

Letter R20
The Hague, 4 February 1883

Amice Rappard,

Thanks very much for your letter and the list of the wood engravings you found. I am very eager to see some of them, especially those by De Groux and Lançon. The news that your health is improving so rapidly delights me. ¹ You'll remember that before your illness we carried on a rather brisk correspondence about lithographs, and then we had to stop this correspondence.

Since then I have been working rather hard – not directly on stone, but with lithographic crayon; it is an excellent material.

If my letters bother you somewhat, don't think ill of me; and as for you, do write often, for you will have to make up for lost time – although as far as that goes your illness, and not yourself, is at fault.

I assure you that the Graphics I have now are amazingly interesting. More than ten years ago, when I was in London, I used to go every week to the show windows of the printing offices of the Graphic and the London News to see the new issues. The impressions I got on the spot were so strong that, notwithstanding all that has happened to me since, the drawings are clear in my mind. Sometimes it seems to me that there is no stretch of time between those days and now – at least my enthusiasm for those things is rather stronger than it was even then. I haven't the slightest doubt that you won't regret coming to look at them. I know that you don't look upon Black and White the way most Dutchmen do; and, although I don't know exactly whether you intend to express yourself in this medium, still I believe that you have no prejudice against it. One need not exclude the other, and in many cases Black and White is a method that makes it possible to put on paper, relatively swiftly, effects that would otherwise lose something of what is called "spontaneity."

I doubt whether, if the "London Sketches" – for instance, Herkomer's "Low Lodginghouse St. Giles" or Fildes's "Casual Ward" – were to be painted, they would be quite as full of feeling and character as they are now in that unpolished Black and White.

There is something virile in it – something rugged – which attracts me strongly. And there is another thing – perhaps the master of Black and White is someone who neither you nor I knows. In the "General Report" of the exhibitions I see mention of the work of L'Hermite² – a Frenchman who is doing scenes of the fisherman's life in Brittany. They say of him that he is "the Millet and Jules Breton of Black and White," and his name keeps reappearing over and over again. I should like to see something of his work; the other day I wrote about it to my brother, who has provided me with sound information more than once (e.g. about Daumier's paintings).

As for my lithographs – the one of the fellow sitting on a basket cutting his bread is a failure [F 1663, JH 272]. When I transferred it to the stone the upper half got all blurred – I have been able to remedy the worst part with the scraper. Yet you will see that there are things in it which prove one can work vigorously with this process and express the nature of materials, as for instance the basket, the trousers and the muddy boots. And though at first I thought it a sorry abortion, I have become somewhat reconciled to it since then, and if I were to start over again, I should do it in the same vigorous way – with a background.

I remember reading in Herkomer's biography³ how in his early days (when that incident with the rough sketch of "Sunday at Chelsea Hospital" occurred) he did his utmost to find among the artists of that time men who would be willing to do types from the people too. Then he found Gregory, who started out by doing sketches of the Franco-German War ("Paris under the Red Flag" – I did not know at first that this sheet had been done by him – and also "Ambulance in the Pit of a Theater"), and later on specialized more in shipboard scenes – Gregory and Herkomer have remained friends since then.

Now that you write me about your improving health, I am reminded of when I was recuperating last summer. There is something dating from that time that I want to tell you; perhaps I wrote you about it at the time, but I am not sure. Do you remember the woman we met when you visited me during the summer, whom I said was a model I had found, adding that I had discovered that she was pregnant, for which reason I was trying all the harder to help her.

It was shortly afterward that I fell ill myself. At that point she was in the hospital at Leyden, and I got a letter from her in the clinic where I was, telling me she was in great trouble. Before that time – during the winter, when she was in a very bad way indeed – I had done what I could, and now I had a fierce inner struggle trying to decide what to do. Could I – should I help? – I was ill myself, and the future looked so dark. For all that, I got up against the doctor's wishes and went to see her. I visited her in the hospital at Leyden on July 1. The night before, she had given birth to a little boy, who was lying asleep in his little cradle by her bedside, his little turned-up nose just outside the covers – unconscious, of course, of what was

going on in the world. At least a poor struggler of a sick painter like myself knows a few things that a tiny baby like that doesn't know.

And what should I do? – I had some hard thinking to do at that moment. The mother, poor creature, had had a very difficult confinement. Aren't there moments in life when it is criminal to remain impassive and say, What business is it of mine?

At any rate I told the woman, "When you have recovered, come to me; whatever I can do for you I shall do." Well, my dear friend, that woman had another child, a sickly, neglected child of a girl. It was an undertaking which exceeded my means rather more seriously than buying an issue of the Graphic, for instance – but what was I to do? After all, a man has a heart in his body, and if we did not take a chance now and then we should not deserve to be alive. So she came to me – I moved into a house that was not yet quite finished at the time, and that I could get at a relatively low rent; I am still living there, two doors down from my old studio; the number is 138. So here we are, the only difference being that the baby from the hospital cradle no longer sleeps as much as he did those first days.

He is now about seven or eight months old and has become a charming little fellow, very much alive and kicking. When they moved in, I carried his cradle home from the secondhand shop on my shoulders, and all through the dark winter this little child has been like a light in the house. And though the woman does not have a strong constitution, and though notwithstanding this she has to work hard to keep the house clean, yet she has become stronger. So you see, while I'm trying to penetrate more deeply into art, I'm doing the same with respect to life itself – and the two things go together.

It does not surprise me very much that I had my share of botheration with former friends who did not want to see me any longer. But fortunately this was not the case with my best friend – I mean my brother – for he and I are far more friends than brothers, and he is a man who can understand such things – more than that, who has helped and is still helping many unfortunates. I have lost some friends through it, all the same, but on the other hand I have more light and shade in my own house, although at times, when my worries become too great, I feel as if I were on a ship during a hurricane. But you see, although I well know that the sea has its dangers, and that one can drown in it, still I love the sea; and, notwithstanding all the perils that the future may hold, I have a certain serenity.

Now I am anxious to talk with you again, and I should be delighted if you could see your way to coming to look at the Graphics before long. But I am writing you in advance to tell you of the changes in my household because I do not know exactly what your opinion of such contingencies of life is.

If we were living in the days of the "Bohème," a painter's family and a studio like mine would be nothing unusual. But nowadays we are very far removed from the original "Bohème," and among painters one finds considerations of respectability which I personally do not precisely understand, although I do not want to offend those who cling to them.

I repeat, if we were living in the days of the "Bohème," I should let things slide, but now, my friend Rappard, I will tell you frankly, I am living with a poor woman and two children, and there are many who, for that or some other reason, do not wish to associate with me, which makes it my duty to write you in this way. Won't you come and look at the Graphics one of these days?

To this I must add that, when my father first heard of all these happenings, he was far from pleased – as you may well understand – or rather, not having expected such a thing of me, he did not know what to make of it. But after a while we saw each other again, which had not happened since I came here, as I left home after a lot of trouble. And he changed his original opinion when he knew more about it. The disagreement I had with him when I left home did not last long – we had made it up before I began living with this woman. And then, even though I was living with this woman, my father came to see me once. But how many misunderstandings there are in life, and how much more smoothly everything would go if people co-operated a bit more instead of quarreling.

Oh, my dear fellow, how I wish that there was something more left of the old "Bohème" in society and particularly among painters.

Don't think that they won't come to see me just because of that woman. It is certainly one of the reasons, but it is mostly because of the painting itself, although last summer I did paint a number of studies. In short, I am sorely disappointed in my association with painters. Will it improve???

Not long ago a painter here – Boks, a landscapist – was sent to the lunatic asylum. It was very difficult to get help for him before he was sent there, although during his illness he really did get some help, especially through Mauve's intervention. Now that he has been locked up, everybody is speaking of him with great sympathy and calling him very clever.

For instance, a certain person, who repeatedly refused to help him and declined to buy his studies, said the other day that they were “more beautiful than Diaz,” which I think rather exaggerated. The poor fellow himself told me a year ago that he got a medal at one time in England – which he later sold as old silver.... Another painter, Breitner, with whom I occasionally went sketching in the streets at first, and who was also in the hospital about the time I was, has been appointed drawing master at a secondary school, although I know he doesn’t care for the job.

Is it a good time for painters?? When I first came to this city I went to all the studios I could visit in order to find intercourse and make friends. Now I have cooled off very much in this respect, being of the opinion that there is a serious drawback to it, in that the painters pretend to be friendly, but are too often inclined to trip you up. That is the fatal thing; we ought to help and trust each other, for there are enough enmities in society, and we should be better off in general if we did not injure each other’s interests. It is jealousy that impels many to speak ill systematically of others – and what is the result? Instead of forming a great whole, a corps of painters whose strength is unity, everyone keeps to himself and works all alone, and those who are at the top at present create, by their very jealousy, a kind of desert around themselves, which I think is a very unfortunate thing – for themselves.

Sharp competition in painting and drawing is in a certain sense good, or at any rate justified, but the artists should not become personal enemies and fight each other with other weapons.

Well, anyway, if all this is no obstacle to you, please think over whether you want to come and see those Graphics, for they are splendid. I want to discuss with you what to do with the duplicates, because there are many of them; these are among the most beautiful ones – “The Last Muster,” an old women’s almshouse, by Herkomer, “Low Lodginghouse St. Giles” by the same, “Emigrants” and “Boarding School” by Frank Hol, “Caxton⁴ Printing” and the “Small Old Gate” by Fred. Walker. Well, there are quite a lot, and such important ones that they would form the core of any collection of wood engravings. I know well enough from our previous correspondence that you won’t have them for nothing, although if you appreciate them and would really like to have them, I for my part would gladly give them to you unconditionally.

But I feel sure that we shall be able to arrange things so that you’ll feel no pangs of conscience about accepting them, and as it is certain that we shall come to some agreement, I think the best thing would be to get together soon, if your health keeps on improving.

And I think it all the more desirable to have you come here, because I have just got together a large number of drawings I did this winter, and I should like to talk them over with you. I would have written you sooner about all the things I am telling you now, but they seemed so strange even to myself, and some unpleasant experiences with others had made me angry besides. And I am writing you now, not because I consider you narrow-minded with regard to the facts of life, nor because I believe you will think what I have done incomprehensible, but because I should think it unstraightforward if I asked you to come and look at my wood engravings again without telling you that there have been rather great changes in my household, and that because of these changes many are avoiding me, and would most certainly not set foot in my house. The studio is much more spacious than the last one, but I am continually afraid that the landlord will raise the rent or find tenants who can pay more than I. Well, as long as I can keep it, it is a very good studio. If you consider that I now have duplicates of nearly everything in the Graphic, you’ll realize that’s quite a lot. And I hope to be able to get sets of the very first years too.

Oh, I have had my illusions of other women as well as my disappointments, but I never thought it would turn out like this. But as for this woman, I thought it so touching that she, a mother, was so alone and forlorn, that I did not hesitate and I think I did nothing wrong then, nor do I think I am doing so now. For when a mother has been deserted, and is in dire distress, one should not avert one’s eyes and go on – at least that’s what I think. This one is a figure like some that Hol or Fildes have drawn.

If you should come before long, don’t let your visit be a short one. The Graphics are so beautiful that I believe looking them over may stimulate and invigorate you even though you are still weak – unless the trip itself should be too fatiguing for you (I live quite close to the Rhine Railway Station, for that matter). So do as you think best. With a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. See letter 265 to Theo of February 8, 1883.
2. Lhermitte. Vincent later wrote the name correctly.
3. See letter 263 to Theo of February 3, 1883
4. Vincent wrote “Claxton.”