

My dear Theo,

You have so often afforded me a glimpse of Paris with your descriptions, this time for a change I am giving you a glimpse out of my window at the snow-covered yard.

I am adding a glimpse into a corner of the house, and they are two impressions of one and the same winter's day.

We are surrounded by poetry on all sides, but putting it on paper is, alas, not as readily done as looking at it.

I made a watercolour of the above, from which this small sketch is taken, but I don't think it is vivid and powerful enough.

I believe I've already written to you that I was able to find some mountain chalk here in the city. I am at work with that, as well.

To my mind the cold spell we had last week was the most perfect part of this winter. It was fantastically beautiful, what with the snow and the curious skies. The thawing of the snow today was almost more beautiful still. But it was typical winter weather, if I may call it that – the kind of weather that awakens old memories and lends the most ordinary things the sort of look one cannot help associating with stories from the age of stagecoaches and post chaises.

Here, for example, is a quick little sketch I made in just such a dream-like state. It shows a gentleman who, having missed a coach or something of the sort, has had to spend the night in a village inn. Now he has risen early, and having ordered a glass of brandy against the cold, he is paying the landlady (a little woman in a peasant's cap). It is still very early in the morning, *la piquette du jour* [the crack of dawn], – he must catch the post chaise – the moon is still shining and one can see the snow glittering through the taproom window, and all the objects are casting curious, whimsical shadows. This story is really of no consequence, nor is the little sketch, but one or another may perhaps help you to understand what I mean, that is, that lately everything has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, which makes one feel like getting it down quickly on paper. Still, the whole of nature is an indescribably beautiful Black and White exhibition during such snow effects.

As I am doing small sketches at present anyway, I am adding another, very slight one, of a drawing done in mountain chalk, the girl by the cradle [F 1024, JH 336], done like the woman and child you mention [F 1072, JH 341]. This mountain chalk is truly the strangest material. The other little sketch of a bargee is after a drawing in which a great deal has been lavis [washed] with neutral tint and sepia [F1010, JH 306].

It would not surprise me at all if the few things I sent you recently seem to you rather meager products. Indeed I believe it could hardly be otherwise. There is something inevitable about the fact that, to appreciate the characteristic nature of work in Black and White, one must take the whole set into account all the time, which cannot always be done. What I mean is that there is a difference between making 10 drawings and making 100 drawings or sketches or studies. Not because of the quantity, to be sure – forget about the quantity – what I am trying to say is this, there is a kind of tolerance to Black and White that enables one to draw a single figure one admires in perhaps 10 different poses, while if one were to do it in, say, watercolour, or to paint it, one would do just one pose.

Now suppose 9 of those 10 are no good, and I hope in all conscience that this would not be the proportion of good to bad all the time, but just suppose that to be the case. If you were here in the studio yourself, it is my belief that not a week would pass without my being able to show you, not just one, but a whole number of studies, and I should be surprised if you were unable to pick out one from amongst that number that appealed to you every time. Meanwhile the rest would not have been done wholly in vain, since in some respects even unsuccessful studies are likely to prove useful or serviceable one day for some new composition.

And that is why I think that the next time you come, you may well find a few more things about which you can give me a few tips. For instance, it is quite hard, since I am not at all familiar with Lhermitte's drawings (you will remember my asking you about them), but am familiar with Ciceri's watercolours as well as his old lithographic drawing examples, though not at all with his current black and white drawings, I repeat, it's quite hard for me to grasp your precise meaning when you write with reference to a certain little sketch, "Couldn't you do something that would somehow fit in with the above-mentioned drawings?" I'm sure that both those artists are infinitely more advanced than I – but your idea could be feasible and I myself will keep learning too, don't you agree? – so it's not beyond the bounds of possibility. And I wanted to emphasize to you again that, in my opinion, supposing I do produce something that would fit in, there is a sort of tolerance to Black and White which would allow one to become very productive in that direction, once one has embarked on it. Not without working unremittingly, of course, but I do that anyway.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

So if the small drawings in mountain chalk I sent you are not what you intended, although I had your tips in mind when I did them, don't let that put you off and don't hesitate to return to the subject, the more often the better. And bear in mind, too, that as soon as I am sure of what you are after, I shall be ready to do as I said just now, to turn out 10, for example, in order to arrive at one good one. In short, if you do come to the studio one day, I think you would see that I am being fairly energetic, and you would, I hope, go on thinking of me in these terms, wouldn't you, and you would understand as well that even though someone who is fairly energetic may be working hard for himself, or rather without an immediate purpose, it might be twice as stimulating for him if there were a purpose. This is also true of possible work for the illustrated papers.

I immensely enjoyed rereading Fritz Reuter's Gedroogde kruiden [Dried Herbs, the Dutch translation of Reuter's *Sämtliche Werke* (Complete Works)] recently, it is just like, say, Knaus or Vautier.

Do you know a draughtsman by the name of Régamey? There is a lot of character in his work, I have got some woodcuts, including drawings made in prison, and gypsies and Japanese. When you come, you must have another look at the woodcuts, I've acquired a few new ones since last time.

It may well seem to you that the sun is shining more brightly and that everything has taken on a new charm. That, at any rate, is the inevitable consequence of true love, I believe, and it is a wonderful thing. And I also believe that those who hold that no one thinks clearly when in love are wrong, for it is at just that time that one thinks very clearly indeed and is more energetic than one was before. And love is something eternal, it may change in aspect but not in essence. And there is the same difference between someone who is in love and what he was like before as there is between a lamp that is lit and one that is not. The lamp was there all the time and it was a good lamp, but now it is giving light as well and that is its true function. And one has more peace of mind about many things and so is more likely to do better work.

How beautiful those old almshouses are, I can't find words to describe them. And though Israël's does this sort of thing to perfection, so to speak, I find it strange that so relatively few should have an eye for it. Every day here in The Hague, so to speak, I see a world which very many people pass by and which is very different from what most make of it. And I shouldn't dare to say so if I didn't know from experience that figure painters, too, actually pass it by, and if I didn't remember that whenever I was struck by some figure or other I encountered while out walking with them, I would hear time and again, "oh, those dirty people," or "that kind of person" – expressions, in short, one would not expect from a painter.

Yes, that often used to make me think. I remember, for instance, a conversation with Henkes, who frequently saw, and sees, things so clearly, which took me completely by surprise. It is as if they deliberately shun the most serious, the most beautiful things, in short voluntarily muzzle themselves and clip their own wings. And while I am gradually acquiring greater respect for some, I cannot help thinking that others will be reduced to sterility if they go on like that. And the old Bohème was very insistent on this very point, on being productive. And, and "La Bohème" was no good, according to some, but mind you, there will always be those who want to have their cake and eat it and, and, and who will end up with jam on their faces. Snuff out the candle – que soit [so be it] – but there is no point in applying the snuffer prematurely. Goodbye, with a handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent

[Sketches "Early Morning Passenger" JH 339, "Girl Kneeling at Cradle" JH 338, and "Fisherman sitting with Pipe" F 1013, JH 345 were enclosed with letter.]