

Letter R30
The Hague, c. 5 March 1883

Amice Rappard,

Thanks for your letter of February 27, which I'm answering today. First as to what you say about lithography. You will have seen that the very same paper is used for ink and for crayon. I got the paper from Jos. Smulders & Co., paper dealers, Spuistraat, of this city; their storehouse is on the Laan, and they have a large stock of stones of various sizes there. They called it "Korn" paper, and they had bought it for one of the ministries, where they drew all kinds of maps on it for lithographic reproduction.

There were a number of sheets left, and I took these, all of them. At the time he told me he would order some more sheets – did he do it? – I don't know – but Smulders knows all about it at any rate, and can have it sent to him by parcel post within a few days. It is rather expensive: 1.75 guilders per sheet. The lithographic crayon – likewise made expressly for this paper – is more expensive than the ordinary kind, and in my opinion much worse than the crayon that is not expressly made for it. Autographic ink, liquid or in lumps [is certainly also sold by] Smulders and other dealers – for surely you can find these ingredients in all lithographers' shops.

The scraper I used has this form: I got it at Smulders's – [illegible] called a point – to scratch hair with, for instance, only for light fine scratches like those an etching needle makes, but which turn out white on the black surface.

It goes without saying that you – [illegible] can use all kinds of implements as scrapers; the shape doesn't matter – now and then I scrape with my pocket-knife.

What am I paying for my proofs? – he promised to state a fixed price, as well as the prices for printing and for the stones. The prices that I paid provisionally do not count; as the printer himself was not familiar with the method, we have compounded the matter – and also because there were failures, etc. I shall get estimates from Smulders, however, that will be rather important to know, but he will have to calculate them at his leisure. The fact is that he will give me the prices of the stones in various sizes, if taken by the dozen, and also the printing expenses for, say, a series of a dozen drawings and a series of two dozen – besides the price of the paper. When I saw him the last time he was in an awful rush and said, "Come and discuss it again by the end of March; then we'll go to the warehouse and look everything over together." So for the time being I hardly know anything about the real prices.

The ink's running when making transfers isn't caused directly by the thickness of the lines; I have seen enormously thick lines transferred quite clearly. As for your friend who draws with a little pen – well, that's his business – but personally I think it decidedly wrong, because I'm afraid that by doing this he is trying to get an effect from the process that's not in its character.

If one wants to work with a fine point and yet remain vigorous, then I know only one method – etching. If one wants to work with the pen and autographic ink, then I am of the opinion that one should in no case take a finer pen than an ordinary writing pen. Very fine pens, like very elegant people, are sometimes amazingly useless; and, as I see it, they often lack elasticity which the most ordinary pens just naturally have to a certain extent.

Last year I bought at least six special penholders and all kinds of nibs – and the whole lot was rubbish. But they looked very practical. Well – I'm none too sure myself – there may be good ones among them, and one may possibly get good results by working with finer pens and autographic ink – all right, so be it – I shall be delighted if it turns out well, but I should think one would not get the satisfaction one derives from the more fluent, bolder stroke of an ordinary quill pen, for instance.

Now something else. Do you know "black mountain crayon"?¹ Last year I got some big sticks about this size from my brother.

I worked with it but without paying much attention to it; I found a piece of it the other day, however, and I was struck by its beautiful black colour.

Well, yesterday I made a drawing with it – women and children at the serving window of the public soup kitchen [F 1020a, JH 330]. And I can tell you I was delighted with this experiment.

I've scratched a few strokes here at random in order to let you see the colour of the black. Don't you think it's a beautifully warm tone?

I immediately wrote to my brother for more of it – shall I send you a piece when I get it? But if you know it already, and if you should be able to get it in your town, then please send me some. For I intend to go on using it in combination with lithographic crayon. It's just as if there's soul and life in that stuff, and as if it understood what you mean to express and co-operated. I should like to call it "gypsy crayon." One need not

use a holder, as the pieces are so long. It has the colour of a ploughed field on a summer evening! I would provide myself with a bushel, if it were sold by the bushel, which I doubt.

The Album des Vosges is a relatively old publication, but it certainly does exist. And it is beautiful.

Your list of wood engravings is very good, especially the Lançons; I have the “Contrebandiers” too, but not the “Comité d’aide” [Committee of Assistance], for instance. But I have found a duplicate of precisely the “Soup Distribution” – perhaps it is the same one, perhaps not – and I have a duplicate of “Raggpickers in a Pub.” So you can have these.

I know little sketches by Renouard of cats, pigs and rabbits, but I haven’t got any. I have “Les Cours de Gambetta” and “Mendiants le jour de l’an” [Beggars on New Year’s Day] besides.

I have found two beautiful Régameys – a “Foundlings’ Hospital in Japan” by F. Régamey; and by Guillaume Régamey, soldiers in white cloaks leading black horses by the bridle, after a painted sketch, very beautiful. I read a short biography of the two brothers. Guillaume lived only to the age of thirty-eight. Last fall he exhibited some military – [illegible] rather like Boulanger. After that he retired somewhat; he seems to have had an ailment that made life difficult for him. But he kept on working through it all – for many years. A multitude of superb studies came to light after he died – there has been an exhibition of them – hardly anybody knew of their existence during his lifetime. A fine thing, eh?

F. Régamey is traveling around a good deal, and as you know he is very strong on Japanese art. What you say about the French wood engravings in general rather coincides with my own opinion. The English especially have found the soul of the wood engravings – the original character that is just as peculiar as the character of etchings. Take Buckmann’s “A London Dustyard,” for instance, and the “Harbour of Refuge” by Walker. Boetzel and Lavieille know how to do it too all the same, but Swain is the master. I think the Lançons engraved by Moller, however, have a very original character too. There is a lot of good, for instance, in the Feyen-Perrins done by Boetzel and the Millets by Lavieille. But for the rest, yes, they often lapse into industrialism, into the unfeeling.

You ask me about De Bock. I haven’t been to see him for a long time, in fact, not since before I fell ill. I noticed that every time I came to him or met him in the street, he said, “Oh, I’ll come and see you one of these days,” in such a way that I felt I had to conclude from it, Don’t come to see me until I come to see you, which will never happen. Anyhow I haven’t gone there again, because I certainly don’t want to intrude. I know that De Bock is working on a large picture at the moment; this winter I saw some smaller ones which I thought very beautiful. I’ve met De Bock twice lately – not in his studio but in the street, in a fur coat, kid gloves, etc., in short like a man in very flourishing circumstances. I hear that he is doing what they call flourishing in general.

I often think his work very fine – but it does not remind me primarily of Ruysdael, for instance – and I hardly think this will be your lasting, well-considered impression.

In point of fact I should like greatly to go to his studio again, for the very reason that I should so like to be convinced that it is really as beautiful as I should like it to be, for now I cannot help having my doubts about him every now and then. My impression of him last year was really not very favourable – he was continually talking about Millet – very good! – and about the greatness and breadth of Millet – I talked with him about it once, for instance, in the country, in the Scheveningse Bosjes [Groves]. I said then, “But, De Bock, if Millet were here at this moment, then would he look at those clouds and that grass and those twenty-seven tree trunks and forget that little fellow over there in his bombazine clothes, who is sitting there on the stump of a tree eating his poor-man’s lunch, his spade lying at his side? Or do you think that little part of the scene, where the little fellow is sitting, would be the exact spot on which he would concentrate his attention? I don’t believe I am less fond of Millet than you are,” I said; “it pleases me enormously that you have a certain admiration for Millet – but, pardon me, I don’t think Millet would look at the things you point out to me all the time. Millet is primarily, and more than any other, the painter of humanity. He has unquestionably painted landscapes, and they are beautiful – nothing is surer than that – but I find it hard to understand how you can really mean it when you say that you see in Millet principally those things you now point out to me.”

In short, Rappard, I find more of Bilders, for instance, than of Millet or Ruysdael in our friend De Bock. But I may be mistaken for all that, and see more in his work later on; nothing would please me more.

I most certainly like Bilders too – and there is no picture of De Bock’s that I don’t look at with a certain pleasure – there is always something fresh and genial about it. But there is a certain kind of art – perhaps less flowery, more thorny – of which I find more in my own heart.

I know, Ruysdael himself has had his metamorphoses, and perhaps his most beautiful works are not the waterfalls and the grand forest views but “L’estacade aux eaux rousses” and “Le Buisson” in the Louvre,

“The Mill at Wijk bij Duurstede” in the Van der Hoop Collection, the “Bleacheries at Overveen” in the Mauritshuis [museum in The Hague] and other more commonplace things which he turned to in later years, probably under the influence of Rembrandt and Vermeer of Delft. I wish something similar would happen to De Bock, but will this be the case? I should be sorry for him if he did not land more in the thorns than in the flowerets – that’s all.

And although I have, unintentionally, been a little à froid with him of late, nothing more serious has occurred between him and me than a few discussions about Millet and similar topics. I have nothing against him, only I haven’t exactly seen the style of Millet or Ruysdael in him up to now – I think his style for the present is something like Bilders’s; I don’t mean Gerard Bilders but the old one.

I’m still quite delighted with the alterations in my studio, especially since the experiments I’ve made with various models have shown me how great an improvement it is. Formerly a figure in the studio cast no sharp shadow because the strong reflection threw light on it again, and so all effects were neutralized. This drawback has now been overcome.

Don’t think that I am going to neglect the lithographs, but I have had so many expenses, and I still have to buy so many necessities, that I cannot attack new stones. Nothing will be lost by waiting a bit. I am very eager to work more with the “black mountain crayon.”

Do you know what I have a great longing for now and then? – for a look at your studio. And not only that, but also for a look at the places you are in the habit of walking in when hunting up subjects. No doubt there are beautiful little courts and alleys in Utrecht too.

The Hague is beautiful – and there is an enormous variety of scenes. I hope to work hard this year. There are also often financial difficulties that hamper me, which you will understand, and this is the very reason why – because I want to work much and must in fact do so – I shall concentrate more and more on black and white.

When I’m doing watercolours or oil paintings I must stop every now and then on account of the expense, but with a piece of crayon or lead pencil one has only the expense of the model and some paper. And I prefer to spend the little I have on models, I assure you, than to spend it on painting materials. I have never regretted the money I spend on models.

Do you have the portrait of Carlyle – that beautiful one in the Graphic? At the moment I am reading his Sartor Resartus – “the philosophy of old clothes.” Among the “old clothes” he includes all kinds of forms and in the matter of religion all dogmas; it is beautiful – and faithful to reality – and humane. There has been a lot of grumbling about this book, as about his other books. Many consider Carlyle a monster – a joke about his “philosophy of old clothes” runs like this: Carlyle not only strips mankind to the skin, he even flays it. Something like that. Well, this is not true, but it most certainly is true that he is honest enough not to call the shirt the skin – and very far from seeing a tendency to belittle man in his works, I find, on the contrary, that he raises man to a high position in the universe. And much more than bitter criticism I find in him a love of humanity besides – a great love. He – Carlyle – has learned much from Goethe – but still more, I believe, from a certain man who did not write books, but whose words, though he did not write them down himself, have endured – namely Jesus... who, long before Carlyle, included many forms of all kinds of things among the “old clothes” too.

I bought a new sixpenny edition of Dickens’s Christmas Carol and The Haunted Man (London, Chapman & Hall) this week, in which there are some seven illustrations, e.g., among other things, a “Secondhand Shop” by Barnard. I admire everything that Dickens wrote, but I have reread these two “children’s tales” nearly every year since I was a boy, and they are new to me again every time. Barnard understood Dickens well. The other day I saw photographs again of some black-and-white drawings by Barnard, a series of characters from Dickens’s books; I saw Mrs. Camp, Little Dorrit, Sikes, Sydney Carton and some others. They are highly accentuated figures – most important, treated as cartoons.

There is no writer, in my opinion, who is so much a painter and a black-and-white artist as Dickens. His figures are resurrections. On a nursery print I found a little wood engraving after Barnard by Swain – a black policeman is dragging along a woman in white who is struggling backward, and a crowd of street urchins is following them. It is hardly possible to express so much of the true character of a poor neighborhood with fewer means. I shall try to get another copy of this print for you; as a matter of fact it’s only a small sketch.

Unfortunately I have not been able to get that sheet of Fildes’s “Empty Chair” for you, which was promised me together with some others. Now the man remembers getting rid of them some years ago.

Write soon again – I wish you good luck with your work in every respect. By the way, I have a nearly complete French edition of Dickens, translated under the supervision of Dickens himself. I think you told

me once that you could not enjoy all the English books by Dickens because of the sometimes complicated English, as for instance the miners' [sic] dialect in *Hard Times*. If you should ever want to read something of this French edition, it is at your disposal, and I am even willing to exchange the whole collection of Dickens's works in French for something else, if you should care to. I am thinking of gradually getting the English Household Edition.

Adieu, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

There is character too in the illustrations by John Leech and Cruikshank – but the Barnards are more intensively worked out. Nevertheless, Leech is strong on street urchins.

In the *Graphic* for February 10, 1883, there is a little figure by Frank Hol – a child in a little attic, very full of character; I bought the number especially for that.

1. This is a literal translation of the Dutch *bergkrijt*, but it is not clear what kind of crayon Vincent meant – most probably a very soft kind which produced bold, deep black strokes.