

Letter 370
Nuenen, early June 1884

Dear Theo,

I still think of your pleasant visit very often, which I hope will soon be repeated, and then for a somewhat longer time.

Since you were here, I have been working hard on the figure of a woman spinning [F 1139, JH 1884], of which I enclose a sketch.

It is fairly large sized, and painted in a dark tone; the figure is dressed in blue, with a mouse-coloured shawl.

I hope to make another one, of an old man at the spooling wheel, near a little window, of which you perhaps remember a small study.

I should be very glad to receive the measures of your frames soon, then I should be able to get going.

Perhaps if the measure fits, I shall make a small one of that woman spinning.

I just copy for you the following passage from *Les artistes de mon temps* by Ch. Blanc.

Trois mois environ avant la mort d'Eug. Delacroix, nous le rencontrâmes dans les galeries du palais Royal, sur les dix heures du soir, Paul Chenavard et moi. C'était au sortir d'un grand diner où l'on avait agité des questions d'art, et la conversation s'était prolongée entre nous deux sur le même sujet, avec cette vivacité, cette chaleur, que l'on met surtout aux discussions inutiles. Nous en étions à la couleur, et je disais:

"Pour moi les grands colouristes sont ceux, qui ne font pas le ton local," et j'allais développer mon thème, lorsque nous aperçûmes Eugène Delacroix dans la galerie de la Rotonde.

Il vint à nous en s'écriant: je suis sûr qu'ils parlent peinture. En effet, lui dis-je, j'étais sur le point de soutenir une proposition qui n'est pas, je crois, un paradoxe, et dont vous êtes en tout cas meilleur juge que personne; je disais que les grands colouristes ne font pas le ton local, et avec vous je n'ai pas besoin sans doute d'aller plus loin.

Eugène Delacroix fit deux pas en arrière, selon son habitude en clignant les yeux: "Cela est parfaitement vrai," dit-il, "voilà un ton par exemple (il montrait du doigt le ton gris et sale du pavé), eh bien, si l'on disait à Paul Veronèse: peignez-moi une belle femme blonde dont la chair soit de ce ton-là; il la peindrait, et la femme serait une blonde dans son tableau."

[About three months before his death, Paul Chenavard and I met Eug. Delacroix in the Palais Royal galleries, about ten o'clock in the evening. It was after a big dinner, during which questions of art had been debated, and the conversation on the subject had been prolonged between us, with the liveliness and warmth which people tend to do in useless discussions. We were talking about colour, and I said:

"For me, the great colourists are those who don't paint local colour," and I was getting ready to enlarge on my theme, when we caught sight of Eugène Delacroix in the Rotonde gallery.

He came toward us, crying: I'm sure you are talking about painting. In effect, I told him. I was at the point of defending a proposition which is not, I think, a paradox, and of which you are a better judge than anyone; I said that the great colourists don't paint local colour, and with you I don't need to go any further.

Eugène Delacroix took two steps backwards, as was his habit, and blinking his eyes: "That is perfectly true," he said, "there is a tone, for instance (he pointed his finger to a grey and dirty tone of the pavement), very well, if one said to Paul Veronese: paint me a beautiful blonde woman whose flesh has that tone, he would paint her, and the woman would be a blonde in his painting."]

As to drab colour, in my opinion, one must not judge the colours of a painting separately; a drab colour, for instance, next to a strong brownish-red, a dark blue or olive-green may express the very delicate, fresh green of a meadow or a little cornfield.

And yet I believe De Bock, who baptized certain colours "drab colours," certainly would not contradict this – for I myself heard him say once that in some pictures by Corot, for instance in evening skies, there are colours which are very luminous in the picture and, considered separately, are in fact of a rather dark, greyish tone.

Father and Mother will write you soon and thank you for your letter.

But to revert to that question of painting an evening sky, or a blonde woman with a drab colour like the grey of the pavement, if one considers it well, that question has a double meaning.

In the first place:

A dark colour may seem light, or rather give that effect; this is in fact more a question of tone. But then, as regards the real colour, a reddish-grey, hardly red at all, will appear more or less red according to the colours next to it.

And it is the same with blue and yellow.

One has to put but a very little yellow into a colour to make it seem very yellow if one puts that colour in or next to a violet or a lilac tone.

I remember how somebody tried to paint a red roof, on which the light was falling, by means of vermilion and chrome, etc.! That didn't work.

Jaap Maris did it in many a watercolour, by putting a very little highlight of red-ochre on a colour that was reddish. And it expressed the sunlight on the red roofs perfectly.

As soon as I have time, I shall copy another part of that article on Delacroix, about the laws which always remain true for colours. I sometimes think that when people speak about colour, they really mean tone.

And perhaps at present there are more tonists than colourists.

This is not the same, though they may easily go together.

I quite agree with you that nowadays it is often very hard to satisfy the need to talk with people who know how to give advice and from whom one learns and gets light without their playing the schoolmaster, or without their using nothing but big empty words, which are, after all, banalities or platitudes.

Well, but nature is a thing about which one can learn a great deal. Goodbye, please don't forget the rabbit measure of your frames. Believe me,

Yours, Vincent