

Amice Rappard,

I was just writing you a letter when the postman brought me your very welcome letter; I am glad to hear that you have made progress with your drawing. I never doubted you would, for that matter, for you attacked it in a virile way.

Now, to begin with I want to tell you that I think what you say about the English black-and-white artists perfectly right and proper. I saw in your work exactly what you say. Well, I quite agree with you – particularly about the bold contour.

Take Millet's etching "The Diggers," take an engraving by Albrecht Dürer, above all take the large woodcut by Millet himself, "The Shepherdess" – then you see with full clarity what may be expressed by such a contour. And, as you say, you feel "that is how I have always wanted to do it, if I had always gone my own way, etc." That's well said, old fellow, and spoken like a man.

Now I think another example of characteristic, bold and vigorous drawing is Leys's pictures, and more especially that series of decorations for his dining room – "La Promenade dans la Neige," "Les Patineurs," "La Réception," "La Table," "La Servante." And De Groux has it too, and so has Daumier.

Even Israëls, and at times Mauve and Mans too, cannot refrain from drawing a vigorous contour, but they don't do it in the manner of Leys, or of Herkomer.

But when you hear them talk, they will have none of it, and more often they are talking about "tone" and "colour." And yet, in certain charcoal drawings Israëls has also used lines that remind one of Millet. I want to state flatly that personally, however much I admire and respect these masters, I regret that, when they speak to others, they – and particularly Mauve and Maris – do not point out more emphatically what can be done with the contour, and advise them to draw cautiously and softly. And so it happens that watercolours are the order of the day nowadays, and are considered the most expressive medium, whereas in my opinion too little attention is being paid to black and white, so much so that there is even a certain antipathy against it. There is no black, so to speak, in a watercolour, and that is what they base themselves on in order to say, "Those black things." It is not necessary, however, to devote my whole letter to this.

I wanted to tell you that I have four drawings on my easel at the moment – peat cutters – sand pit – dunghill – loading coal. I even did the dunghill twice; the first one was too overworked to be continued.

Besides I have not ventured to work too much in them with printer's ink and turpentine; instead I have used charcoal, lithographic crayon and autographic ink so far.... Except in the case of the dunghill that became too overworked; I attacked this one with it and not unsuccessfully; it became rather black, it's true, but for all that the freshness returned somewhat, and now I see my way again to working on it some more, although I thought it hopeless before I put on the printer's ink.

I have been working very hard since I visited you; I had not done any compositions for such a long time – only a lot of studies – that when I once started I went quite wild about it. I was pegging away at it many mornings as early as four o'clock. I am extremely eager for you to see them, for I can make neither head nor tail of what Van der Weele, the only one who has seen them, said.

Van der Weele's opinion was rather sympathetic, but he said about the sandpit that there were too many figures in it; the composition was not simple. He said, "Look here, just draw that one little fellow with his wheelbarrow on a little dike against the bright sky at sundown; how beautiful such a thing would be – now it is too turbulent."

Then I showed him Caldecott's drawing "Brighton Highroad," and said, "Do you mean to say that it is not permitted per se to introduce many figures into a composition? Never mind my drawing, just tell me what you think of this composition."

"Well," he said, "I don't like that one either. But," he added, "I am speaking personally, and I can't speak any other way than personally, and this is not the kind of thing I like and want to look at." Well, I thought this well said in a certain way, but you will understand that I did not find in him exactly that sound knowledge of things which I was looking for. But he is quite a sound fellow on the whole, and we took a very pleasant walk together, and he pointed out some damned fine things to me.

It was while taking a walk with him that I saw that sandpit too, but he hardly looked at it on that occasion, and next day I went back to it alone. I have drawn that sandpit with many figures because at times there really are very many fellows toiling there, because in winter and in autumn the town gives employment in this way to persons who are out of work. And then the scene is extremely busy [F 1029, JH 366].

I have had some beautiful models of late. A superb grass mower, a magnificent peasant boy, exactly like figures by Millet. A fellow with a wheelbarrow, the same whose head you may remember I drew, but then in his Sunday

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clothes and with a Sunday-clean bandage around his blind eye. Now I have him in his everyday clothes, and – as I see it – it is difficult to believe that this is the same man who posed for both studies.

The size of these four large drawings is 40 x 20 inches.

I am much pleased with using a brown passe-partout with a very deep black inner rim. Then many blacks seem to be grey, whereas they would show up too black in a white passe-partout, and the whole retains a clear effect.

Lord, how I wish you could see them, not because I think them good myself, but I should like to know what you think of them, although I am not yet satisfied with them. In my opinion they are not yet sufficiently pure figure drawings, though they are figure drawings all right, but I should like to accentuate the drawing of the actions and the structure more cleanly and boldly.

What you write about feeling that you are now on a road, and not on little by-paths and crossroads, is very true, in my opinion. I have a similar feeling myself, because during the past year I have been concentrating on figures even more than I used to.

If you believe that I have eyes to see with, then you may be sure that there most certainly is sentiment in your figures; what you are doing is healthy and virile – never doubt yourself in this respect, and for the very reason that you do not doubt, dash it on without hesitation.

I think the studies of the heads of those blind fellows are superb.

It must not surprise you that some of my figures are so entirely different from the ones that I sometimes make after the model. I very seldom work from memory – I hardly practice that method. But I am getting so used to being confronted immediately with nature that I am keeping my personal feelings unfettered to a far greater extent than in the beginning – and I get less dizzy – and I am more myself just because I am confronted with nature. If I have the good fortune to find a model who is quiet and collected, then I draw it repeatedly, and then at last a study turns up which is different from an ordinary study – I mean more characteristic, more deeply felt.

And yet it was made under the same circumstances as the more wooden, less deeply felt studies that preceded it.

This manner of working is as good as any other – just a little more easily understood – like these “Little Winter Gardens.” You said it yourself – they are felt; all right, but that was not accidental; I drew them over and over again before, and that feeling was not in them then. After that – after the iron-like ones – came these, and also that clumsiness and awkwardness. How does it happen that I express something with that? – because the thing has shaped itself in my mind before I start on it.

The first ones are absolutely repulsive to others. I say this to make you understand that, when there is something in it, this is not accidental but most certainly reasoned out and willed.

I am delighted to hear that you’ve noticed that I’m doing my best at present and that I attach importance to it – to express the relation of the values of the masses against each other, and to show how in the dizzying tangle of every corner in nature things will show up separate.

Formerly the light and brown in my studies was rather fortuitous, at least not logically carried through, and that is why they were colder and flatter.

When once I feel – I know – a subject, I usually draw three or more variations of it whether it is figure or landscape – but every time and for each one I consult nature. And I even do my best not to give details – for then the dreaminess goes out of it. And when Tersteeg and my brother, and others, say, “What is this, is it grass or cabbage?” – then I answer, “Delighted that you can’t make it out.”

And yet they are sufficiently true to nature for the honest natives of these parts to recognize certain details which I have hardly paid any attention to; they will say, for instance, “Yes, that’s Mrs. Renesse’s hedge,” or, “Look, there are Van de Louw’s beanpoles.”

I want to tell you something besides about a kind of Faber lead pencil that I have discovered. Here is the diameter of the lead; they are soft and of a better quality than the carpenter’s pencils; they give a glorious black, and are very pleasant to work with for large studies. I drew a seamstress with it on gray papier sans fin [i.e. cut from the roll], and got an effect like lithographic crayon. The lead is enclosed in soft wood painted dark green, and they cost 20 cents apiece.

Before I forget, I should like to borrow from you the issues of Harper’s magazine you have, for I want to read the articles on Holland that are illustrated by Boughton and Abbey. I shall send you a package with the old loose numbers I have containing illustrations by Howard Pyle and others, so that you can look through them at your leisure, and I shall add Erckmann-Chatrion’s *Histoire d’un Paysan*, illustrated by Schüler, as well as a few illustrations by Green, which you’ll remember I promised you. If you have some more duplicates, please send them along with the Harper’s (at least if you can spare the latter for some four days, so that I can read them), and also Zola’s little book about Manet, at least if you have finished it.

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I am distressed to hear that your health is not yet what it should be; all the same I think that making progress with your drawings will reanimate you more than those baths or whatever other tricks they may perform at Soden. I think you will long to be back in your studio as soon as you have left it. I clearly remember how terribly melancholy Mauve was on his pilgrimage to a similar kind of works – speaking with all due respect.

As you know, I am rather an infidel about such things, and I sympathize with what Bräsig, in Fritz Reuter's Dried Herbs, had to say about what this authority called "die Wasserkunst," I think.[The literal translation is "water art," but what is meant is "hydropathic tricks."]

How beautiful Fritz Reuter's work is! I think you will admire that book by Erckmann-Chatrion.

Another thing I must tell you is that the other day I got hold of a marvelous old Scheveningen woman's cape as well as a cap, but the cap is not so beautiful. And I shall also get a fisherman's jacket with a high turned-up collar and short sleeves. I am immensely eager to see your charcoal drawing; perhaps when my brother comes here – I don't know exactly when – I shall go with him to Brabant, and then, as we are passing through Utrecht, and if I can manage it, I shall look in on you; but at any rate I shall try to come to you without that, for I am very curious to see it.

As for you, try to keep your promise to come to The Hague, for you will have to come here anyway for that wedding party, you know. If my recent luck with finding models holds out, I shall certainly make some more large drawings this summer.

I should like to go on working on those I have in hand, so as to raise them to a high standard against the time my brother comes here.

In Harper's Weekly I came across a very characteristic thing after Smedley, the black figure of a man on a white sandy road. He calls it "A Generation Ago"; the figure is some kind of clergyman, and perhaps I could describe my impression of it thus – Yes, that's what my grandfather looked like. I wish I had done it. In the same issues, after Abbey, two girls standing fishing on the side of a ditch with pollard willows. Both of these things in Harper's are only sketches in a review of an exhibition.

I should like to send you sketches of my drawings, but I don't have much time to spare.

I asked permission to make drawings in the old men's and old women's almshouse here, but they refused again. Oh well, there are more almshouses in the villages near by. But here I knew some fellows that I have used as models. But I went there to have a look, and among other things I saw a little old gardener near an old twisted apple tree, very characteristic.

Well, here comes my model. Adieu, send the Harper's if you can spare them, with a handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent