

Letter 436
Antwerp, 24 – 27 November 1885

Dear Theo,

I want to tell you that I am in Antwerp, and that I already have seen a few things. I have taken a room for 25 fr. a month, No. 194 Rue des Images, over a colour dealer's. So when you write, kindly send your letter to that address, instead of c/o G.P.O.

I shall begin by telling you that I saw Ley's dining hall, you know, "The Walk on the Ramparts," "The Skaters," "The Reception" and "The Table," and on a panel between the windows "St. Luc." To my astonishment the composition was somewhat different from the ultimate compositions, at least I imagine so – although I have not yet been able to compare photos of the pictures with them.

Then, it was painted in fresco – i.e. on the plaster of the wall. Now fresco really must and can last for centuries, but these have already faded considerably, and the one over the mantelpiece especially (part of "The Reception") already shows some cracks. The highly ingenious son of Baron Leys has also improved the hall by having a door enlarged so that in "The Skaters," the legs of the fellows standing on the bridge looking over the railings have been cut away, which makes a deplorable effect. Besides, the light is terribly bad there; now that hall was originally painted – I imagine – to be used by lamplight. Therefore, because I honestly could not see anything, I gave the servant a tip and asked her to light the chandelier for me, and then I could see better.

After so much that had rather disappointed me – in the first place that the colour of the fresco, and, alas, I am afraid bad fresco, is not what we are used to from Leys – after so much that disappointed me – after all it is superb.

The maidservant, the woman near the baker's shop, the lovers and other figures in "The Walk on the Ramparts" – the bird's-eye view of the city, the silhouette of the towers and roofs against the sky, the bustle of skaters on the frozen moat – are superbly executed.

I have also seen the museum of old pictures and the Musée Moderne. I agree with you that the figures on the first plane, those heads in "Le Christ au Purgatoire," are very beautiful, finer than the rest, and than the principal figure; those two blonde women's heads especially are Rubens at his best.

I was very much struck by Frans Hal's "Fisherboy"; Mr. De Vos – portrait of master of the guild – Rembrandt, very beautiful, two small Rembrandts, which perhaps are not by Rembrandt, but by N. Maes? or somebody else; Jordaens – "a chip off the old block"; Van Goyen, S. Ruysdael. And the Quentin Matsys; the drawing "St. Barbara" by Van Eyck, etc.

In the Musée Moderne: the great Mols is Mesdag-like, with smears of Vollon plainly visible. (Vollon knew him well.) Braekleer, not the bad one – a Brabant inn, curiously fine, beautiful landscapes by C. de Cock, Lamorinière, Coosemans, Asselbergs, Rosseels, Baron, Munthe, Achenbach, a good Clays, two old Leyses – one Braekleer-like, the other romantic, the latter good; a beautiful portrait by Ingres, a fine portrait by David, other good things, also horrible things like life-sized cows by the God-fearing Verboeckhoven, etc. But I have seen very little at the art dealers', next to nothing, one little painting the size of a hand, not even as good as Raffaelli, otherwise nothing special, and I am afraid that metaphorically business is at death's door. But – there is a good old Dutch proverb, "Never despair." I like Antwerp, have explored the city in every direction; the quays are most characteristic.

Well, it will never hurt knowing Antwerp a bit; it will probably prove to be like everything everywhere, namely disillusioning but with its own atmosphere.

Besides, it is good to have a change now and then.

Goodbye, write soon if you can.

Ever yours, Vincent