

Dear friend Rappard,

Many thanks for your letter, which I was pleased to get. I was very glad to hear that you saw something in my drawings.

I shan't enter into generalities concerning technique, but I certainly foresee that as I gain more of what I shall call expressive force, people will say not less but even more than they do now that I have no technique. Hence I absolutely agree with you that what I am saying in my present work will have to be said more forcefully, and I am working hard to strengthen that aspect, but – that the general public will understand me better when I do – no.

That doesn't alter the fact that, in my view, the reasoning of the artless fellow who asked of your work, "Does he paint for money?" is the reasoning of a bloody idiot, since this intelligent creature evidently considers it axiomatic that originality prevents one from making money with one's work. Trying to pass this off as an axiom, because it can decidedly not be proved as a proposition, is, as I said, a common trick of bloody idiots and idle little Jesuits.

Do you really think I don't care about technique or that I don't try for it? Oh, but I do, although only inasmuch as it allows me to say what I want to say (and if I cannot do that yet, or not yet perfectly, I am working hard to improve), but I don't give a damn whether my language matches that of the rhetoricians (you remember making the comparison: if someone had something useful, true and necessary to say but said it in terms that were hard to understand, what good would that be to the speaker or to his audience?).

Let me just hold on to this point – the more so as I have often come across a rather peculiar historical phenomenon. Don't misunderstand me: it goes without saying that one must speak in the mother tongue of one's audience, if that audience knows one language only, and it would be absurd not to take that for granted. But now for the second part of the question. Suppose a man has something to say and says it in a language in which his audience, too, is at home. Time and again we shall find that the speaker of truth lacks oratorical style and does not appeal to the greater part of his audience, indeed, is scorned as a man "slow of tongue" and despised as such. He can count himself lucky if he can edify just one, or at best a very few, with what he says, because those few are not interested in oratorical tirades, but positively listen out for the true, useful, necessary content of the words, which enlighten them, broaden their minds, make them freer or more intelligent.

And now for the painters – is it the object and the "non plus ultra" of art to produce those peculiar smudges of colour, that waywardness in the drawing – that are known as the refinement of technique? Certainly not. Take a Corot, a Daubigny, a Dupré, a Millet or an Israëls – men who are certainly the great forerunners – well, their work goes beyond the paint, standing out from that of the fashionable crowd as much as an oratorical tirade by, say, a Numa Roumestan differs from a prayer or a good poem.

So the reason why one must work on one's technique is simply to express better, more accurately, more profoundly what one feels, and the less verbiage the better. As for the rest, one need not bother with it.

Why I say this is because I think I have noticed that you sometimes disapprove of things in your own work which in my opinion are rather good. In my view, your technique is better than, say, Haverman's, because your brushstroke often has an individual, distinctive, reasoned and deliberate touch, while what one invariably gets with Haverman is convention, redolent at all times of the studio, and never of nature.

For instance, those sketches of yours I saw, the little weaver and the Terschelling women, appeal to me, they are a stab at the core of things. All I get with Haverman is a feeling of malaise and boredom, little else.

I am afraid that you – and I congratulate you on it – are going to hear the same remarks about your technique in the future as well, and about your subjects and . . . about everything, in fact, even when that brushstroke of yours, which has so much character already, acquires still more of it. Yet there are art lovers who, après tout, appreciate most what has been painted with emotion. Although we no longer live in the days of Thoré and Théophile Gautier, alas.

Just consider whether it is sensible to talk a great deal about technique nowadays. You will say that I myself am doing just that – as a matter of fact, I regret it. But as far as I am concerned, I am determined, even when I shall be much more master of my brush than I am now – to go on telling people methodically that I cannot paint. Do you understand? Even when I have achieved a solid manner of my own, more complete and concise than the present one.

I liked what Herkomer said when he opened up his own art school to a number of people who already knew how to paint – he urged his students to be kind enough not to paint the way he did but in their own way. "My aim," he said, "is to set original forms free, not to recruit disciples for Herkomer's doctrine." Entre lions on ne singe pas. [Lions do not ape one another.]

Anyway, I've been painting quite a bit lately, a seated girl winding shuttles for the weavers and a weaver on his own. I'm rather anxious that you should see my painted studies one of these days – not because I'm satisfied with them but because I think they'll convince you that I really am keeping my hand in, and that when I say that

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I set relatively little store by technique, it's not because I'm trying to save myself trouble or to avoid problems, for that is not my way.

Apart from that, I am looking forward to your getting to know this corner of Brabant some day – in my opinion it is much more beautiful than the Breda side.

These last few days it has been delightful. There is a village here, Son en Breughel, which bears an amazing resemblance to Courrières, where the Bretons live – though the figures are even more beautiful over there. As one's love for the form grows, one may well come to dislike the "Dutch national costume," as it's called in the photograph albums they sell to foreigners.

I detest writing or talking about technique in general, Rappard – though I may occasionally get the urge none the less to discuss how to execute some idea or other of mine, be it with you or with someone else, and I never make light of the practical value of such discussions. But that doesn't gainsay my first thought – which I may not have expressed properly.

That thought, I can't find the right words, is based not on something negative but on something positive. On the positive awareness that art is something greater and higher than our own skill or knowledge or learning. That art is something which, though produced by human hands, is not wrought by hands alone, but wells up from a deeper source, from man's soul, while much of the proficiency and technical expertise associated with art reminds me of what would be called self-righteousness in religion.

My strongest sympathies in the literary as well as in the artistic field are with those artists in whom I see the soul at work most strongly – Israëls, for example, is clever as a technician, but so is Vollon – but I like Israëls more than Vollon because I see something more in Israëls, something quite different from the masterly reproduction of the materials, something quite different from light and brown, something quite different from the colour – yet that something quite different is achieved by the precise rendering of the light effect, the material, the colour.

This something different of which I find so much more in Israëls than in Vollon is pronounced in Eliot, and Dickens has it as well. Does it lie in their choice of subjects? No, for that, too, is only an effect.

What I am driving at, among other things, is that while Eliot is masterly in her execution, above and beyond that she also has a genius all of her own, about which I would say, perhaps one improves through reading those books, or perhaps these books have the power to make one sit up and take notice.

In spite of myself I keep writing about exhibitions, though actually I give them precious little thought. Now that by chance I do happen to be thinking about them, I am examining my thoughts with some surprise. I should not be expressing them fully enough if I didn't add that in some pictures there is something so thoroughly honest and good that no matter what is done with them – whether they end up in good or in bad, in honest or dishonest hands – something good emanates from them. "Let your light shine before men," is, I believe, the duty of every painter, but in my view does not mean that letting the light shine before men must be done through exhibitions. Believe me, I just wish there were more and better opportunities than exhibitions to bring art to the people. Far from wanting to hide the light under a bushel, I would sooner let it be seen. Well, enough of this.

I have recently been reading Eliot's Felix Holt, the Radical. This book has been very well translated into Dutch. I hope you know it. If you don't, see if you can get hold of it. It somewhere contains certain views of life that I find outstandingly good – profound things expressed in a droll way. It is a book written with great verve, and various scenes are described as Frank Holl or someone similar might have drawn them. The way of thinking and the outlook are similar. There are not many writers as utterly sincere and good as Eliot. This book, The Radical, is not as well known in Holland as, say, her Adam Bede, and her Scenes from Clerical Life are not all that well known either – more's the pity, much as it's a great pity that not everyone knows Israëls's work.

I am enclosing a little booklet on Corot, which I believe you will read with pleasure if you don't know it already. It contains a number of accurate biographical details. I saw the exhibition at the time for which this is the catalogue.

It's remarkable, I think, that this man should have taken so long to settle down and mature. Just look what he did at different periods of his life. I saw things in the first of his real contributions – the result of years of study – that were as honest as the day is long, thoroughly sound – but how people must have despised them! For me Corot's studies were a lesson when I saw them, and I was even then struck by the difference between them and the studies of many other landscape painters. I would compare your little country churchyard with them, if I didn't find more technique in it than in Corot's studies. The sentiment is identical, an endeavour to render only what is intimate and essential.

The gist of what I am saying in this letter is this. Let us try to grasp the secrets of technique so well that people will be taken in and swear by all that is holy that we have no technique. Let our work be so savant [skillful] that it seems naive and does not reek of our cleverness. I do not believe that I have reached this desirable point, and I do not believe that even you, who are more advanced than I, have reached it yet.

I hope you'll see something more than verbal nitpicking in this letter.

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I believe that the more contact one has with nature herself the more deeply one delves into her, the less attracted one is by all the trucs d'atelier [studio tricks] and yet I do want to give them their due and watch them painting. I often look forward to visiting studios myself.

Niet in boeken heb ik het gevonden
En van "geleerden" – och, weinig geleerd.
[Not in books have I found it
And from the "learned," ah, but little have I learned]

says De Genestet, as you know. By way of a variation one might say,

Niet in 't atelier heb ik gevonden
En van de schilders/de kenners – och, weinig geleerd.
[Not in the studio have I found it,
and from painters/connoisseurs, ah, but little have I learned.]

Perhaps you are shocked to find me putting in painters or connoisseurs indiscriminately.

But to change the subject, it is fiendishly difficult not to feel anything, not to be affected when those bloody idiots say "does he paint for money?" One hears that drivel day in, day out, and one gets angry with oneself later for having taken it to heart. That's how it is with me – and I think it must be much the same with you. One doesn't really care a rap, but it gets on one's nerves all the same, just like listening to off-key singing or being pursued by a malicious barrel organ. Don't you find that to be true of the barrel organ, and that it always seems to have picked on you in particular? For wherever one goes, it's the same old tune.

As for me, I'm going to do what I tell you: when people say something or other to me, I shall finish their sentences even before they are out – in the same way as I treat someone I know to be in the habit of extending his finger to me instead of his hand (I tried the trick on a venerable colleague of my father's yesterday) – I too have a single finger ready and, with an absolutely straight face, carefully touch his with it when we shake hands, in such a way that the man cannot take exception, yet realizes that I am giving as good as I damned well got. The other day I put a fellow's back up with something similar. Does one lose anything as a result? No, for to be sure, such people are sent to try us, and when I write to you about certain expressions of yours I do so only in order to ask you: are you certain that those who are so loud in their praises of technique are de bonne foi? [of good faith] I'm only asking because I know that your aim is to avoid studio chic.