

Letter 396
Nuenen, mid March 1885

Dear Theo,

Some of the heads I promised you are finished, but they are not quite dry yet. As I wrote you already, they were painted in a dark cottage, and they are studies in the real sense of the word. I already began to send you studies of drawings long ago.

I did not intend to stop doing so.

I work hard, and suppose that only one out of ten or twenty studies I make is worth seeing; though those few, either more or less in number, may be of no value now, they may be later on, perhaps.

Not so much taken separately as in connection with other studies.

However it may be – I will try it once more, so as soon as they are quite dry, and I can varnish them, I'll send you some heads and also a little sketch of a woman spooling yarn.

And that needn't be all – seeing that I have applied myself almost exclusively to painting for more than a full year, I dare claim these to be somewhat different from the first painted studies I sent you.

When I see, as I did recently, something like those splendid woodcuts by Lhermitte, I know very well that I am still far from doing such a thing myself. But seeing his work encourages me as to my views and working method, namely always directly from nature or in the squalid, smoke-blackened cottage. For I see (for instance, from details in heads, in hands) how artists like Lhermitte must have studied the peasant figure, not only from a fairly great distance, but from very close by, not now when they create and compose with ease and assurance, but before they could do so.

“On croit que j’imagine – ce n’est pas vrai – je me souviens,” said one who could compose with a master hand.

Now as for me, I cannot yet show a single picture, hardly a single drawing yet. But I do make studies, and that's just why I can very well imagine that the time might come when I shall also be able to compose easily. And, moreover, it is hard to say where the study ends and the picture begins.

I am brooding over a couple of larger, more elaborate things, and if I should happen to get a clear idea of how to reproduce the effects I have in mind, in that case I should keep the studies in question here for the time being, because then I should certainly need them – it would be, for instance, something like this: namely figures against the light of a window.

I have studies of heads for it, against the light as well as turned toward the light, and I have worked several times already on the complete figure; spooling yarn, sewing, or peeling potatoes. Full face and in profile, it is a difficult effect.

But I think I have learned a few things from it.

Goodbye, I couldn't put off writing to you again.

Ever yours, Vincent