

Letter 427
Nuenen, October 1885

Dear Theo,

Today I forwarded carriage-paid a box marked V4 containing the still lifes. The two sketches of Amsterdam are unfortunately somewhat damaged. [F 113, JH 944; F 211, JH 973] They got wet on the way, then the panels got warped while drying and dust stuck on them, etc., but I sent them to show you that if in an hour's time I want to dash off an impression somewhere, I am learning to do so in the same way as others who analyze their impressions, and who account for what they see. This is a different thing from feeling, i.e. undergoing impressions, there is perhaps a great difference between undergoing impressions and analyzing them, that is to say, taking them to pieces and putting them together again. But it is pleasant work to dash something off in a rush.

What struck me most on seeing the old Dutch pictures again is that most of them were painted quickly, that these great masters, such as a Frans Hals, a Rembrandt, a Ruysdael and so many others – dashed off a thing from the first stroke and did not retouch it so very much.

And please note this too – if it was right, they left it as it was. I have especially admired the hands by Rembrandt and Hals, certain hands in “The Syndics,” even in “The Jewish Bride,” and in Frans Hals, hands that lived, but were not finished in the sense they demand nowadays.

And heads too – eyes, nose, mouth done with a single stroke of the brush without any retouching whatever. Unger, Bracquemond have etched it well – just as it was painted – and one can see in their etchings the way of painting.

Then, how necessary it is to look at the old Dutch pictures in these days! and at the French painters, Corot, Millet, etc. The rest might quite well be dispensed with, and it may lead others more astray than they think. To paint in one rush, as much as possible in one rush. What joy to see such a Frans Hals, how different it is from those pictures – there are so many of them – where everything has been carefully smoothed down in the same way.

By chance I saw a Meissonier in the Fodor museum on the same day I saw old Dutch masters, Brouwer, Ostade, especially Terborch.

Well, Meissonier does it, like they did, a very well-considered, well-calculated touch – but in one stroke and if possible correct at once.

I think it better to scrape off with the knife a part that is wrong, and to begin anew, than to make too many corrections.

I saw a sketch by Rubens and a sketch by Diaz almost at the same time; they were not alike, but what they have in common is the belief that colour expresses form if well applied and in harmony. Diaz is indeed a painter to the very marrow – and he is conscientious to his fingertips.

The Diaz in Fodor is only sketchy, but perhaps for that very reason it was for me, who had not seen one for years, a great pleasure to see it again, and it stood up very well, even if one had just seen the technique of the old masters.

I must refer once more to certain present-day pictures, which are becoming more and more numerous. About ten or fifteen years ago they started talking about “brightness,” about “light.” Originally this was right, it is a fact that beautiful things were produced by that system. But when this degenerates into an overproduction of pictures that have the same light all over the canvas, in all four corners – I think they call it day tone and local colour – is this right??? I think not. The Ruysdael at Van der Hoop's, the one with the mill, isn't it “plein-air,” isn't it enormously full of space? And yet the whole picture is in a much darker colour scheme than people would use now; besides, earth and sky form one whole, belong together.

Van Goyen, that Corot of the Dutch, I stood a long time before that superb picture in the Dupper collection, two oak trees on a dune in autumn, in the storm. A sentiment, let me say, like Jules Dupré or “Le Buisson.” But there is more common yellow ochre than white in the picture.

There is Cuyp – a view of Dordrecht in Van der Hoop's collection, it is quite reddish-gold – the ochres are there too.

The picture by Frans Hals, you may call it what you like; citron amorti or jaune chamois, what is it done with? In the picture it seems very light, but just put white against it.

I think a great lesson taught by the old Dutch masters is the following: to consider drawing and colour one, which Bracquemond also says. And this many painters do not do, they draw with everything except a healthy colour. Oh, Theo, it is such a nuisance, it is such a bore to listen to a fellow like Haverman when he talks about “technique”; I do not mean Rappard, because though he too talks that way, fortunately for him he paints better than he talks.

I don't care at all to make many friends in the painters' club, but I repeat – speaking of technique, there is a good deal more healthy, sound technique in Israël's, for instance in that very old picture, "The Fisherman of Zandvoort," with its splendid chiaroscuro, than in the technique of those who are always equally smooth everywhere, flat and distingué in their sheet-iron frigid colour. You may safely put that "Fisherman of Zandvoort" beside an old Delacroix – "La Barque du Dante," it is of one and the same family.

Those are the things which I believe in, but every day I hate more and more those pictures which are light all over. It is a bad thing for me when they say that I have "no technique"; it is possible that this will blow over, as I make no acquaintances among the painters; it is true that, on the contrary, those who talk most about technique are in my eyes weakest in it!

I wrote you so already. But when I show something of my work in Holland, I know beforehand what will be said, and by what kind of critics. Meanwhile I am going quietly to the old Dutch masters, and to the pictures by Israël's, and to those who have a direct affinity with Israël's, which the modern painters do not have. They are almost diametrically opposed to Israël's.

And I think I have noticed that Israël's himself, and Mans, Mauve, Neuhuys, too, look disapprovingly on a certain tendency which we are talking about now. Mesdag, for instance, who was at first very realistic, as you remember, has become in his later pictures and drawings deeper of tone and often somewhat more mysterious.

Witkamp has many good points, is rather like Jules Breton or Bastien Lepage, but Jules Breton is warm and he is far too cold. And that's a fault not easily remedied, to get some warmth into a thing, it must be put in from the very beginning, otherwise one cannot get rid of the coldness.

What they call brightness is in many cases an ugly studio tone of a cheerless city studio. The dawn in the morning or the twilight in the evening does not seem to exist, there only seems to be midday, from 11 to 3, a very decent hour indeed, but – often insipid as a milksop.

But for all that, Theo – I am damned hard up at present. Painting hard is very expensive, I am almost without a cent, and the end of the month is misery. The saying "l'argent est le nerf de la guerre" is alas also true of painting. In war, however, the result is nothing but misery and destruction, and in painting one sometimes sows, though the painter himself is not the man who reaps.

How are you, and how is business? I do not know if I am right, but judging from the show window, the shop in Amsterdam did not look very flourishing, but oh so quiet and respectable.

Indeed, too much courage and enthusiasm are not the faults(?) of today. I have hardly spoken to anybody, but indirectly I sounded people out here and there, because I am curious to see the art trade's results and what will become of it. I don't think you are exactly overwhelmed with pictures – are you?

This winter I am going to study several things of great technical skill which I noticed in the old masters. I have seen much that is of use to me. But above all things – what is called enlever, that is what the old Dutch masters did famously.

That enlever in a few strokes of the brush, they won't hear of it nowadays, but how excellent the results are, and how masterfully this was understood by many French painters, by Israël's too.

In the museum I was thinking continually of Delacroix, why? Because standing before Hals, before Rembrandt, before Ruysdael and others, I was constantly reminded of the saying: "Lorsque Delacroix peint, c'est comme le lion qui devore le morceau." That is how it ought to be, and oh, Theo, when I think of what I will call the technical club, as they call themselves, how dull it is. If at any time I should come into contact with one of those gentlemen or meet one of them, you may be sure I shall play the fool, but à la vireloque¹ with a coup de dents [bite] afterward.

I hate it when things drag and go amiss.

And isn't it a fatal thing, that forced finishing everywhere (what they call finish), everywhere that same monotonous grey instead of light and brown; colour – local colour – instead of tone, isn't it deplorable and yet isn't it so.

I find all these things wrong because I consider Israël's, for instance, such a master, and because there are so many modern as well as old painters whom one can admire.

I ought to have noticed before this that I am very probably boring you with this letter. But the fact is, I didn't think of it. For my part, I can tell you that I wish you would write me your impressions of things in the Louvre, or Luxembourg, or anywhere else.

Write soon if you can, and let me tell you that the end of the month is very hard. But I am glad to have been in Amsterdam, though it was at a moment when I could less afford the expenses than ever. The consequence is that around New Year's I shall be very hard up, but, oh well, faint heart never won fair lady and for the sake of painting, I will put up with always being in difficulties if it has to be.

Goodbye, I hope you will get my parcel in good order. There is a book by de Goncourt about Chardin, Boucher, Watteau, and Fragonard; I must read that; have you got it or one of your friends perhaps? I am afraid not, but do you happen to know if it is very important?

Goodbye,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. I.e. on a reciprocal basis, by which Vincent means: casting the other one for the same part.