

Letter 297
The Hague, c. 2 July 1883

Dear Theo,

Your letter and the enclosure were not a little welcome; the news that you are going to write a little more at length was no less welcome. I hope you will write me in detail about Les Cent Chefs-d'Oeuvre [The Hundred Masterpieces] – it must have been a good thing to have seen such a show.

And when one thinks how at the time there were a few persons whose character, intention and genius were rather suspect in the public's opinion – persons about whom the most absurd things were told, Millet, Corot, Daubigny, etc., who were thought of the way the village policeman views a stray shaggy dog, or a tramp without a passport – and time passes, and voilà “les cent chefs-d'oeuvre,” and if a hundred are not enough, then innumerable ones. And what beomes of the policeman? Very little remains of them except a number of summonses as curiosities. Yet I think the history of great men is tragic – though it's true that they did not meet only village policemen in their lives – for usually they are no longer alive when their work is publically acknowledged, and for a long time during their lives they are under a kind of depression because of the opposition and the difficulties of struggling through life. And so whenever I hear of such a public acknowledgement of the merits of such and such a one, I think the more vividly of the quiet, somewhat sombre figures of those who personally had few friends, and then, in their simplicity, I find them even greater and more tragic.

There is an etching by Legros, Carlyle in his study, which I often have in mind when I want to think of Millet, for instance, as he really was. Something like what Victor Hugo says about Aeschylus, “On tua l'homme puis on dit: élevons pour Aischylos une statue en bronze [They killed the man, then they said: Let us erect a bronze statue for Aeschylus], always comes to my mind when I hear of an exhibition of somebody's works. I care very little for “la statue de bronze,” not because I do not approve of public appreciation, but because of the thoughts about the man which accompany it: Aeschylus was simply banished, but here too the banishment was a death sentence, as it often is.

Theo, when you come to the studio someday, I shall be able to show you a collection which you certainly won't find everywhere. I can show you something which might be called the “Hundred Masterpieces” in wood engraving by modern artists. The work of men whose names are unknown even to most connoisseurs. Who knows Buckmann, who knows the two Greens, who knows Régamey's drawings? Only a very few. Seen together, one wonders at that firmness of drawing, that personal character, that serious conception and that penetration and artistic elevation of the most ordinary figures and subjects found in the streets, in the market place, in a hospital or an almshouse.

Last year I had already collected something, but what I have found since has far surpassed my expectations. When you come, you won't pay too short a visit to the studio, will you? Since I wrote you, I have worked on those potato diggers. And I started a second one on the same subject, with the single figure of an old man.

Further, I am doing a sower in a large field, with lumps of earth, which I think is better than the other sowers I tried before [F 1035, JH 374].

I have at least six more of them, solely as studies of the figure, but now I have put him into surroundings more especially like a real composition, and I have carefully studied the earth and sky besides. Then I have studies of the burning of weeds [F 1035a, JH 375], and of a man with a sack of potatoes on his back, and one with a wheelbarrow.

I think of Tersteeg's opinion that I must make watercolours; supposing I myself were wrong, and tried with all good will to change my mind, yet I cannot understand how these figures of the man with the sack, of the sower, of the old potato digger, of the wheelbarrow, of the man burning weeds, would retain their individuality if I made them in watercolour. The result would be very mediocre, the kind of mediocrity which I don't want to surrender myself to. Now there is at all events some character in them, something which – be it from afar – is in harmony with what Lhermitte, for instance, seeks.

Watercolour is not the most sympathetic means for him who particularly wants to express the boldness, the vigour, and the robustness of the figures. It is different when one seeks tone or colour exclusively, then watercolour is excellent. Now I must admit that one could make different studies of those same figures done from another point of view (namely tone and colour) and with another intention – but the question is, if my temperament and personal feeling primarily draw me toward the character, the structure, the action of the figures, can one blame me if, following this emotion, I don't express myself in watercolour, but in a drawing with only black or brown?

But there are watercolours where the outlines are very strongly expressed – for instance those by Régamey, those by Pinwell and Walker and Herkomer, which I think of very often (those by the Belgian Meunier); but even if I tried this, Tersteeg would not be satisfied with them. He would always say, “It is not saleable and saleability must come first now.”

Personally I think he means in plainer terms, “You are a mediocrity and you are arrogant because you don’t give in and you make mediocre little things: you are making yourself ridiculous with your so-called seeking, and you do not work.” That is the real meaning of what Tersteeg said to me the year before last, and last year; and he still means it.

I am afraid Tersteeg will always be for me “the everlasting no.”

That is what not only I, but almost everyone who seeks his own way, has behind or beside him as an everlasting discourager. Sometimes one is depressed by it and feels miserable and almost stunned.

But I repeat, it is the everlasting no; in the cases of men of character, on the contrary, one finds an everlasting yes, and discovers in them “la foi du charbonnier.”

But for all that, life sometimes becomes gloomy, and the future, dark, because the work costs money, so the harder one works, the deeper one gets into debt, instead of the work helping one on, so that difficulties and expense may be surmounted by working harder.

I make progress with my figures, but financially I am losing ground, and cannot keep it up.

And of late I sometimes think it would be well to move to the country, either to the seaside or to a spot where the farm labour is full of character, because I think it would help me to economize.

Here I could also do what I want if I could earn a little more and go here and there to make studies. And the advantage here is that my studio is good, and that after all one is not quite outside the world of art; one can hardly do without some intercourse, without hearing and seeing something now and then.

I sometimes think of going to England. In London they publish a new magazine of importance, equal to the London News and Graphic – the Pictorial News. Perhaps I could find work and wages there, but who can give any security?

Recently I have not asked for particulars about the woman, as I myself feel assured that you love each other, which is the main thing, for as long as one knows this one thing, there is no need to ask for particulars.

I only hope you will come soon – a year is a long time not to see each other, yet to be always thinking of each other. Now on July 1 our little chap was one year old, and he is the merriest, jolliest child you can imagine, and I think this child’s doing well and keeping her busy and occupying her thoughts are important in saving the woman herself. For the rest, I sometimes think it would be well for her to live in the country for a time, far from the city and far from the family; it would help to bring about a thorough improvement. It’s true she has improved, but her family’s influence is a bad drawback at times: I want to lead her to greater simplicity, whereas they are driving her to intrigues and duplicity.

Well, she is indeed what one may call an “enfant du siècle,” and her character has been so much influenced by circumstances that she will always show the consequences in the form of a certain discouragement and indifference, and want of a firm faith in something or other. Often, often I have thought it would be good for her to live in the country. But moving also brings a lot of expenses. And then I should want to be married before I moved if I went either to the country or to London.

I do miss the necessary intercourse with other people here, and I don’t see any chance of improving this.

After all, every place is alike to me, and I want to move as little as possible.

As soon as you have decided anything about your coming – do write me. I am in doubt about several things of late, and it makes me rather nervous and that will remain so till we have seen each other and spoken about the future.

Recently I have read articles by Boughton on Holland. They were the text accompanying illustrations by himself and Abbey, splendid things some of them. One thing I noted especially – a description of the isle of Marken – written in such a manner that I should like to go there, and who knows what a good thing it might prove to be if one settled someplace which was very picturesque.

But in such a case one must have at least one point of contact with the art world, for of course the fishing population hasn’t the slightest notion of it, and one must have enough to live on.

Don’t forget to write the promised letter about Les Cent Chefs-d’Oeuvre, and if you are very lucky in business, and could send me something extra, it would be very welcome.

As to living in the country – I love nature, yet there are many things that tie me to the city, especially the magazines, the possibility of reproduction.

Not to see any locomotives would mean no hardship for me, but never to see a printing press would be hard. Adieu, boy, with a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

I have been reading Mes Haines by Zola; there are good things in it, though I think he makes great mistakes – he doesn't even mention Millet in his general survey. The following is quite true: "Observez que ce qui plaît au public est toujours ce qu'il y a de plus banal, ce qu'on a costume de voir chaque année, on est habitué à de telles fadeurs, à des mensonges si jolis, qu'on refuse de toute sa puissance les vérités fortes." [Note that what pleases the public is always utterly banal, just what they are accustomed to seeing every year; they have got used to such insipidities, to such pretty lies that they repudiate vigorous truths with all their might.]