

My dear comrade Bernard,

I see I forgot to answer your question as to whether Gauguin is still in Pont-Aven. Yes, he is still there, and if you should like to write to him, I am inclined to think he will be pleased. He has been staying there till now, but he will probably join me here before long, as soon as he himself or both of us can get the money for the journey.

I don't believe that this question of the Dutch painters, which we are discussing at the moment, is without interest. As soon as virility, originality, naturalism of whatever kind come into question, it is very interesting to consult them. But I must speak to you again first of all about yourself, the two still lifes you have done and the two portraits of your grandmother. Have you ever done anything better than that, and have you ever been more yourself and a personality? I think not. The profound study of the first thing which came to hand, of the first person who came along was enough to create really. Do you know why I like these three or four studies so much? Because of that unknown quality of deliberateness, of great wisdom, that inexpressible quality of being steady and firm and self-assured of which they give evidence. You have never been closer to Rembrandt, old fellow, than in these studies. In Rembrandt's studio that incomparable sphinx, Vermeer of Delft, found this extremely solid technique which has never been surpassed, which at present... we are burning ... to find. Oh, I know we are working and reasoning with colours, just as they were with chiaroscuro, tonal values.

But what do these differences matter, when the great thing after all is to express oneself strongly?

At present you are studying the methods of the Italian and German primitives, the symbolic significance which the abstract mystical drawing of the Italians may contain. Go ahead. I myself rather like that anecdote about Giotto.

There was a contest for painting some picture or other representing a Virgin. A lot of cartoons were submitted to the Administration of Fine Arts of the time. One of these cartoons, signed Giotto, was simply an oval, an egg shape. The Administration, perplexed – and confident – entrusted the Virgin in question to Giotto. I don't know whether it is true or not, but I like that anecdote quite a lot.

However, let us return to Daumier and your grandmother.

When are you going to show us studies of such vigorous soundness again? I urgently invite you to do it, although I most certainly do not despise your researches relating to the property of lines in opposite motion – as I am not at all indifferent, I hope, to the simultaneous contrasts of lines, forms. The trouble is – you see, my dear comrade Bernard – that Giotto and Cimabue, as well as Holbein and Van Dyck, lived in an obeliscal – excuse the word – solidly framed society, architecturally constructed, in which each individual was a stone, and all the stones clung together, forming a monumental society. When the socialists construct their logical social edifice – which they are still pretty far from doing – I am sure mankind will see a reincarnation of this society. But, you know, we are in the midst of downright *laissez-aller* and anarchy. We artists, who love order and symmetry, isolate ourselves and are working to define only one thing.

Puvis [de Chavannes] knows this all right, and when he, so just and so wise – forgetting his Elysian Fields – was so good as to descend amiably into the intimacy of our time, he painted a fine portrait indeed: the serene old man in the clear light of his blue interior, reading a novel with a yellow cover – beside him a glass of water with a watercolour brush and a rose in it. Also a fashionable lady, as de Goncourts have depicted them.

Now we see that the Dutch paint things just as they are, apparently without reasoning, just as Courbet painted his beautiful nude women. They painted portraits, landscapes, still lifes. Well, one can be stupider than that, and commit greater follies.

If we don't know what to do, my dear comrade Bernard, then let's do as they did if only not to let our rare intellectual power evaporate in sterile metaphysical meditations which cannot possibly put the chaos into a goblet, as chaos is chaotic for the very reason that it contains no glass of our caliber.

We can – and this was done by these Dutchmen who are so desperately naughty in the eyes of people with a system – we can paint an atom of the chaos, a horse, a portrait, your grandmother, apples, a landscape.

Why do you say Degas is impotently flabby? Degas lives like a small lawyer and does not like women, for he knows that if he loved them and fucked them often, he, intellectually diseased, would become insipid as a painter. Degas's painting is virile and impersonal for the very reason that he has resigned himself to be nothing personally but a small lawyer with a horror of going on a spree. He looks on while the human animals, stronger than himself get excited and fuck, and he paints them well, exactly because he doesn't have the pretension to get excited himself. Reubens! Ah, that one! he was a handsome man and a good fucker, Courbet too. Their health permitted them to drink, eat, fuck ... As for you, my poor dear comrade Bernard, I already told you in the spring: eat a lot, do your military exercises well, don't fuck too much; when you do this your painting will be all the more spermatic.

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Ah! Balzac, that great and powerful artist, has rightly told us that relative chastity fortifies the modern artist. The Dutchmen were married men and begot children, a fine, very fine craftsmanship, and deeply rooted in nature.

One swallow does not make a summer. I don't say that among your new Breton studies there are none which are virile and sound; I have not seen them yet, so I could not possibly discuss them. But what I have seen were those virile things: the portrait of your grandmother, those still lifes. But judging from your drawings, I have vague misgivings that your new studies will not have the same vigor, exactly in point of virility.

Those studies, which I am speaking about first, are the first swallow of your artistic spring.

If we want to be really potent males in our work, we must sometimes resign ourselves to not fuck much, and for the rest be monks or soldiers, according to the needs of our temperament. The Dutch, once more, had peaceful habits and a peaceful life, calm, well regulated.

Delacroix-ah! that man! –“I found,” he says, “my style of painting when I had neither teeth nor breath left!” – and those who saw this famous artist paint said, “When Delacroix paints, it is like a lion devouring his piece [of meat].” He did not fuck much, and only had easy love affairs, so as not to curtail the time devoted to his work.

If you discover in this letter, which seems more incoherent than I should have liked it to be, considered by itself in relation to your correspondence and especially to the friendship which preceded it – if you discover in this letter some uneasiness – or at any rate solicitude – about your health, with a view to the severe trial you will have to undergo when you do your military service – obligatory, alas! – then you will read it correctly. I know that the study of the Dutch painters can only do you good, for their works are so virile, so full of male potency, so healthy.

Personally I feel that continence is good for me, that it is enough for our weak, impressionable artists' brains to give their essence to the creation of our pictures. For when we reflect, calculate, exhaust ourselves, we spend cerebral energy.

Why exert ourselves to pour out all our creative sap where the well-fed professional pimps and ordinary fools do better in the matter of satisfying the genital organs of the whore, who is in this case more submissive than we are ourselves?

The whore in question has more of my sympathy than my compassion.

Being a creature exiled, outcast from society, like you and me who are artists, she is certainly our friend and sister.

And in this condition of being an outcast she finds – just as we ourselves do – an independence which is not without its advantages after all, when you come to think of it. So let's beware of assuming an erroneous attitude by believing that we can do her a service by means of a social rehabilitation which for that matter is hardly practicable and would be fatal to her.

I have just done a portrait of a postman [F 432, JH 1522], or rather even two portraits. A Socratic type, none the less Socratic for being somewhat addicted to liquor and having a high colour as a result. His wife had just had a child, and the fellow was aglow with satisfaction. He is a terrible republican, like old Tanguy. God damn it! what a motif to paint in the manner of Daumier, eh!

He kept himself too stiff when posing, which is why I painted him twice, the second time at a single sitting [F 433, JH 1524]. A blue, nearly white background on the white canvas, all the broken tones in the face – yellows, greens, violets, pinks, reds. The uniform Prussian blue, with yellow adornments.

Write me soon if you feel like it, I am overburdened with work, and haven't found time yet for figure sketches. A handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

PS. Cézanne is a respectable married man just like the old Dutchmen; if there is plenty of male potency in his work it is because he does not let it evaporate in merrymaking.