

My dear comrade Bernard,

I don't have the slightest doubt that you'll admit that neither you nor I can have a complete idea of Velázquez and Goya, of what they were as men and as painters, for neither of us has seen Spain, their country, and so many beautiful things which are still left in the South. But what one knows of them is already something nevertheless. Of course as for the people of the North, Rembrandt first of all, it is highly desirable, when judging these painters, to know their work as a whole as well as their country, and also the somewhat intimate and concise history of the period and of the customs of the old country.

I emphatically repeat that neither Baudelaire nor you has a sufficiently clear idea of Rembrandt.

As for you, I cannot encourage you strongly enough to spend a long time looking at the great and minor Dutchmen before forming a fixed opinion. It is not merely a question of gems, but a question of selecting marvels among the marvels.

And then there is not a little paste among the diamonds.

So, as for me, who have been studying the school of my country for twenty years now, I shouldn't even answer if it were being discussed, because in general I hear too much talk which is beside the point, when the painters of the North are under discussion.

So that my only answer to you is, Bah! look a little closer than that; it will truly repay your trouble a thousandfold.

Look here, for instance, if I declare that the Ostade in the Louvre representing "The Painter's Family" (man, wife and a dozen children) is a picture infinitely worthy of study and reflection, as well as "The Peace of Munster" by Terborch – and then, when those pictures in the gallery of the Louvre which I personally prefer and think most astonishing are overlooked very often by artists, even by those who have come to see the Dutchmen, then I am not very surprised, as I know that my choice in that gallery is based on a knowledge of this subject which the majority of the French could not possibly share.

But if I disagreed with you, for instance, about these subjects, I should confidently expect you to grant that I was right later on. But what pains me so terribly in the Louvre is to see their Rembrandts going to ruin and the idiots of the administration letting so many beautiful pictures decay. So the annoying yellow tone of certain Rembrandts is the result of deterioration from moisture or some other causes; in some cases I could point it out to you with a wet finger.

It is as difficult to say what Rembrandt's colour is as it is to give a name to Velázquez' grey. For want of a better name one might call it "Rembrandt gold." And this is what they have done, but it is pretty vague.

Coming to France as a foreigner, I, perhaps better than Frenchmen born and bred, have felt Delacroix and Zola, and my sincere and wholehearted admiration for them is boundless.

Since I had a somewhat complete notion of Rembrandt, one, Delacroix, got his results by colours, the other, Rembrandt, by tonal values, but they are on a par. [In his haste Vincent must have left part of this sentence out, but his meaning is clear nonetheless.]

In their quality as painters of a society, of a nature in its entirety, Zola and Balzac produce rare artistic emotions in those who love them, just because they embrace the whole of the epoch they depict.

When Delacroix paints humanity, life in general, instead of an epoch, he belongs no less to the same family of universal geniuses.

I very much like the last words of, I think, Silvestre, who ended a masterly article in this way: "Thus died – almost smiling – Delacroix, a painter of a noble race, who had a sun in his head and a thunderstorm in his heart, who turned from the warriors to the saints, from the saints to the lovers, from the lovers to the tigers, and from the tigers to the flowers."

Daumier is also a great genius.

And then Millet, the painter of a whole race and the environment it lives in.

It is possible that these great geniuses are only madmen, and that one must be mad oneself to have boundless faith in them and a boundless admiration for them. If this is true, I should prefer my insanity to the sanity of the others.

Perhaps the most direct road is to approach Rembrandt indirectly. Let's talk about Frans Hals. He never painted Christs, annunciations to the shepherds, angels, crucifixions or resurrections; he never painted nude, voluptuous and bestial women.

He did portraits, and nothing, nothing else.

Portraits of soldiers, gatherings of officers, portraits of magistrates assembled to debate the affairs of the republic, portraits of matrons with pink or yellow skins, wearing white caps and dressed in wool and black satin, discussing the budget of an orphanage or an almshouse. He painted the portraits of middle-class men in their homes: the man,

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the woman, the child. He painted the drunken toper, an old fishwife in a mood of witch-like hilarity, the pretty gypsy whore, babies in their diapers, the dashing, self-indulgent nobleman with his mustache, top boots and spurs. He painted himself, together with his wife, young, deeply in love, on a bench on a lawn, after the first wedding night. He painted vagabonds and laughing urchins, he painted musicians and he painted a fat cook.

He does not know greater things than that; but it is certainly worth as much as Dante's Paradise and the Michelangelos and the Raphaels and even the Greeks. It is as beautiful as Zola, healthier as well as merrier, but as true to life, because his epoch was healthier and less dismal.

And now what is Rembrandt?

The same thing absolutely: a painter of portraits.

One must first of all have a healthy, broad, clear notion of these two brilliant Dutchmen, equal in value, before going any further into the subject. When we have understood this thoroughly – this whole glorious republic, depicted by these two prolific portraitists, reconstructed in bold outlines – then we still keep a very large margin for landscapes, domestic scenes, animals, philosophical subjects.

But I implore you, follow this straightforward reasoning carefully, for I am doing my best to present it to you in a very, very simple way.

Hammer into your head that master Frans Hals, that painter of all kinds of portraits, of a whole gallant, live, immortal republic. Hammer into your head the no less great and universal master painter of portraits of the Dutch republic: Rembrandt Harmensz [son of Harmen] van Rijn, that broad-minded naturalistic man, as healthy as Hals himself. And then we see issuing from this source, Rembrandt, a line of direct and true pupils: Vermeer of Delft, Fabritius, Nicholaes Maes, Pieter de Hooch, Bol, and those whom he influenced: Potter, Ruysdael, Ostade, Terborch. I mention Fabritius here although we know only two canvases of his, and I don't mention a lot of good painters, and especially not the paste among these diamonds, that paste so solidly crammed into the vulgar French noodles.

Am I very incomprehensible, my dear comrade Bernard? I am just trying to make you see the great simple thing: the painting of humanity, or rather of a whole republic, by the simple means of portraiture. This first and foremost.

When later on – in the case of Rembrandt – we happen to meet with mysticism, with Christs, with nude women, then it is very interesting but it is not the main thing. Let Baudelaire hold his tongue in this domain; his words are sonorous but then infinitely shallow.

Let us take Baudelaire for what he is, a modern poet, just as Musset is another, but let him stop being a nuisance when we are speaking about painting. ¹ I don't like your drawing "Lechery" as much as the others. I like "The Tree," however; it is very smart.

A handshake,

Sincerely yours, Vincent

1. [Footnote by Bernard] All this was provoked by my quoting with admiration the quatrain from Charles Baudelaire's Phares:

Rembrandt triste hôpital tout rempli de murmures
Et d'un grand crucifix décoré seulement,
D'où la prière en pleurs s'exhale des ordures
Et d'un rayon d'hiver traverse brusquement.

[Rembrandt – sad hospital filled full of murmurs
And decorated only with a great crucifix
Where the tearful prayer breathes out of the filth
And brusquely traversed by a wintry ray.]