opposite of those of the editors of the Christmas issue in question, the result being something like this:

The Graphic editors say, "All right."

H. Herkomer says, "All wrong."

Now you will find something striking on page four of the copy I sent: When strong enough to stand on its own feet, the Graphic rented a house and began to print with six machines.

I have full respect for this; here I feel something holy, something noble, something sublime. Then look at that group of great artists, and think of foggy London and the bustle in that small workshop. Moreover, I see in my imagination the draughtsmen in their several studios, starting their work with the best enthusiasm.

I see Millais running to Charles Dickens with the first issue of the Graphic. Dickens was then in the evening of his life, he had a paralyzed foot and walked with a kind of crutch. Millais says that while showing him Luke Fildes's drawing "Homeless and Hungry," of poor people and tramps in front of a free overnight shelter, Millais said to Dickens, "Give him your Edwin Drood to illustrate," and Dickens said, "Very well."

Edwin Drood was Dickens's last work, and Luke Fildes, brought into contact with Dickens through those small illustrations, entered his room on the day of his death, and saw his empty chair; and so it happened that one of the old numbers of the Graphic contained that touching drawing, "The Empty Chair."

Empty chairs – there are many of them, there will be even more, and sooner or later there will be nothing but empty chairs in place of Herkomer, Luke Fildes, Frank Holl, William Small, etc. And yet the publishers and dealers, not listening to a prophecy like that of H. Herkomer's, will continue to assure us, in the same terms as in the enclosed number, that everything is all right, that we are getting on famously.

But how hard-hearted they are, how mistaken they are, if they think they can make everybody believe that material grandeur outweighs moral grandeur, and that any good can be accomplished without the latter.

It is the same with the Graphic as it is with many other things in the realm of art. Moral grandeur dwindles, material grandeur supersedes. But will the much-desired change come? I think that everybody must find that out for himself, but the old parable mentions a broad way which leads to destruction, and a narrow path which leads to another result

The Graphic started on the narrow path, has now passed to the broad one. This morning I saw the last number, there wasn't a single good thing in it; this morning I took an old, dirty torn number of 1873 from a bundle of waste-paper at a bookstall, and almost everything in it is worth keeping.

But as to me – que faire?

A few years ago Rappard and I walked outside Brussels on a spot which they call la Vallé Josaphat, in the neighborhood where Roelofs, among others, lives. At that time there was a sand quarry where diggers were at work, there were women looking for dandelion leaves, a farmer was sowing; we looked at all that, and I was almost in despair then: "Shall I ever succeed in painting what I admire so much?" Now I no longer despair, now I can capture those farmers and women better; and working on with patience, I can now succeed to a certain extent. But I am sorely oppressed by the way things are going and can no longer think of those magazines with pleasure and enthusiasm. The Graphic neglects to say that many in the group of artists refuse to give their work, and withdraw more and more. Why? because a painter paints to do some good and has some sincerity in his heart which despises all that grandeur. What more shall I say?... I can only repeat, "Que faire!"

Of course, continue to work, but conscious of a dark future.

Here in The Hague there are clever, great men, I readily admit it; but in many respects what a miserable state of affairs – what intrigues, what quarrels, what jealousy. And in the personality of the successful

artists who, with Mesdag at their head, set the tone, material grandeur is unmistakably substituted for moral grandeur.

I am beginning to feel that if I went, for instance, to England, if I made every effort, I should certainly have a chance of finding a job.

My ideal was to achieve this, and, after all, it still is; this was what enabled me to surmount the enormous difficulties in the beginning. But my heart gets heavy at times when I think of the way things are going, it's not so much fun any more. Of course, I love to do my best on the drawings, but to present myself at all those publishers' offices – oh, I hate the thought of it!

You ask about my health – last summer's trouble is really quite gone, but I feel rather depressed at present, whereas at other moments, when my work progresses well, I am quite cheerful, and feel kind of like a soldier who isn't at home in the guardhouse, and argues thus to himself, "Why must I be in prison here, when I should be much better off among the rank and file where I belong?"

I mean, I feel depressed because I have a strength in me which circumstances prevent from developing as well as it could; the result is that I often feel miserable. A kind of internal struggle about what I must do – which is not as easy to solve as might seem at first.

I wish I had a job which would help me make progress. Many jobs which might possibly be within my reach would lead me to things quite different from those I aim at. These jobs are out of my reach, for though I might be accepted at first, they would not be satisfied with me in the long run; they would fire me or I would leave of my own accord, as at Goupil's.

I mean, they would demand current events, topics of the day, which people like Adrien, Marie, or Godefroid Durand make to perfection. I begin to see more and more clearly that the magazines drift with the superficial tide, and I think they do not try to be as good as they ought to be. No, to fill the magazines with things which cost neither time nor trouble, to give a good thing now and then, but reproduced in a cheap, mechanical way, further, to make as much money as possible – this is what they do.

I do not think this method wise. I think it will make them go bankrupt, and they will bitterly regret it in the end, which may still be far away, but nevertheless, things are as they are. They do not think of renewing themselves. Suppose the Graphic, Illustration, or Vie Moderne published an issue full of dull, insignificant things – they'd still sell it by the carload, and by the boatload; the managers would rub their hands and say, "It sells just as well this way; who's the wiser – they swallow it anyhow."

Yes, but if their lordships the managers could follow their publications and see how thousands take the paper up greedily, and then, when they put it down, involuntarily have a feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment, perhaps their frenzy for current events would abate somewhat.

However, this is by no means the case; as you see from the report in the Graphic, they do not lack self-confidence.

In the meantime, people intrude themselves, as employees, who would never have been accepted in the difficult but noble days. It is what Zola calls "triomphe de la médiocrité." Snobs, nobodies, take the place of workers, thinkers, artists; and it isn't even noticed.

The public, yes, one part of it is dissatisfied, but material grandeur also finds applause; however, do not forget that this is merely a straw-fire, and that those who applaud generally do so only because it has become the fashion. But on the day after the banquet, there will be a void – a silence and indifference after all that noise.

The Graphic will give "Types of Beauty" (large heads of women), as this prospectus says – I dare say to take the place of "Heads of the People" by Herkomer, Small and Ridley.

All right, but some people will not admire the "Types of Beauty" and will remember the old "Heads of the People" with sadness (this series has been stopped).

The Graphic says they will make chromos!!! Give us back Swain's studio.

Look here, Theo boy, it cuts me to the heart, things are going wrong. You know I would have counted it the highest honour – an ideal, in fact – to contribute to what the Graphic started. The sublime beginning of the Graphic was something like what Dickens was as an author, what the Household Edition of his work was as a publication.

And now everything is gone – once again materialism instead of moral principle. Do you know what I think of the copy I'm sending you? It is just like Obach's kind of talk, for instance, the manager of Goupil and Co. in London. And it has success, yes, that has success, yes, that is listened to and that is admired. Do you know, boy, what I think of this number of the Graphic? It is something like Mesdag's talk about his panorama. I respect all kinds of work, I despise neither Obach nor Mesdag, but there are things which I rank infinitely higher than that kind of energy.

I want something more concise, more simple, more serious; I want more soul and more love and more heart.

But you may be sure that I will not and cannot cry out against it, that I will not rebel against it. But it makes me sad, it takes away my pleasure, it upsets me, and personally I am absolutely at a loss about what to do. What sometimes makes me sad is this: formerly, when I started, I used to think, If only I make so or so much progress, I shall get a job somewhere, and I shall be on a straight road and find my way through life. But now something else occurs, and I fear, or rather expect, instead of a job, a kind of jail – I expect such things as, Yes, some things in your work are rather good (I doubt if they really mean it), but, you see, we have no use for work like yours, we need current events (for example, the Graphic – we print on Saturday what happened on Thursday).

Look here, Theo boy, I cannot make ‘Types of Beauty’; I do try my best to make ‘Heads of the People.’ You know, I would like to do the kind of work those who started the Graphic did, though I do not count myself their equal; I would take a fellow or woman or child from the street, and draw them in my studio. But no, they would ask me, “Can you make chromos by electric light?” In short, instead of meeting with an opinion, a sentiment, an aim like Dickens’s (for such the Graphic originally stood for), one is confronted with a philosophy like Obach’s. It makes me sad, and then I feel helpless. One can only undertake a thing if one has sympathy and co-operation.

Now this brings me to another matter. Do not take offense when I write you my thoughts, and continue to do so. If you have no time to write and cannot answer at once, at all events when we meet again, you will know what I have in mind, and perhaps we shall find a practical way.

This number of the Graphic is a fact which speaks clearly for itself, and that’s why I am sending it to you. With a handshake in thought,
Yours sincerely, Vincent