

My dear Theo,

I had been more or less on the lookout for your letter and was very pleased when it came. Many thanks for it.

What you write about the exhibition is very interesting. Which old painting by Dupré was it that you particularly liked so much? You must tell me when you next write. Your description of the Troyon and the Rousseau, for instance, has enough substance for me to get a fair idea of the way in which they are done.

There are other pictures from about the time of Troyon's Pré Communal that had the sort of atmosphere one might call dramatic, although there are no figures in them. Israël's got it quite right when he said of a Jules Dupré (Mesdag's large one), "It is like a figure-painting," and it is this dramatic effect that lends the *je ne sais quoi* which makes one feel what you say about it: "It conveys that moment and that place in nature to which one can repair alone, without company." Ruysdael's "Buisson" has it very strongly as well.

You must have seen those old Jacques in which it was slightly exaggerated, perhaps done slightly for effect – no, not really – which one used to admire for that very reason, even though the ordinary man in the street didn't rate them among Jacques's finest.

Speaking of Rousseau, do you know the Richard Wallace Rousseau, a *lisière de bois* [edge of a wood] in autumn after the rain, a glimpse of meadows stretching endlessly into the distance, marshy, with cattle, the foreground very much in tone. To me that is one of the finest – very much like the one of the red sun in the Luxembourg. The dramatic effect in those paintings is something that, more than anything else in art, makes one understand "*une coin de la nature vu à travers d'un temperament*" [a corner of nature viewed through (the medium of) a temperament] and *l'homme ajouté à la nature* [man added to nature]. One finds the same thing in, say, portraits by Rembrandt. It is more than nature, something of a revelation. And it seems to me that it is as well to have great respect for it and to hold one's tongue when, as so often, people say it is exaggerated or mannered.

Oh, I must tell you that De Bock has been to see me – rather enjoyable. Breitner, who was totally unexpected because he seemed to have broken contact completely at one time, turned up yesterday. I was pleased, because – when I first moved here – it used to be very agreeable going out with him. I don't mean going out into the country but going out to look for characters and enjoyable experiences in the city itself. There isn't another person here in The Hague with whom I have ever done this, most find the city ugly and give everything in it a miss. And yet the city can be very beautiful at times, too, don't you agree?

Yesterday, for instance, I saw workmen in the Noordeinde busy pulling down the section opposite the palace. Men all white with plaster dust, with carts and horses. It was chilly, windy weather, a grey sky, the whole place full of character.

I met Van der Velden last year – one evening at De Bock's when we were looking at De B.'s etchings. I wrote to you then that he made a very favorable impression on me, although he had little to say and wasn't very good company that evening. But the immediate impression he made on me was that he is a solid, genuine painter. He has a square, Gothic head, – a touch of insolence or boldness and yet gentleness in his look, a sturdy, broad build, in fact the exact opposite of Breitner and De Bock. There is something virile and powerful about him, even though he doesn't say or do anything in particular. I hope to have closer contacts with him one day – perhaps through Van der Weele.

I was at Van der Weele's last Sunday. He was working on a picture of cattle in the milking-yard, for which he's done a number of substantial studies. He is going to the country now for a while.

By way of a change I did a few watercolours again in the countryside recently, a little cornfield and a bit of a potato field. And I have also drawn a few small landscapes as settings for a couple of figure drawings I am hoping to do. These are the designs for those figure drawings, very sketchy. The top one is of people burning weeds, the bottom one shows the return from the potato fields. I am seriously thinking of painting a number of figure studies, chiefly with a view to working up the drawings.

What happy news that you plan to come to Holland at the beginning of August; as I've told you often enough, I look forward to seeing you very much.

I'm eager to hear from you how well up your woman is in artistic matters. I imagine in any case that much still remains to be done and encouraged in that direction. *Tant mieux*. In any case, I hope she will acquire some sort of scrapbook, for which I hope you will be able to find a few sheets from among the smaller studies. Sometimes there are sheets in a sketchbook which, although they are mere scribbles, nevertheless have something to say. I shall put a few things aside against her arrival.

I have talked it over with De Bock and I can store my things at his house when I do my studies in Scheveningen. I also hope to call on Blommers again in the near future. I spoke to De Bock about his painting at the Salon, "November,"

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the reproduction of which I admired so much in the catalogue. He must still have a sketch of it, and I should like to see that.

As for my going to London sooner or later, for a shorter or longer period, I agree there would be a better chance of doing something with my work over there. I also think that I could learn quite a lot if I could meet some of the people there. And I assure you I would not be short of subjects. There are bound to be beautiful things to do there at those dockyards on the Thames!

Anyway, there are several matters we must talk over when you come. I hope you won't be in too much of a hurry, there is so much we should discuss.

I really wish I could go to Brabant again in the autumn and do some studies there. I should particularly like to have some studies of a Brabant plough, of a weaver and of the village churchyard at Nuenen. But again, everything costs money.

Well, regards, and many thanks again for your letter and the enclosure. Look after yourself. Are you thinking of bringing your woman along to Holland or isn't that advisable yet? I wish you would.

Goodbye, my dear fellow, with a handshake,

Ever yours,

Vincent

I am adding a few lines to tell you some more about Breitner – I have just returned from his temporary studio here (as you know, he lives in Rotterdam at present). You no doubt know Vierge, or Urabietta, who draws for L'Illustration? Well, at times Breitner reminds me of Vierge, though not very often.

When he is good, his work looks like something done in a hurry by Vierge, but when he, that is B., does work that is too hurried or unfinished, which is what happens most of the time, then it is hard to say what it looks like, because it doesn't look like anything – unless it is strips of faded old wallpaper from I don't know what period, but anyway a most peculiar and probably very distant one. Just picture the scene, as I step into his garret at Siebenhaar's. It has been furnished in the main with various (empty) matchboxes, and for the rest with a razor or the like and a box with a bed in it. I could see things standing against the chimney, 3 endlessly long strips, which I took at first for sun blinds. But on closer inspection they turned out to be canvases

in this format:

As you see from the above illustration, the first one is a somewhat mystical scene, probably taken from Revelation, or so one might be inclined to think at first. But I am told it is artillery manoeuvres in the dunes. My considered opinion is that it is a good 4 meters long by $\frac{3}{4}$ meter broad.

The second one tells the story of a man leaning against a wall at the extreme left of the painting; while at the extreme right various ghostly female specimens stand gaping at him, care having been taken to leave a fair amount of space between these two groups. And I was also told that the man on the left was meant to represent a drunkard, which might well have been the painter's intention, and I have no wish to call that into question, though it could have been anything else.

The third one is almost better, and is a sketch of the market place he did last year, which seems, however, to have changed since then to represent a Spanish rather than a Dutch market, at least in so far as anything can be made out in it at all. What sort of wares are being sold in that market, where it may be – I, for my part, doubt it is meant to be on this globe, and to the naive spectator it would seem rather to represent a scene on one of the planets that Jules Verne's miraculous travellers were in the habit of visiting (by projectile). It is impossible to be specific about the sort of wares actually being sold, though seen from afar it could be enormous quantities of candied fruit or sweetmeats.

Now, you try to imagine something like that, but on ne peut plus absurd [as absurd as can be] and heavy-handed to boot, and you have the work of friend Breitner. From a distance it looks like patches of faded colour on a bleached, mouldering and mildewy wallpaper and in that respect it has some qualities, which to me are none the less positively objectionable.

I simply fail to comprehend how it is possible for anyone to produce such things. They are like something seen in a fever, impossible and meaningless as in the most preposterous dream.

I think it just shows that Breitner hasn't yet fully recovered and that he actually did do it while he was feverish, which in view of his illness last year is quite on the cards.

Last year, when I had recovered but couldn't sleep and was feverish myself, I too had moments when I felt like forcing myself to do some work, and I did do a few things, but thank God not too absurdly large, which later I couldn't believe I had done. That's why I believe B. will be all right again, but I do find this stuff ridiculous.

A watercolour study of some small birch trees in the dunes, which was much better and had nothing abnormal about it, lay crumpled in a corner. But his large things are no good.

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At Van der Weele's I saw another very ugly one by him, as well as a very good head, but a portrait of Van der Weele he had started was another bad one. Thus he is hard at it making a fine old mess and on a very large scale. I do at times like the work of Hoffmann and Edgar Poe (the Fantastic Tales, Raven, etc.) but I find Breitner's stuff objectionable because the imagination behind it is clumsy and meaningless and has virtually no contact with reality. I think it's terribly ugly. But I look on it as the result of a spell of ill-health. Van der Weele also has two rather curious little watercolours of his, stylishly done, which have a touch, a certain *je ne sais quoi*, of what the English call "weird."

I learned a lesson today thanks to that visit, namely that one is fortunate indeed if in present-day society one can live in fairly normal surroundings and has no need to resort to a coffee-house existence – from which one starts to see things through a growing fog of confusion. For I have no doubt that this is what happened to him. Imperceptibly he has strayed far from a composed and rational view of things, and so long as this nervous exhaustion persists he will be unable to produce a single composed, sensible line or brushstroke.

I wish I could provide him with some company and diversion, I wish I could share his ups and downs more often and perhaps cultivate his friendship a bit more. Do you remember the painting *La folie d'Hugues v. d. Goes*, by Wauters? In some respects Breitner reminds me a little of v. d. Goes's mental state. I don't want to be the first here to say so, but I believe that people have been talking along these lines about his work for quite some time now.

The cure for him would be to take a good long look at some potato plants, which have lately had such a deep and distinctive colour and tone, instead of driving himself mad looking at pieces of yellow satin and bits of gold leather. Well, we shall have to wait and see. He is intelligent enough, but he persists *quand même* [all the same] with a sort of eccentric *parti pris* [prejudice]. If he were merely departing from normality with a rational motive, well and good, but with him it is also a question of no longer taking trouble with his work. I think it is a very bad business and just hope he will come out of it all right, but he has badly lost his way.

Well, I shall be making a start in Scheveningen this week. I could have done with a little extra to buy some painting material.

I am going to have a few drawings photographed in cabinet size [6.5 x 4.5 inches] or a little larger (to see how they will look on a smaller scale) by a photographer who has taken photographs of drawings by Ter Meulen, Duchâtel and Zilcken. He does it for 75 cents, which isn't expensive, is it? I shall have him do "The Sower" and "The Peat Cutters" for now, the one with a lot of small figures, the other with 1 large figure. And if those come off, then if I should later have any drawings I shall be able to send you photographs of them, which you could show to, say, Buhot, to see if he thinks he can find buyers. They could reproduce those they want from the actual drawings, or else I could copy them onto their paper.

Regards once again, Theo, all the best. Write again soon. I am having those photographs done because we must keep going after Buhot & C^{ie}, I must earn a bit of money so that I can start something new and also do some painting, as I am just in the mood for it now.

Mauve has fallen out not just with me but also, to name but one other, with Zilcken. The other day I saw Zilcken's etchings and just now at the photographer's I saw photographs of Zilcken's drawings. Leaving myself out of it, I must say that, going by those, it is beyond me what Mauve has against Zilcken. His drawings were good, not bad at all. It's just capriciousness on Mauve's part.

After all, I don't think it's very nice of C. M. never to have sent one syllable in answer to my letter, when I took the trouble to enclose two sketches of the drawings in question.

Nor do I think it nice of H. G. T., now that I, for my part, have tried to thaw the ice between us, not to come to see me. It's stuff and nonsense to say he's busy, for that isn't the reason, he could easily find the time to come round once a year.

I am adding another half-page to say something about Brabant. Among the figures I've done of working types there are several with what many would call a distinctly old-fashioned character, even in conception, for instance a digger who looks more like those one occasionally comes across on the carved wooden bas-reliefs of Gothic church pews than on a modern drawing. I think of the Brabant figures very often because I find them particularly appealing. What I should tremendously like to do, and what I feel I could do, too, on the understanding that circumstances made patient posing possible, is the small figure of Father on a path across the heath; the figure rigorously drawn, with character, and as I have said, on a stretch of brown heathland crossed by a narrow white sandy path and a sky applied and suggested with just a touch of passion. In addition, Father and Mother arm in arm, let's say – in autumnal surroundings – or against a small beech hedgerow with withered leaves. I should also like to use Father's figure when I do a peasant funeral, which I fully intend to try, although it won't be easy.

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Leaving aside less relevant differences in religious opinion, the figure of a poor village clergyman is for me, in type and character, one of the most sympathetic there is, and I would not be who I am if I didn't tackle it some day.

When you come, I should very much like to consult you about arrangements for a trip there. When you see my drawings of orphan men, for instance, you will understand what I want and how I intend to set about it.

I want to do a drawing that not quite everybody will understand, the figure simplified to the essentials, with a deliberate disregard of those details that do not belong to the actual character and are merely accidental. That is, it mustn't be, say, a portrait of Father, but rather depict the type of a poor village clergyman on his way to visit the sick. Similarly, the couple arm in arm by the beech hedge will be a typical husband-and-wife who have grown old together in love and fidelity, rather than portraits of Father and Mother, although I hope that they will pose for it. But they will have to understand that it is a serious matter, which they might perhaps not realize if the likeness isn't exact. And so they will have to be gently warned that if it comes off, they will have to adopt the pose I choose and not change it. Anyhow, it should turn out all right, and I don't work so slowly that it need be a big effort for them. And I for my part should set great store by doing it.

The simplification of figures is something that greatly preoccupies me. Anyway, you will see it for yourself in the figures I'll be showing you. Should I go to Brabant, then I don't think it should be some sort of an outing or a pleasure trip, but a short period of very hard work done at lightning speed.

Speaking of expression in a figure, I am increasingly coming round to the idea that it lies less in the features than in the whole tournure [bearing]. There are few things I detest more than most of the academic têtes d'expression [facial expressions] – I would sooner look at Michelangelo's Night or a drunkard by Daumier or Millet's diggers and that well-known big woodcut of his, "The Shepherdess" – or an old horse by Mauve, etc.