

Letter 418  
Nuenen, July 1885

Dear Theo,

I wish the 4 canvases I wrote to you about had gone. If I keep them here for much longer, I might paint them over again and I think it's better if you get them just as they come, off the heath. The reason I haven't sent them is that I don't want to send them to you carriage forward at a time when you say that you yourself might be short of cash, and I cannot afford the carriage myself.

I have never seen the little house in which Millet lived – but I imagine that these 4 little human nests are of the same sort. One is the residence of a gentleman popularly known as “the mourning peasant” – the other is inhabited by a worthy soul who, when I went there, was up to nothing more mysterious than digging her potato-clamp, but who must be capable of practicing witchcraft – she goes by the name of “the witch's head,” anyway.

You'll remember that Gigoux's book tells how it came about that 17 of Delacroix's pictures were turned down all at the same time. That shows – to me at least – that he and others of that period were faced with connoisseurs and non-connoisseurs alike, who neither understood them nor wanted to buy anything by them – but that they, who are rightly called “les vaillants” [the brave] in the book, didn't talk of fighting a losing battle but went on painting.

What I wanted to say again is that if we take that story about Delacroix as our starting point, we still have a lot of painting to do.

I find myself faced with the necessity of being that most disagreeable of people, in other words of having to ask for money. And since I don't think that sales will pick up in the next few days, the situation seems rather dire. But I put it to you, isn't it better for both of us, après tout, to work hard, no matter what problems that may entail, than to sit around philosophizing at a time like this?

I can't tell the future, Theo – but I do know the eternal law that all things change. Think back 10 years, and things were different, the circumstances, the mood of the people, in short everything. And 10 years hence much is bound to have changed again. But what one does remains – and one does not easily regret having done it. The more active one is, the better, and I would sooner have a failure than sit idle and do nothing.

Whether or not Portier is the right man to do something with my work – we need him now at any rate. And this is what I have in mind. After, say, a year's work, we shall have put together more than we have now, and I know for sure that my work will fare better the more I can add to it. People who show some liking for it now, who speak of it as he does, and show it from time to time are useful, because if I work for, let's say, another year and they are able to add a few more things to their collection, that will speak for itself even if the collectors themselves have nothing to say at all.

If you happen to see Portier, tell him that, far from giving up, I intend sending him much more. You, too, must go on showing my work if you meet people. It won't be all that long before we have more important things to show.

You yourself will have seen – and it is something that pleases me enormously – that 1-man shows, or shows by just a few who belong together, are becoming increasingly popular. I'm sure that in the art world this has more avenir [future] than other ventures.

It's a good thing people are beginning to realize that a Bouguereau does not do well next to a Jacque – or a figure by Beyle or Lhermitte next to a Schelfhout or Koekkoek. Scatter Raffaelli's drawings about and judge for yourself if it's still possible to get a good idea of that singular artist. He – Raffaelli – is different from Régamey, but I think he has just as much personality.

If I kept my work with me, I am sure I should go on repainting it. Sending it to you and Portier just as it comes from the countryside or from the cottages, I may well include an example that isn't any good – but some things will have been saved that would not have been improved by frequent repainting.

Now supposing you had these 4 canvases and a few smaller studies of cottages, someone who saw nothing else of mine would be bound to think that I painted nothing but cottages. And likewise with the series of heads. But peasant life involves so many different things, that when Millet speaks of “travailler comme plusieurs nègres” [working like a bunch of slaves], this is truly what has to be done if one wants to assemble a body of work.

One may laugh at Courbet's saying, “Peindre des anges! Qui est-ce qui a vu des anges?” [Painting angels! Who has ever seen angels?] But to that I should like to add, “des justices au harem, qui est-ce qui a vu des justices au harem?” [Justice in the harem, who has ever seen justice in the harem?] And Benjamin Constant's painting, Des Combats de Taureaux, “qui est-ce qui en a vu?” [Bullfights, who has ever seen those?] And so many other Moorish and Spanish things, cardinals, and then all those historical paintings

they keep on doing yards high and yards wide! What is the use of it all and what are they doing it for? Within a few years most of it looks dull and dreary and more and more boring. But still, perhaps they are well painted, they could be that.

Nowadays, when connoisseurs stand in front of a painting like the one by Benj. Constant, or like some reception given by some cardinal by I don't know which Spaniard – it's the custom to say, with a meaningful air, something about "clever technique." But as soon as those same connoisseurs are confronted by a subject from peasant life or a drawing by, say, Raffaelli, they criticize the technique with the same knowing air – à la C. M.

You may think I'm wrong to comment on this, but I'm so struck by the fact that all these exotic pictures were painted in the studio. Just try going outside and painting things on the spot! All sorts of things happen then. I had to pick off a good hundred or more flies from the 4 canvases you're about to receive, not to mention dust and sand, etc., not to mention the fact that if one carries them through heath and hedgerows for a couple of hours, a branch or two is likely to scratch them, etc. Not to mention the fact that when one arrives on the heath, one feels tired and hot after a couple of hours' walk in this weather. Not to mention the fact that the figures don't stand still like professional models, and that the effects one wants to capture change as the day wears on.

I don't know how it is with you – but as far as I am concerned, the more I work at it, the more absorbed I get in peasant life. And the less I care for Cabanel-like things, among which I would include Jacquet, and the present-day Benj. Constant – or the highly praised but inexpressibly, hopelessly dry technique of the Italians & Spaniards. "Imagiers!" [Popular print makers!] I often think of that term of Jacque's.

Yet I do have parti pris [prejudice], I respond to Raffaelli, who paints something quite other than peasants – I respond to Alfred Stevens, to Tissot, to mention something completely different from peasants – I respond to a beautiful portrait.

Zola, who otherwise, in my opinion, makes some colossal blunders when he judges pictures, says something beautiful about art in general in *Mes haines*: "Dans le tableau (l'oeuvre d'art), je cherche, j'aime l'homme – l'artiste." [In the picture (the work of art), I look for, I love the man – the artist.]

There you have it; I think that's absolutely true. I ask you, what kind of man, what kind of visionary, or thinker, observer, what kind of human character is there behind certain canvases extolled for their technique – often no kind at all, as you know. But a Raffaelli is somebody, a Lhermitte is somebody, and with many pictures by almost unknown people one has the feeling that they were made with a will, with feeling, with passion, with love.

The technique of a painting from peasant life or – in Raffaelli's case – from the heart of urban workers, introduces problems quite other than those of the smooth painting and portrayal of actions of a Jacquet or Benjamin Constant. Namely, living in cottages day in and day out, being out in the fields just like the peasants – in the heat of the sun in summer, enduring snow and frost in winter, not indoors but out in the open, and not just while taking a walk but day in, day out, like the peasants themselves.

And I ask you, all things considered, am I really so wrong to object to the criticisms of those experts, who more than ever before bandy this so often irrelevant word "technique" about (giving it an increasingly conventional relevance)? Considering all the traipsing and trudging it takes to paint "the mourning peasant" in his cottage, I dare say this work involves a longer, more tiring journey than the one so many painters of exotic subjects – whether "la justice au harem" or "reception at a cardinal's" – have to go on to produce their choicest eccentric subjects – since Arabic or Spanish or Moorish models are readily available, against payment, in Paris. But anyone who, like Raffaelli, paints the ragpickers of Paris in their own quarter, has greater problems and his work is more serious.

Nothing seems simpler than painting peasants or ragpickers and other workers, but – there are no subjects in painting as difficult as those everyday figures! As far as I know, not a single academy exists in which one can learn to draw and paint a digger, a sower, a woman hanging a pot over the fire, or a seamstress. But every city of any importance has an academy with a choice of models for historical, Arabic, Louis XV – in a nutshell, every sort of figure, provided they do not exist in reality.

When I send you and Serret a few studies of diggers or peasant women weeding, gleaning corn, etc., as the first of a whole series on all kinds of work in the fields, you or Serret may discover flaws in them, which it will be helpful to me to know about and which I shall in all probability acknowledge.

But I should like to point out something perhaps worthy of consideration. All academic figures are put together in the same way, and, let us admit, "on ne peut mieux" [it cannot be done better] – impeccably – faultlessly. You will have gathered what I am driving at – they do not lead us to any new discoveries.

Not so the figures of a Millet, a Lhermitte, a Régamey, a Lhermitte [sic], a Daumier. They are also well put together – but après tout, not the way the academy teaches. I believe that no matter how academically correct a figure may be, it is superfluous, though it were by Ingres himself (with the exception of his Source, because that surely was, is and always shall be, something new), once it lacks that essential modern aspect, the intimate character, the real action.

You may ask, when will the figure not be superfluous, for all its faults, and grave faults to my way of thinking? When the digger digs, when the peasant is a peasant and the peasant woman is a peasant woman, is this anything new? Yes, even the little figures by Ostade and Terborch don't work as people do today. I could say much more on the subject, and I should like to say how much I myself want to improve what I have begun – and how much more highly I value the work of some others than I do my own. I ask you – do you know of a single digger, a single sower, in the old Dutch school? Did they ever try to do “a worker”? Did Velásquez look for one in his water carrier or his types from the people? No. Work, that's what the figures in the old pictures don't do.

I've been plodding away the last few days at a woman whom I saw pulling carrots in the snow last winter. Look – Millet has done it, Lhermitte, and by and large the painters of peasants from this century – say an Israëls – they consider it more beautiful than anything else. But even in this century, how relatively few among the legion of artists paint the figure – yes, for the figure's sake avant tout [above all], i.e. for the sake of form and modelé [modelling], yet cannot imagine it otherwise than in action, and want – what the old masters and even the old Dutch masters who depicted so many conventional actions avoided – want, as I say, to paint the action for the action's sake. So that the painting or the drawing has to be a figure drawing for the sake of the figure and of the unutterably harmonious form of the human body – but at the same time a pulling of carrots in the snow. Do I make myself clear? I hope so, and you might mention it to Serret.

I can put it more succinctly – a nude by Cabanel, a lady by Jacquet, and a peasant woman not by Bastien Lepage, but by a Parisian who has learned his drawing at the academy, will always convey the limbs and the structure of the body in the same way – sometimes charming, accurate in proportion and anatomical detail. But when Israëls, or, say, Daumier or Lhermitte, draw a figure, one gets much more of a sense of the shape of the body, and yet – and that's the very reason I'm pleased to include Daumier – the proportions will sometimes be almost arbitrary, the anatomy and structure often anything but correct in the eyes of the academicians. But it will live. And Delacroix too, in particular.

It still isn't well put. Tell Serret that I should be in despair if my figures were good, tell him that I don't want them to be academically correct, tell him that what I'm trying to say is that if one were to photograph a digger, he would certainly not be digging then. Tell him that I think Michelangelo's figures are splendid, although the legs are unquestionably too long, the hips and buttocks too broad. Tell him that, to my mind, Millet and Lhermitte are the true artists, because they do not paint things as they are, examined in a dry analytical manner, but as they, Millet, Lhermitte, Michelangelo, feel them to be. Tell him that I long most of all to learn how to produce those very inaccuracies, those very aberrations, reworkings, transformations of reality, as may turn it into, well – a lie if you like – but truer than the literal truth.

And now it's nearly time to close – but I felt the need to say once more that those who paint peasant life or the life of the people, though they may not be counted among the “hommes du monde” [men of the world], may well stay the course better in the long run than the creators of exotic harems and cardinal's receptions, painted in Paris.

I know that it is disagreeable of one to ask for money at awkward moments – but my excuse is that painting what appear to be the most commonplace things is sometimes the most difficult and expensive. The expenses that I must incur if I want to work are at times considerable when compared with my means. I assure you that had my constitution not become virtually like that of a peasant, through exposure to the elements, I should not have been able to endure it, for there is simply nothing left over for my personal comfort. But then I don't seek that for myself either, any more than many peasants seek anything other than to live as they do. But what I do ask for is paint, and above all models.

From what I write about the figure drawings you will no doubt have gathered that I am particularly keen on going ahead with them. You wrote not long ago that Serret had spoken to you “with conviction” about certain faults in the structure of the figures in the Potato Eaters. But you will have seen from my answer that I found fault on that score myself as well, though I did point out that this was my impression after I had seen the cottage many evenings in the dim lamplight, after I had painted 40 heads, from which follows that I set out from a different point of view.

However, now that we have started to discuss the figure, I have a great deal to say. I find Raffaelli's perception of “character,” that is, the words he uses to describe it, good and well chosen and exemplified by

the drawings. But those who, like Raffaelli, move in artistic and literary circles in Paris, have, après tout, different ideas from, for instance, mine, out here in the country among the peasants. My point is that they are looking for a single word that will sum up all their ideas – he suggests the word “character” for the figures of the future. I agree with that, with what I think is the meaning – but I believe as little in the accuracy of the word as in the accuracy of other words – as little as in the accuracy or effectiveness of my own expressions.

Rather than say, “there must be character in a digger,” I would put it like this: the peasant must be a peasant, the digger must dig, and then there will be something essentially modern in them. But I feel that even these words may give rise to misconceptions – even were I to add a whole string of them.

Far from cutting down on the expenses for models – which is a fairly heavy burden on me now as it is – I think spending a little more is called for, very much called for. For what I am aiming at is quite different from doing “a little figure” drawing. To show the peasant figure in action, that – I repeat – is what an essentially modern figure painting really does, it is the very essence of modern art, something neither the Greeks nor the Renaissance nor the old Dutch school have done.

This is a question I ponder every day. The difference between the great, or the lesser, masters of today (the great, e.g. Millet, Lhermitte, Breton, Herkomer; the lesser, e.g. Raffaelli and Régamey) and the old schools is, however, something I have rarely seen expressed in articles about art. just think about it and see if you don’t agree. They started doing peasants’ and workmen’s figures as a “genre” – but nowadays, with Millet, the perennial master, in the lead, these figures have become the very essence of modern art and so they will remain.

People like Daumier – one must respect them, for they are among the pioneers. The simple but modern nude – as revived by Henner and Lefevre – ranks high. Baudry, and above all such sculptors as Mercier and Dalou, are also amongst the very soundest. But the fact is that peasants and ouvriers [workers] are not nudes, nor does one need to imagine them in the nude. The more that people begin to do workers’ and peasants’ figures, the better I shall like it. And for myself, I can think of nothing I like as much.

This is a long letter and I’m not even sure if I’ve made myself entirely clear. Perhaps I’ll write a few lines to Serret too. If I do, I’ll send the letter to you to read, for I do want to make plain how much importance I attach to the figure issue.