

Letter 416
Nuenen, 6 July 1885

Dear Theo,

Thanks for the money, your letter and the Raffaelli catalogue. I think the drawings in it masterly. What he himself says further about “le caractéristique” is interesting.

His article is a mixture of very simple words that come from the heart and from a nervous artistic temperament; these are striking. And besides – of words which, I think, Raffaelli himself understands as little as those who must read them. So it is an article full of very fine things and full of mistakes. That’s what I like to read more than anything else. For what he talks about is so intensely complicated after all. Yet the substance of what he says is satisfactory in the reading, and with all his queer sallies he says something that is healthy and true.

Theo, you must not think that if I saw Uhde’s picture myself I should lose the impression I got from it. I repeat, I think it will be the same with this man as with Knaus and Labrichon. After a few things of character, it is the very technique that will be his undoing, that is to say, he will become more and more correct in his work and more and more dry.

In my opinion as a painter Raffaelli ranks much higher than Uhde.

You never hear me being pessimistic about Lhermitte, do you? So I am not a man who always doubts. On the contrary, I have a very strong confidence in some people.

I had never seen anything of Raffaelli’s except those two blacksmiths; I wrote you about it at the time. Raffaelli and especially Lhermitte possess what Raffaelli calls “conscience.”

I am afraid that this will be Uhde’s weak point, that he will no longer know his own mind.

So much for that. You say that the silvery grey Uhde uses is so beautiful and that if I saw the picture I should think differently of it.

No, boy – I have seen so much grey in my life that such a bit of silver-grey cannot seduce me so easily as it used to.

Painting grey as a system is becoming intolerable, and we shall certainly get to see the other side of the coin.

Yet in order to convince you that I want to appreciate its good qualities, and have nothing against it, I am just now working on a grey picture. We can’t help discussing these things further someday. Don’t forget, however, that though I have some objections to Uhde, I admit that I certainly admire the main part of this picture, which forms three-quarters of it – the children.

I must go out and work – I didn’t want to put off writing any longer; I am dog-tired every day because I have to go far, far across the heath!

I have also done some more figures.

I am very sorry to hear what you said about the money, that you will be very hard up yourself.

Painting is sometimes so damned expensive, and especially nowadays, it is so necessary to follow one’s own idea, coûte que coûte.

“Il nous faut un art de force vive” [What we want is an art with live vigour], Raffaelli says, and in order to reach that aim in figure drawing, it costs a lot of trouble to find models.

The time has past – and I don’t want it back – when it was enough for a figure to be academically, conventionally correct, or rather, though many still ask for this, a reaction is setting in – and I hope it will make some stir. The artists call for character, well – the public will do the same.

I assure you that Uhde’s Christ is a sad failure indeed, it is definitely below the mark – the children are good.

I like Lhermitte and Raffaelli so much because their work is so thoroughly logical, sensible and honest!

I have here before me some figures: a woman with a spade, seen from behind; another bending to glean the ears of corn; another seen from the front, her head almost on the ground, digging carrots. I have been watching those peasant figures here for more than a year and a half, especially their action, just to catch their character. Therefore I cannot stand such a Santa Claus as Uhde painted in that little school – the little school in itself is very beautiful though. Uhde himself – oh, I am sure that he knows it quite well, and that he has only done so because the honest people in his country want a “sujet” and “something (conventional) to make them think,” as otherwise he would have to starve. One of these days, if I can find a moment when I am not too tired to write, I shall try to tell you once again how splendid I find some things in Raffaelli.

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent