

Dear sister,

Many thanks for your letter, which I have been longing for. I dare not indulge my feelings to the extent of writing you often or of encouraging you to do the same. All this correspondence does not tend to keep us, who are of a nervous temperament, vigorous in case of possible immersions in melancholy of the type you mention in your letter, and to which I myself fall victim now and then.

An acquaintance of ours used to assert that the best treatment for all diseases is to treat them with profound contempt.

The remedy for the immersion which you mention is not, as far as I know, to be found growing among the herbs with healing powers. Nevertheless, I am in the habit of taking large quantities of bad coffee in such cases, not because it is very good for my already damaged collection of teeth, but because my strong imaginative powers enable me to have a devout faith – worthy of an idolater or a Christian or a cannibal – in the exhilarating influence of said fluid. Fortunately for my fellow creatures I have until today refrained from recommending this and similar remedies as efficacious.

The sun in these parts, that is something different, and also if over a period of time one drinks wine, which – at least partly – is pressed from real grapes. I assure you that in our native country people are as blind as bats and criminally stupid because they do not exert themselves to go more to the Indies or somewhere else where the sun shines. It is not right to know only one thing – one gets stultified by that; one should not rest before one knows the opposite too. What you say about extenuating circumstances, namely that, alas, they do not obviate the fact of one's having done something wrong or of having spoiled something is very true. Only think of our national history, the Rise and fall of the Dutch Republic, and you will understand what I mean. We must never invoke the excuse of extenuating circumstances, of our inability, and so on. It is less Christian (in the sense in which it is diluted nowadays), but it is better for us, and perhaps even for others. And energy begets energy, and conversely paralysis paralyzes others. Here we are now, living in a world of painting which is unutterably paralytic and miserable. The exhibitions, the picture stores, everything, everything, are in the clutches of fellows who intercept all the money. And do not suppose for a moment that this is only my imagination. People give a lot of money for the work after a painter himself is dead. And they are always slighting the living painters, fatuously defending themselves by pointing to the work of those who are no longer there.

I know we are unable to do anything to alter this. So for heaven's sake one must resign oneself to it, or try to find some sort of subvention, or conquer a rich woman, or something of the kind, or else one cannot work. All that one hopes for, independence through work, influence on others, all comes to nothing, nothing at all.

And yet it is a certain pleasure to paint a picture, and yet at this very moment there are some twenty painters here, all having more debts than money, etc., all leading lives approximately comparable to the lives of street dogs, who are going to be of perhaps more importance than the whole of the official exhibition as far as the future style of painting is concerned.

I should imagine that the most distinctive characteristic of the painter is being able to paint. Those who are able to paint, to paint the best, are the beginnings of something that will last a long time to come; they will go on existing as long as there are eyes capable of enjoying something that is specifically beautiful. But I always regret that one cannot make oneself richer by working harder – on the contrary –

If only one could do that, one would be able to achieve a good deal more, get associated with others, and whatnot. For now everybody is chained to the opportunity he has of earning his bread, which means that in fact one is far from free.

You ask whether I sent something to the "Arti" exhibition<sup>1</sup> – certainly not! Only Theo sent Mr. Tersteeg a consignment of pictures by impressionist painters and among them there was one of mine. But the only result has been that neither Tersteeg nor the artists, as Theo informed me, have seen anything in them.

Well, this is extremely comprehensible, for it is invariably the same thing all over again. One has heard talk about the impressionists, one expects a whole lot from them, and...and when one sees them for the first time one is bitterly, bitterly disappointed and thinks them slovenly, ugly, badly painted, badly drawn, bad in colour, everything that's miserable.

This was my own first impression too when I came to Paris, dominated as I was by the ideas of Mauve and Israëls and other clever painters. And when there is an exhibition in Paris of impressionists only, it is my belief that a lot of visitors come back from it bitterly disappointed, and even indignant, in a state of mind comparable to the mood of

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

the decent Dutchmen in the days of yore, who left church and a moment later heard a discourse by Domela Nieuwenhuis<sup>2</sup> or one of the other socialists.

And yet – you know it – within ten or fifteen years the whole edifice of the national religion collapsed, and – the socialists are still there, and will be there for a long time to come, although neither you nor I are very much addicted to either creed.

Well, Art – the officially recognized art – and its training, its management, its organization, are stagnant-minded and moldering, like the religion we see crashing, and it will not last, though there be ever so many exhibitions, studios, schools, etc. Will last as little as the bulb trade.

But this is none of our business; we are neither the founders of something new, nor are we called on to be the preservers of something old.

But this is what remains – a painter is a person who paints, in the same way that a florist is in reality a person who loves plants and grows them himself, which is not done by the flower merchant.

And consequently, though some of those twenty painters or so who are called impressionists have become comparatively rich men, and rather big fellows in the world, yet the majority of them are poor devils, whose homes are cafes, who lodge in cheap inns and live from hand to mouth, from day to day.

But in a single day those twenty whom I mentioned paint everything they lay eyes on, and better than many a big noise who has a high reputation in the art world.

I tell you this in order to make you understand what kind of tie exists between me and the French painters who are called impressionists – that I know many of them personally, and that I like them.

And that furthermore in my own technique I have the same ideas about colour, even thought about them when I was still in Holland.

Cornflowers and white chrysanthemums and a certain number of marigolds – see here a motif in blue and orange. Heliotrope and yellow roses – motif in lilac and yellow.

Poppies or red geraniums in vigorously green leaves – motif in red and green.

These are fundamentals, which one may subdivide further, and elaborate, but quite enough to show you without the help of a picture that there are colours which cause each other to shine brilliantly, which form a couple, which complete each other like man and woman.

Explaining the whole theory to you would involve quite a lot of writing, yet it might be done.

Colourings, wallpapers and whatnot could be made much prettier by paying attention to the laws of colours.

You will understand that Israëls and Mauve, who did not use whole colours, who were forever working in grey – with all due respect and love – do not satisfy the present-day for colour.

And another thing: somebody who can really play the violin or the piano is in my opinion highly amusing. He takes his violin and starts playing, and a whole company enjoys itself all through the evening. This is something a painter should be able to do too. And now and then it gives me pleasure, when I work outdoors, to have somebody looking on. Suppose, for instance, one is in a wheat field. Well, within a few hours one ought to be able to paint that wheat field, and the sky above it, in perspective, in the distance. Somebody witnessing this will, as soon as an opportunity occurs, keep his mouth shut about the clumsiness of the impressionists, and their incompetent painting – do you see? But we of the present day seldom have acquaintances who are sufficiently interested to accompany us – but if they do, they may be converted once and for all.

Now contrast this with the fellows in studios who require months and months to do something, which is often enough rather insipid when all is said and done.

Can't you understand then that there is something in this new style of painting? And there is something additional that I should like to have – I want to be able to paint a portrait in one morning or in one afternoon, which I have done occasionally, for that matter. This kind of work does not prevent one from working on other pictures for a long time. By yesterday's mail I sent you a drawing which is the first scratch for a large picture.\*

But isn't it curious that, as I tell you this, there are at least a score of fellows who in a few hours could paint a portrait in which there would be character – they are hardly ever asked to do one – some twenty fellows capable of doing whatever landscape you please, at whatever hour of the day with whatever colour effect, on the spot, without hesitation – and nobody stands behind them looking on? They are always working alone. If only everybody knew this – but this is how conditions are, they are so little known.

But I imagine that in the next generation, or in one of the later generations, this working resolutely and without hesitation, this measuring correctly at a glance, this adroitness in the mixing of colours, this drawing with lightning speed – there will come a generation that will not only do this just as we are doing it now, unappreciated, but then with a public that will like it, in the portrayal of persons no less than in the portrayal of landscapes or of interiors.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

But I am writing far too much just about painting; only what I wanted to make you understand is this, that it is rather important that Theo has succeeded in introducing the business he manages to have a permanent exhibition of the impressionists now. Next year will be rather important.

Just as in literature the French are irrefutably the masters, they are the same in painting too; and in modern art history, names like Delacroix, Millet, Corot, Courbet, Daumier, dominate all that is produced in other countries. Oh well, that clique of painters who are lording it over the official world nowadays adorn themselves with the laurels won by those of the past, but they themselves are of a far lower rank. Consequently they won't be able to contribute much at the forthcoming World's Fair to helping French art retain the importance it now has. Next year the attention, not of the public in general – which of course looks at everything without troubling its head about history – but the attention of those who are well informed will be drawn to the retrospective exhibition of the pictures of the big fellows who are dead, and by the impressionists. This will not instantly alter the circumstances in which the latter find themselves either, but it will certainly be conducive to the spreading of the ideas, and induce a little more animation. But the dull schoolmasters who are now on the selection committee of the Salon will never think of admitting the impressionists.

But the latter will hardly desire this at all, and they will hold an exhibition of their own.

If you now take into consideration that I want to have at least some fifty pictures ready toward that time – though I may not be exhibiting at all – you will perhaps feel that I am gradually and to a certain extent taking part in the battle in which, if one does participate, one is at least not exposed to the danger of being awarded a prize or a medal like a “good boy.” In point of fact these fellows are ambitious too, but there is a difference nevertheless, and many here are beginning to understand how preposterous it is to make oneself dependent on the opinion of others in what one does.

I hate writing about myself, and I have no idea why I do it. Perhaps I do it in order to answer your questions. You see what I have found – my work; and you see too what I have not found – all the rest that belongs to life. And the future? Either I shall become wholly indifferent to all that does not belong to the work of painting, or . . . I dare not expatiate on the theme, seeing that this becoming exclusively a painting machine, unfit for and uninterested in anything else, may be so much better or worse than the average. It might be pretty easy for me to resign myself to the average, and so be it for the present, for I am now in the same mess as in the past.

Listen, speaking about messes. Perhaps it might be worth while to try to save something of the “mess” that Theo tells me is still lying in some garret at Breda; however, I dare not ask you to do this, and perhaps it has got lost, so don't worry.

But the question is this – you know that Theo brought a whole lot of wood engravings with him last year. Yet a number of the best portfolios are missing and the rest is less good because of the very fact that the collection is no longer complete. Of course the wood engravings from illustrated papers get rarer and rarer according to the age of the issues they are taken from. Enough – so I am not wholly indifferent to that “mess,” you see? There are, for instance, a copy of Gavarni's “Human Masquerade,” and a book Anatomy for Artists – in short a number of things that are really far too good to lose. However, I look upon them in advance as lost; what may be found would be pure profit. When I went away, I did not know it would be for good. For the work at Nuenen did not go badly, and it was only a matter of continuing it; I still feel the want of my models, who seemed to be made for me, and whom I still adore; if only I had them here – I feel sure my fifty pictures would turn out to be hits. Do you understand this?? I am not the master of mankind because I am this or that – I fully grant in advance that those who say so are right – but I feel grieved because I do not have the power to make those I want to pose for me to do it, wherever I want them, and as long as I want them.

There, and not in the technical difficulties, lies the obstacle, which I shall have to clear out of the way in the end. And today I am a landscape painter, whereas in reality portrait painting would suit me better. So it would not surprise me if at some future time I should change my style. One painter – Chaplin – who paints the most beautiful women of Paris gloriously – ladies in boudoirs, with or without costume – has painted vigorous landscapes and herds of pigs on the heath. What I want to say is that one must do the work that is nearest, and retain a hold on one's technique. If you were within my reach I am greatly afraid you would get irretrievably addicted to painting. There are Parisian ladies, at least one of them really good, among the impressionists – even two good ones. And when I think that it is precisely this new style which would put women who are incapable of pernicky accuracy, who feel musically, on the right track, I regret now and then that I am getting older and uglier than my interest demands.

It is very commendable of Theo to have invited you to come to Paris. I don't know how it would impress you. When I saw it for the first time, I felt above all the dreary misery, which one cannot wave away, as little as one can wave

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

away the tainted air in a hospital, however clean it may be kept. And this remained with me afterward – though later on I gained the impression that it is also a hotbed of ideas, and that people try to get everything out of life that can by the remotest chance be got out of it. Other cities become small in comparison with it, and it seems as big as the sea. There one always leaves behind a considerable part of one's life. But one thing is certain, nothing is fresh there. Therefore, when one leaves it, one thinks a lot of things elsewhere excellent.

I am extremely glad you have regained your health. All that one does, one does involuntarily; and so, without understanding it oneself for the moment, one does wrong when one falls ill.

It is my impression that you would not think the sun here unpleasant at all; I feel it is excellent for me to work in the open air during the hottest part of the day. It is a dry, clean heat.

Essentially the colour is exquisite here. When the green leaves are fresh, it is a rich green, the like of which we seldom see in the North, quiet. When it gets scorched and dusty, it does not lose its beauty, for then the landscape gets tones of gold of various tints, green-gold, yellow-gold, pink-gold, and in the same way bronze, copper, in short starting from citron yellow all the way to a dull, dark yellow colour like a heap of threshed corn, for instance. And this combined with the blue – from the deepest royal blue of the water to the blue of the forget-me-nots, cobalt, particularly clear, bright blue – green-blue and violet-blue.

Of course this calls up orange – a sunburned face gives the impression of orange. Furthermore, on account of the many yellow hues, violet gets a quick emphasis; a cane fence or a grey thatched roof or a dug-up field make a much more violet impression than at home. Furthermore – something you've already suspected – people are often good-looking here. In a word, I believe that life here is just a little more satisfying than in many other spots. However, I have the impression that people are getting slack here, a little too much affected by the decadence of carelessness, indifference, whereas if they were more energetic the land would probably produce more.

I have not had much time to read lately, except Madame Chrysanthème by Pierre Loti, and also L'Abbé Constantin by Ohnet, frightfully sweet and heavenly, so that even his Maître des forges, which already shows a similar tendency, becomes all the more suspect. At times, driven by a certain mental voracity, I even read the newspapers with fury, but do not deduce from this fact that I feel a craving for reading. This is not really the case to a large extent, because I prefer to look at things myself; but the fact is that one gets into the habit of reading for a few hours at night, so one cannot help feeling as if one were in want of something; but that this feeling is not really distressing, one may infer from the fact that one goes on thinking what one sees interesting.

I have spent a week on the Mediterranean coast; you should think it beautiful. What strikes me here, and what makes painting so attractive, is the clearness of the air; you cannot know what this means, because this is exactly what we do not have in our country – but one distinguishes the colour of things at an hour's distance; for instance the grey-green of the olive trees and the grass green of the meadows, and the pink-lilac of a dug-up field. In our country we see a vague grey line on the horizon; here even in the far, far distance the line is sharply defined, and its shape is clearly distinguishable. This gives one an idea of space and air.

Seeing that I am so busily occupied with myself just now, I want to try to paint my self-portrait in writing. In the first place I want to emphasize the fact that one and the same person may furnish motifs for very different portraits. Here I give a conception of mine, which is the result of a portrait I painted in the mirror, and which is now in Theo's possession.

A pinkish-grey face with green eyes, ash-coloured hair, wrinkles on the forehead and around the mouth, stiff, wooden, a very red beard, considerably neglected and mournful, but the lips are full, a blue peasant's blouse of coarse linen, and a palette with citron yellow, vermilion, malachite green, cobalt blue, in short all the colours on the palette except the orange beard, but only whole colours. The figure against a greyish-white wall.

You will say that this resembles somewhat, for instance, the face of – Death – in Van Eeden's book or some such thing – all right, but it is a figure like this – and it isn't an easy job to paint oneself – at any rate if it is to be different from a photograph. And you see – this, in my opinion, is the advantage that impressionism possesses over all the other things; it is not banal, and one seeks after a deeper resemblance than the photographer's.

However, at the present moment I look different, insofar as I am wearing neither hair nor beard, the same having been shaved off clean. Furthermore, my complexion has changed from green-greyish-pink to greyish-orange, and I am wearing a white suit instead of a blue one, and I am always very dusty, always more bristlingly loaded like a porcupine, with sticks, painter's easel, canvases and further merchandise. Only the green eyes have remained the same, but of course another colour in the portrait is the yellow straw hat, like a hannekenmaaier's,<sup>3</sup> and a very black little pipe – I live in a little yellow house with a green door and green blinds, whitewashed inside – on the white walls very brightly coloured Japanese prints, red tiles on the floor – the house in the full sunlight – and over it an intensely blue sky, and – the shadows in the middle of the day much shorter than in our country. Well – can you

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

understand that one may be able to paint something like this with only a few strokes of the brush? But can't you understand too that there are people who say, "This makes too queer an impression," not to mention those who think it a total abortion or utterly repulsive? But if only there is a likeness, but a likeness different from the products of the God-fearing photographer with his colourless phantoms – this is the aim.

I am positively not very fond of Mr. Vosmaer,<sup>4</sup> and am sufficiently hardhearted to be little impressed by the man's departure from life.

I think it a very good thing that you and Mother preferred to get hold of a garden with she-cats, tom-cats, sparrows and flies, rather than put up with another flight of stairs. In Paris I could never accustom myself to climbing stairs, and I always had fits of dizziness in a horrible nightmare which has left me since, but which came back regularly then.

If I should not mail this letter immediately, I feel absolutely sure that I should tear it up if I read it over – and so I will not read it over, and I think its legibility doubtful. I don't always have time to write. I truly believe there is nothing in this letter, and I should not be able to understand by what means it got this long. Thank Mother in my name for her letter. A long time ago now I designated a painted study for you, and you are sure to get it. I am afraid that if I should send it by parcel post, even if I prepaid the carriage, I should make you pay for insufficient postage, as in the case of the flowers from Menton, and this one is even bigger – but Theo will be sure to send you one; so if I should not think of it, please ask him for it.

I embrace you and Mother in thought.

Your loving Vincent

Theo is doing his best for all the impressionists; he has done something, or sold something, for every one of them, and he will certainly go on doing so. But the few things I wrote you about this question will show you that he is quite different from the other dealers, who do not care the least bit about the painters.

\* Were there enough stamps on the drawing? Please let me know, for I have to know.

1. "Arti" for short, then (and now) a socially recognized painters' association of Amsterdam.
2. Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846-1919), prophet of socialism in Holland, who later passionately opposed the formation of a political labour party, and became an anarchist.
3. Literally, "Little Jack the Mower (or Reaper)," seasonal labourer who in past centuries came to Holland from Western Germany as mowers or harvesters.
4. Carel Vosmaer (1826-1888), Dutch poet and essayist, who evinced a highly progressive spirit for his time.