

My dear friend Bernard,

Many, many thanks for the drawings you sent me. I very much like the avenue of plane trees along the seashore with the two women talking in the foreground and people strolling about. And the woman under the apple tree, the woman with the umbrella. Then the four drawings of nude women, especially the one who is washing herself, a grey effect, enhanced with black, white, yellow, brown. It's charming.

Ah, Rembrandt! ...With all due admiration for Baudelaire, I venture to presume, especially going by those verses, that he knew virtually nothing about Rembrandt. Not long ago I found and bought a small etching after Rembrandt here, a study of a male nude, realistic and simple. He stands, leaning against a door or a pillar, in a dark interior, a shaft of light from above glancing across his bent head and thick red hair. A Degas, you would say, because the animality of the body is real and intensely felt. But listen, have you ever taken a good look at the "Ox" or the "Interior of a Butcher's Shop" in the Louvre? You haven't taken a really good look at them, have you, and Baudelaire infinitely less so. It would be a real treat for me to spend a morning with you in the Dutch Gallery. All those things are almost impossible to describe, but standing in front of the paintings I should be able to point out the miracles and mysteries which are the reason why the primitives do not necessarily take first place in my admiration.

But then, I am scarcely an eccentric; a Greek statue, a peasant by Millet, a Dutch portrait, a female nude by Courbet or Degas, these calm and perfectly modelled representations are the reason why very many other things, the primitives no less than the Japanese, give me the impression of having been composed with the pen. I find that immensely interesting, but anything complete and perfect renders infinity tangible, and the enjoyment of any beautiful thing is like coitus, a moment of infinity.

Do you, for instance, know a painter called Vermeer, who, among other things, painted a very beautiful and pregnant Dutch lady? The palette of this remarkable painter is blue, lemon yellow, pearl grey, black, white. Of course, all the riches of a full palette are there too, in his rarely encountered pictures, but the combination of lemon yellow, pale blue and pearl grey is as characteristic of him – black, white, grey and pink are of Velázquez. Anyway, I know perfectly well that Rembrandt and the Dutch painters are scattered widely over museums and collections, and it isn't very easy to get an overall idea of them if you only know the Louvre. Yet it is the French, Charles Blanc, Thoré, Fromentin and several others, who have written about their art better than the Dutch have. Those Dutch painters had hardly any imagination or fantasy, but an enormous amount of taste and a feeling for composition. They did no paintings of Christ, Our Lord, etc. – Rembrandt did, of course, but he was the only one (and biblical subjects are relatively rare in his work). He was the only one who, exceptionally, painted figures of Christ, etc. And with him, they look quite unlike anything done by other religious painters, it is all metaphysical magic.

This is how Rembrandt painted angels. He does a self-portrait, old, toothless, wrinkled, wearing a cotton cap, a picture from life, in a mirror. He is dreaming, dreaming, and his brush takes up his self-portrait again, but this time from memory, and the expression on the face becomes sadder and more saddening. He dreams, dreams on, and why or how I cannot tell, but – as Socrates and Mohammed had their guardian spirits, so Rembrandt paints a supernatural angel with a da Vinci smile behind that old man who resembles himself.

I am showing you a painter who dreams and paints from the imagination, and I started by contending that it is characteristic of the Dutch that they do not invent anything, that they have neither imagination nor fantasy.

Am I being illogical? No.

Rembrandt did not invent anything, and that angel and that strange Christ came about because he knew them, felt that they were there.

Delacroix paints a Christ using the unexpected note of bright lemon yellow in such a way that the colourful and radiant note in the picture assumes the inexpressible strangeness and charm of a star in a corner of the firmament. Rembrandt works with tonal values in the same way that Delacroix works with colours.

Well now, there is a world of difference between the method used by Delacroix and Rembrandt and that of all other religious painters.

I'll write again soon. This is to thank you for the drawings, which have given me enormous pleasure. I have just finished a portrait of a girl of 12, brown eyes, black hair and black eyebrows, yellowish-grey flesh, white background, strongly tinged with Veronese green, a blood-red bodice with violet stripes. Blue skin with large orange polka dots, an oleander flower in the sweet little hand [F 431, JH 1519]. It has exhausted me so much that I am hardly in a fit state to write. Goodbye for now, and once more many thanks,

Ever yours, Vincent