

Dear Theo,

I must write you again to tell you that I have succeeded in finding a model. I have made two fairly big heads, by way of trial for a portrait. First, that old man whom I wrote you about [F 205, JH 971], a kind of head like Hugo's; then also a study of a woman. In the woman's portrait I have brought lighter tones into the flesh, white tinted with carmine, vermilion, yellow and a light background of grey-yellow, from which the face is separated only by the black hair. Lilac tones in the dress. [F 206, JH 972]

Rubens is certainly making a strong impression on me; I think his drawing tremendously good – I mean the drawing of heads and hands in themselves. I am quite carried away by his way of drawing the lines in a face with streaks of pure red, or of modeling the fingers of the hands by the same kind of streaks. I go to the museum fairly often, and then I look at little else but a few heads and hands of his and of Jordaens'. I know he is not as intimate as Hals and Rembrandt, but in themselves those heads are so alive.

Probably I don't look at those which are generally admired most. I look for fragments like, for instance, those blonde heads in "Ste. Thérèse au Purgatoire." I am now looking for a blonde model just because of Rubens. But you must not be angry if I tell you that I cannot make both ends meet this month. I have bought some more colours and two new kinds of drawing brushes which suit me splendidly and with which I can work more accurately.

Then the canvases which I brought with me were too small for the heads, because by using other colours I need more space for the surroundings.

All that and the models are ruining me.

I tell you this as emphatically as possible, because when losing time one loses doubly.

In the last days of this month, after I have done some more heads, I hope to paint a view on the Scheldt, for which I have already bought a canvas. I can also go there in bad weather, to an inn at St. Anne's, that is on the other side, opposite the Lieve Vrouwekerk [Our Lady's Church]. Other painters have worked there before. I am very glad I came here, for in many ways it is useful and necessary for me.

I made the acquaintance of Tyck, the best colour manufacturer here, and he was very kind in giving me information about some colours. About green colours, for instance, that are fast. I also asked him things about Rubens's technique, which he answered in a way that proved to me how well he analyzes the material used, which not everybody does, although it is very useful.

What more shall I tell you? Oh yes, I have seen two collections of modern pictures, first, what was bought at the exhibition for the raffle, and then a collection of pictures that was for sale.

So I saw several fine things, two studies by Henri de Braekeleer; you know that he is absolutely different from the old De Braekeleer, I mean the one who is a famous colourist, and who analyzes rigorously. He is somewhat like Manet, that is to say as original as Manet.

One study was of a woman in a studio, or some such interior, with Japanese objects; the woman wore a costume of yellow and black. The flesh colour, white with carmine. In the surroundings, all kinds of quaint little tones. The other one was a half-finished study of a landscape. Yellow, faded, flat fields à perte de vue [as far as the eye can see], crossed by a black cinder path, with a ditch alongside; over it, a sky of lilac gray, with accents of carmined lilac. Far away the little red patch of vermilion of a roof, and two little black trees. Hardly anything, and yet for me a great deal, because of the peculiar sentiment in the juxtaposition of colours. I also saw an old study by De Groux, a woman beside a cradle, somewhat like an old Israëls.

Further, what shall I say about those modern pictures? I thought many of them splendid, and then I mean especially the work of the colourists, or of those who try to be so, who look everywhere for mother-of-pearl-like combinations in the light parts. But to me it is not always perfect by a long shot; it is too affected. I prefer to see a simple brush stroke and a less far-fetched, difficult colour. More simplicity, in short that intelligent simplicity which is not afraid of frank technique.

I like Rubens just for his ingenuous way of painting, his working with the simplest means.

I don't count Henri de Braekeleer among those who look for mother-of-pearl effects everywhere, because his is a curious, very interesting endeavor to be literally true, and he stands quite apart. I also saw various gray paintings, including a printing shop by Mertens, a picture by Verhaert representing his own studio, where he himself is sitting etching and his wife standing behind him.

By La Rivière – an Amsterdam hired mourner after a funeral, very fine in the black tones, a Goya-like conception; that little picture was a masterpiece. In both collections I saw very beautiful landscapes and marines. But as to the portraits – those I remember best are the "Fisherboy" by Frans Hals, "Saskia" by Rembrandt, a number of smiling or weeping faces by Rubens.

Ah, a picture must be painted – and then why not simply? Now when I look into real life – I get the same kind of impressions. I see the people in the street very well, but I often think the servant girls so much more interesting and beautiful than the ladies, the workmen more interesting than the gentlemen; and in those

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common girls and fellows I find a power and vitality which, if one wants to express them in their peculiar character, ought to be painted with a firm brush stroke, with a simple technique.

Wauters understood this, used to at least, for so far I haven't seen any work of his here. What I admire so much in Delacroix, too, is that he makes us feel the life of things, and the expression, and the movement, that he absolutely dominates his colours.

And in a great many of the good things I saw, though I admire them, there is often far too much paint. At present I am getting more and more in the habit of talking to the models while painting, to keep their faces animated.

I have discovered a woman – she is old now – who used to live in Paris and provided the painters with models, for instance, Scheffer, Gigoux, Delacroix and another one who painted a Phryne.

Now she is a washerwoman and knows a lot of women, and could always supply some, she said.

It has been snowing, and the city was splendid early this morning in the snow, fine groups of street cleaners.

I am glad I came here, for I am already full of ideas, also for the time when I shall be in the country again.

It was in the Etoile Belge, I think, that I read an article by Eugène Battaille, reprinted from the Figaro, about conditions in Paris, an article which impressed me as being very well thought out; but according to him conditions in general are very bad. This Mr. Battaille has, contrary to the opinion of the Dutch journalists, expressed himself in Amsterdam pessimistically about the state of affairs in Holland.

As to art dealing – as I have already written you, the dealers here complain like *misère ouverte*. And yet I believe that so much might still be done. To mention one thing, for instance, one sees no pictures in the cafés, restaurants, café-chantants, at least hardly any. And how contrary this is to nature. Why don't they hang still lifes there, like the splendid decorations Fijt, Hondekoeter and so many others made in times of old? Why not women's portraits, if they want prostitutes? I know one must work cheaply for such purposes, but one can work relatively cheaply. Raising prices to such a height is the trade's ruin, and leads to no good after all.

Goodbye, write again between times if you can. As to the money, do what you can, but remember that we must try our utmost to succeed. And I won't let that idea of painting portraits go, for it is a good thing to fight for, to show people that there is more in them than the photographer can possibly get out of them with his machine.

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

I have noticed the great number of photographers here, who are just about the same as everywhere, and seem to be pretty busy.

But always those same conventional eyes, noses, mouths – waxlike and smooth and cold.

It cannot but always remain lifeless.

And the painted portraits have a life of their own, coming straight from the painter's soul, which the machine cannot reach. The more one looks at photographs, the more one feels this, I think.