

Letter 408
Nuenen, c. 11 May 1885

Dear Theo,

Many thanks for your letter and for the enclosed 50 francs, which were particularly welcome this month because of the moving. I think that in the long run I shall gain a lot of time by living in the studio, as I can set to work, for instance, immediately after getting up, whereas at home it was such that I could not do anything.

These last days I have been working hard on drawings.

They are busy pulling down the old tower in the fields. So there was an auction of lumber and slates and old iron, including the cross.

I have finished a watercolour of it [F 1230, JH 770], in the style of the lumber auction, but better I think; I also had another large watercolour of the churchyard, but so far it has been a failure.

Yet I have it well in my head, i.e. what I want to express – and perhaps I shall get what I mean onto the third sheet of paper. And if not, then not. I have just sponged out the two failures, but I am going to try again.

If you like, you can have the one of the auction.

Then I'm working on a large study of a cottage by night [F 083, JH 777]. And about six heads. All this was the reason for my not having answered your letter yet.

I am working as hard as I can, because I'm thinking of going to the Antwerp exhibition with that friend of mine in Eindhoven, if I can manage it. And then I should like to take some work with me to show thee if possible.

I am anxious to hear if Portier has seen the potato eaters. What you say of the figure is true, that as figure studies they are not what the heads are. That's why I've thought of trying it in quite a different way, for instance, starting with the torso instead of the head.

But then it would have become quite different. As to the way they sit, however, don't forget those people do not sit on chairs like those in Café Duval, for instance.

The finest thing I saw was when the woman was simply kneeling down, that's in the first sketch I sent you. Well, now it's painted the way it is, and we will try it again someday and then certainly not in the same way.

I am also very busy these days, drawing figures.

Thanks also for the copy of *Le Temps* you sent, with the article about the Salon by Paul Mantz.

I haven't read such a good article in a long time.

I think it very good – the beginning – the picture of those Laplanders, who, after the long winter's night, see the sun rise from their dark hut – how in art they are also waiting for light.

Then immediately after, his pointing to Millet, who has decidedly given new light – “et qui restera.”

Then his pointing out Lhermitte as Millet's successor. I think it all manly language, and perfectly correct, and broadly observed.

But I think it a pity that he calls Roll a “commençant” [beginner], for that means slighting him, and Roll has already made so many beautiful things and is “hors ligne.”

At least his “Grève de Mineurs” [Miner's Strike] is already “hors ligne.” When Paul Mantz says that Roll's labourers do not work hard, and that it is “un rêve” [a dream], well – it is prettily said, and there is some truth in it. But, after all, Roll is right, because it is Paris and not the sober work of the field.

A workman in the city is after all exactly the way Roll paints him.

Rappard has a picture at Antwerp which I think must be very fine, at least in my opinion the sketch, which hardly anybody approved of, was very good. I think him very clever.

Have you finished Zola's *Germinal*? I should love to read it, and shall send it back within a fortnight. Has Lhermitte's “May” already appeared?

In Mantz's article, I also think very good and logical what he says in a very few words about colour, when he speaks of, “des bleus cenrés, que nous aimons” [the ashy blues, which we love], and “les herbes de la prairie sont très vertes, le taureau est brun roux, la jeune fille est rose, voilà l'accord de 3 tons –” [the grass of the meadow is very green, the bull is brown-red, the young girl is pink, there you have the harmony of 3 tones –] when he discusses that same question with respect to Lhermitte.

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

I can imagine Besnard must be interesting.

I don't know whether you noticed that there is a very short remark about "enthusiasm" in Mantz's articles and how there is also something about "le grain de folie qui est le meilleur de l'art." [the grain of madness that is the best of art.]

I know you wrote, "He may be more of an enthusiast than a merchant, which is better perhaps."

Coming from you, this expression is mild enough.

I myself, however, think that enthusiasm is not at all incompatible with being a dealer. And I simply remind you of Mouret and Bourdoncle. Mantz also gives a few words to "cette maladie qu'on appelle sagesse" [that disease which they call wisdom], and hits the nail on the head.

What shall I say? – the future and experience will someday repeat what I cannot find the right words for. I mean that enthusiasm sometimes calculates even better than those cool heads which reckon themselves "above such things." And instinct, inspiration, impulse, and conscience are better guides than many people think. And however that may be, I for one agree with the saying, "Mieux vaut crever de passion, que crever d'ennui." [It is better to die of passion than to die of boredom.]

How singular it is that I still cannot look upon your present views as final.

This week the document bearing on the inheritance arrived. I abided by what I had said at first – Mother seems to want it transferred in her own name, but I cannot help that – I have abided by what I said. I hear a lady is going to be taken in as a boarder – you will understand that it is not pleasant for them if I come too often, nor is it pleasant for me to go there very often. An occasional visit, once in a while, is sufficient. I think them – I know, contrary to your opinion and contrary to theirs – I think those at home very, very far from sincere, and moreover, seeing that there are lots of other things I object to on what I consider sufficient grounds, I look upon Father's death and the inheritance as a matter I can withdraw from in all tranquillity, as I foresee that the character of the three sisters (all three of them) will not improve with time, but on the contrary, will get worse, and at any rate, just now it is utterly unsympathetic to me. Do you remember how sympathetically I wrote about Wil during Mother's illness? Well, it was just a short-lived freak – and it is frozen up again. Have you read L'évangéliste by Daudet? If so, you will find in it better words to express what I mean than mine.

I see quite well that you do your best to conciliate us, but, my dear fellow, after all I wish them no harm, do I? – and likewise I do them no harm. However, I don't want to exert any influence on them, as in the first place they themselves would not understand it, and in the second place they would be unwilling to understand it.

The old tower will be pulled down next week! The spire has already gone. I'm working on a picture of it [F 084, JH 772]. In these new drawings I have been starting the figures from the torso, and it seems to me that they become fuller and broader this way. If fifty are not enough, I shall draw a hundred, and if that is still not enough, even more, till I have exactly what I want, namely that everything is round and that thee is, so to speak, neither beginning nor end to the figure anywhere, but that it makes one harmonious lifelike whole.

You know that this was exactly the question mentioned in Gigoux's book, "ne pas prendre par la ligne, mais par le milieu." [not tackle (it) from the contour, but from the centre.]

Mantz says, "Le modelé est la probité de l'art" [The modelling is the probity of art] and what he changes in Ingres' words is that Ingres said, "Le dessin est la probité de l'art" [The drawing is the probity of art]; and added, "je voudrais marquer le contour d'un fil de fer." [I'd like to mark the contour with an iron wire.]

Hébert had what he called "l'horreur de la ligne." [the horror of the line.]

And then again, there are people who assert that all dogmas are practically absurd. It is a pity that this is again a dogma in itself.

The only thing to do is to go one's way, to try one's best, to make the thing live.

If they hadn't made Thijs Maris too wretched and too melancholy to work, perhaps he would have found something wonderful.

I think of that fellow so often, Theo, how marvellous his work is.

It is as if he dreams – but what an artist he is!

By God, if that fellow were now what he was when he began, what a centre he would become.

For the present-day Dutch schools need some new blood.

One must not work in "thousand fears," and yet, that's what many do who are so anxious to get hold of the right colours and tones that their very anxiety makes them like tepid water. But the real artists, Israëls or Maris or Mauve or Neuhuys, act quite differently, for they say, "Just dash the colour on."

Well – because they have suppressed all enthusiasm, they will "faire hurler jusqu'aux chiens de espoir" [make people howl like dogs in despair], when nobody has any enthusiasm, and nobody has any daring left.

We have not got that far, I know, but what I say is this, let's keep enthusiasm, otherwise we reach that summit of wisdom called the time of the periwigs. One has only to read the history of the old schools of painting to see that it often ends that way. How serious and bitter that fourth article of Mantz's was – the last one – and how exactly what is wanted.

Please look for the Lhermites when they appear. How beautiful they are.

I just met Aunt C., who assured me that you would certainly still come this summer. About that time I shall have finished quite a few figures like those I have started now.

Goodbye.

Just another little word – I cannot advise you strongly enough to study for yourself Eugène Delacroix's different theories about colour.

Though not up-to-date – though outside the art world for so long – banished because of my clogs, etc., yet I see, for instance from that article by Mantz, that even now there are connoisseurs and art lovers – who know something, the very thing Thoré, Théophile Gautier knew.

And that leaving the so-called civilized world of progress for what it is, namely a delusion, the most important thing remains, what the reformers in the matter of taste in '48 already proclaimed in a manly and vigorous way. Just as Israëls will not be surpassed here in Holland, but, in my opinion, will remain the master.

And in Belgium, Leys and De Groux.

Please don't make the mistake of imagining that I want to insist on imitation, for that isn't at all what I mean.

You have seen much more than I have, and I wish I had seen what you have seen and are still seeing every day. But perhaps the very fact of seeing so much makes it difficult to reflect, so be it.

I only want to say that you, as well as many others, must refurbish and restudy the principles of art later in life.

I mean that in your capacity of expert, you, just as the painters themselves – in theory even better than they, because you have to give advice and to speak about pictures in the making – must know certain rules about colours and perspective. Excuse me, but what I say is true, that this will perhaps be of more practical use to you than you may suppose, and would raise you above the ordinary level of art dealers – which is necessary, for the ordinary level is below the mark.

From my own experience I know pretty well what art dealers do know and what they don't.

I believe they are often taken in, and put over deals which they later regret, just because they know too little of how a picture is made. Well, but I know that you are already taking pains, for instance by reading good books like Gigoux's.

Study that question of the colours, etc., carefully. I try to also, and I will gladly and thankfully read whatever you may find concerning it too. At present I am busy putting into practice, on the drawing of a hand and an arm, what Delacroix said about drawing: "Ne pas prendre par la ligne mais par le milieu." That gives opportunity enough to start from ellipses. And what I try to acquire is not to draw a hand but the gesture, not a mathematically correct head, but the general expression. For instance, when a digger looks up and sniffs the wind or speaks. In short, life.