

The Hague, 30 March & 1 April 1883

Dear Theo,

By chance I have at last seen something of Lhermitte's – a very careless reproduction in wood engraving. It represented a little old woman in a church pew. A girl was kneeling beside her. However imperfect the reproduction may be, it gave me some idea of his work. It immediately reminded me of De Groux and Legros – there certainly must be many things in common between his work and Millet's and Breton's. Careless though the little wood engraving was, it stayed in my mind for days, and I still think of it because some things I had heard about Lhermitte made me eager to see something of his work, and I was looking for it. You remember I wrote you about him apropos of a review of the "Black and White" exhibition. I received the crayon – many thanks – it is very good. But it is softer than the kind you gave me the first time, and the pieces are half as long. I am still anxious to get that harder kind in larger pieces, but nevertheless I'm very glad to have this.

I made a large drawing with it combined with lithographic crayon. It is a drawing of a digger – my model was the little old almshouse man you know already – his bald head, bent over the black earth, seemed to me full of a certain significance, reminiscent, for instance, of "thou shalt eat thy bread in the sweat of thy brow." Now these drawings of the woman with the spade [JH 337] and this digger have such an aspect that people won't think they are made in some intricate way, but rather won't think about how they are made at all.

But I believe that if I had made them with ordinary conté pencil, they would have got a dull and ironlike aspect, which would have made people say a once, "That's not life, that's not nature."

By certain grey tints, through a certain richness and pith in the black, one avoids that dull and ironlike aspect.

And these little things are, in my opinion, worth the trouble of looking for such material as that crayon and lithographic crayon.

I am very glad you sent it.

This morning a painter saw these two drawings, namely Nakken; he didn't intend to come to me, but knocked at my door, thinking that Van Deventer lived here – but he lives in another street. I straightened him out, but asked if he wouldn't come in and look at my studio, which he did. As I was drawing that digger mentioned above, it was the first thing he saw on the easel, and he said, "That is vigorously drawn and seriously studied."

Take those words at their face value, without delving too deeply, yet they pleased me because I don't suppose Van Nakken would say that a figure was vigorously drawn if it weren't. But that's all I think of it – I am writing about it because it happened to be the drawing made with that crayon I mentioned, and you can tell that since you took the trouble to procure it for me, I for my part like nothing better than to work with it.

Just how near such drawings would come to certain fusains – Lhermitte is an ideal – and to reach that point is still far distant – but to aim at it is the order of the day. Well, when you come sooner or later, we can talk about it better.

Recently I spoke to Smulders about lithographs; I met him on the street, and he asked me if I didn't intend to make some more. Which is just what I should like to do. But I must talk it over with Rappard, and he must see my studies first.

It always seems to me that one might make of workmen's figures something that has a *raison d'être*. The lithographs by Émile Vernier after Millet and Corot and Daubigny possess qualities which I appreciate highly. How one would like to talk with somebody who is a master of his trade to such a degree. Not with the intention of making reproductions of pictures, but to understand better what may be done in lithography.

Just imagine original drawings with those characteristic greys and that peculiar expression of material. Bodmer has found that, as an artist, he is original, and at the same time, he has what one might call the lithographic tones, or rather the grey colour scale. Which is in some respects quite different from Gavarni's lithography. Bodmer's lithographs are prints finished like paintings. I refer here, not only to Bodmer's real lithographs like "Au bas Breau" and "Combats de Cerfs" [stags fighting], but also to the prints from Illustration, or Monde Illustré. But in my opinion the respect for the need and longing for advice and correction by others may be no excuse for one's idleness. To say, "I don't need other people," however, is rash, if one should systematically use it as a reason to stick one's nose up at other people.

The act of printing has always seemed like a miracle to me, just such a miracle as a tiny seed's growth to an ear of corn. An everyday miracle, even greater for happening every day: one drawing is sown on the stone or the etching plate, and a harvest is reaped from it.

Can you understand that it is something which I think about a great deal while I work, and that I feel a great love for it? Well, the main thing for me to do now is to see to it that the quality of the seed (namely the drawings themselves) improves; it may take more time, but if the harvest is better for it, I am satisfied – I always have my eye on that harvest.

Well, write soon again, and believe me, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

I kept this letter back a few days, as today, Sunday, I have more time for writing. I am reading *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. A book which I remember of old, but I had a great longing to read it again. It is very beautiful, that figure of Monseigneur Myriel or Bienvenu I think sublime.

You spoke in your last letter of "exerting influence" in connection with your patient. That Mgr. Myriel reminds me of Corot or Millet, though he was a priest and the other two, painters. Because in the painters' world Corot, and Millet too, or Breton, besides doing their own work, have roused so much energy in others, who wouldn't have developed fully without them. You surely know *Les Misérables*, and certainly the illustrations which Brion made for it too, very good and very appropriate.

It is good to read such a book again, I think, just to keep some feelings alive. Especially love for humanity, and the faith in, and consciousness of, something higher, in short, *quelque chose là-haut*.

I was absorbed in it for a few hours this afternoon, and then came into the studio about the time the sun was setting. From the window I looked down on a wide dark foreground – dug-up gardens and fields of warm black earth of a very deep tone. Diagonally across it runs a little path of yellowish sand, bordered with green grass and slender, spare young poplars. The background was formed by a grey silhouette of the city, with the round roof of the railway station, and spires, and chimneys. And moreover, backs of houses everywhere; but at that time of evening, everything is blended by the tone. So viewed in a large way, the whole thing is simply a foreground of black dug-up earth, a path across it, behind it a grey silhouette of the city, with spires, and over it all, almost at the horizon, the red sun. It was exactly like a page from Hugo, and I am sure that you would have been struck by it, and that you would describe it better than I. And on seeing it, I thought of you.

I already wrote you that I made a drawing with that crayon – yesterday I began a second one with it, of a seamstress [F 1025, JH 346; F 1026, JH 347], especially for the chiaroscuro. When you come to the studio again, I think you will see pretty soon that, though I don't mention that plan of making workmen types for lithography so much any more, I still have it in mind. However, the fact is that I find it more and more difficult, in that I want to have my figures much better.

I have a sower – a mower – a woman at the washtub – a woman miner – a seamstress – a digger – a woman with a spade – the almshouse man – a grace before meat – a fellow with a wheelbarrow full of manure. There are even more, I suppose, but I think you will understand that just making them, looking at the models, and thinking it over do not make one satisfied with one's work; on the contrary – I mean, one says, Yes, that same thing, but even better and more serious.

And I shouldn't think so much about it if I considered it impractical, but the fact that I have already done these drawings proves my longing to make them better is not just an abstract idea, but an actual struggle to achieve it.

And I didn't make any further definite plan because I think the execution of the drawings much more interesting.

It seems to me that these drawings all go straight in the direction which you meant when you wrote about it recently – though they are far from equalling those by Lhermitte. –

You will understand that, too.

Lhermitte's secret must be no other, I think, than that he knows the figure in general thoroughly – that is, the sturdy, stern workman's figure – and that he takes his subjects from the very heart of the people. To attain his level – one must not talk about that – one must work, and try to get as near as possible. Because talking about it would only be a presumption on my part, but working for it would be, on the contrary, a proof of respect and trust and faith in such artists as he.

Have you ever seen anything by an American named Abbey? At present there is a draughtsmen's club in New York called the "Tile Club" or the "Tile Painters"; I saw a number of their illustrations, for instance,

in a Christmas issue of Harper's. I ask you because all those gentlemen seem to have been in Paris at the same time – judging from a page of cartoons by one of them.

In my opinion Abbey is by far the cleverest of them all. His figures often remind me somewhat of Boughton. Boughton is also a member, or an honorary member, of that club, but I think he himself is more serious than all the rest of the club put together, and doesn't make such a splash.

Abbey, however, is very beautiful.

I have a little figure of a woman in the snow by him, which simultaneously reminds me of Boughton and of Heilbuth.

A large pen-and-ink drawing representing a Christmas scene in Washington's time, or a little earlier, recalls, for instance, Henri Pille. He has style, and that's a good thing, but Boughton has the same – he used to have it even more.

I write about it because I believe you will agree with me that not all Americans are bad. That, on the contrary, there are extremes there like everywhere else, and besides a lot of braggarts and daubers of the most detestable and impossible kind, there are characters who give the effect of a lily or a snowdrop between the thorns.

Now I will go and read a little in *Les Misérables*, though it is already late; such a book warms one the way pictures by Dupré and old Millet's or some of Descamps' do – it is written with what we call *fougue*, vehemence.

I saw that a new book is out by Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, if I remember correctly.