

My dear Theo,

Shortly you are going to make the acquaintance of Mr. Patience Escalier, a sort of man with a hoe, former drover of the Camargue, now gardener at a farm in the Crau. Today I am sending you the drawing I made after this painting [F 1460, JH 1549], as well as the drawing of the portrait of the postman Rollin [sic] [F 1458, JH 1536]. The colouring of this portrait [F 443, JH 1548] of the peasant is less black than the potato eaters of Nuenen, but our highly civilized Parisian Portier – probably so called because he chucks pictures out – will be bothered by the same old problem. You have changed since then, but you still see that he has not, and it really is a pity that there are not more paintings en sabots in Paris. I don't think that my peasant would do harm to the Lautrec that you have and I even dare say that the Lautrec would become even more distinguished by the mutual contrast, and that my own would gain by the odd comparison, because the sunlit and sunburned quality of the huge sun and the open air would show to advantage beside the rice powder and the chic dressing table¹.

What a mistake Parisians make in not having a palate for crude things, for Monticellis, for common earthenware. But there, one must not lose heart because Utopia is not coming true. It is only that what I learned in Paris is leaving me, and I am returning to the ideas I had in the country before I knew the impressionists. And I should not be surprised if the impressionists soon find fault with my way of working, for it has been fertilized by Delacroix's ideas rather than by theirs. Because instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour more arbitrarily, in order to express myself forcibly. Well, let that be, as far as theory goes, but I'm going to give you an example of what I mean.

I should like to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is his nature. He'll be a blond man. I want to put my appreciation, the love I have for him into the picture. So I paint him as he is, as faithfully as I can, to begin with.

But the picture is not yet finished. To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colourist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I even get to orange tones, chromes and pale citron-yellow [F 462, JH 1574].

Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.

Similarly in the portrait of the peasant I have worked this way, but in this case without wishing to evoke the mysterious brilliance of a pale star in the infinite blue. But imagine the terrible man that I have to do in the full furnace of the harvest at high noon. Hence the flashing orange colours like a red-hot fire, hence the tones of old gold luminous in the gloom.

Ah, my dear boy - - and the good folk will not see in this exaggeration anything but a caricature.

But what has that to do with us? We've read *La Terre* and *Germinal*, and if we are painting a peasant, we want to show that in the end what we have read has come very near to being part of us.

I do not know if I can paint the postman as I feel him; this man is like old Tanguy in so far as he is a revolutionary, he is probably thought a good republican because he wholeheartedly detests the republic which we now enjoy, and because on the whole he is beginning to doubt, to be a little disillusioned, as to the republican principle itself.

But I once watched him sing the "Marseillaise" and I thought I was watching '89, not next year, but the old 99 years ago. It was a Delacroix, a Daumier, straight from the old Dutchmen.

Unfortunately he cannot pose, and yet to make a picture you must have an intelligent model.

And now I must tell you that these days, as far as material things go, are cruelly hard. Life, no matter what I do, is pretty expensive here, almost like Paris, where you can spend 5 or 6 francs a day and have very little to show for it.

If I have models, I suffer a good deal for it. But it doesn't matter, and I'm going to continue. And I can assure you that if you should happen to send me a little extra money sometimes, it would benefit the pictures, but not me. The only choice I have is between being a good painter and a bad one. I choose the first. But the needs of the painting are like those of a wasteful mistress, you can do nothing without money, and you never have enough of it. That's why painting ought to be done at the public expense, instead of the artists being overburdened with it.

But there, we had better hold our tongues, because no one is forcing us to work, fate having ordained that indifference to painting be widespread and by way of being eternal.

Fortunately my digestion is so nearly all right again that I have lived for three weeks in the month on ship's biscuits with milk and eggs. It is the blessed warmth that is bringing back my strength, and I was certainly right in going at once to the South, instead of waiting until the evil was past remedy. Yes, really, I am as well as other men now, which I have never been except for a short while in Nuenen for instance, and it is rather pleasant. By other men I

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mean something like the navvies, old Tanguy, old Millet, the peasants. When you are well, you must be able to live on a piece of bread while you are working all day, and have enough strength to smoke and to drink your glass in the evening, that's necessary under the circumstances. And all the same to feel the stars and the infinite high and clear above you. Then life is almost enchanted after all. Oh! those who don't believe in this sun here are real infidels.

Unfortunately, along with the good god sun three quarters of the time there is the devil mistral.

Saturday's post has gone, damn it, and I never doubted but I should get your letter. However, you see I am not fretting about it.

With a handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent

1. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "Poudre de Riz", Van Gogh Museum.