

Dear Rappard,

Thanks for your quick reply – so you soon succeeded in finding rooms, and are now living near the academy. With reference to a certain question, which I descried at the bottom of your postcard, I want to tell you that, far from thinking it “stupid” of you to go to the aforesaid sanctuary, I think it very wise, even so wise that – yes, that I am almost tempted to say, a little bit too wise and righteous.

In my opinion if you had not gone, if your expedition had not taken place, it would have been all the better, but since you have undertaken it, I wish you success from the bottom of my heart, and notwithstanding everything, I have no doubt about the good results.

You – and others too – even if you really and truly attend the lessons at the academy, you will of course never be in my eyes an “academician” in the despicable sense of the word. Of course I do not take you for one of those arrogant fellows whom one might call the Pharisees of art, and the prototype of whom is, I think, “good old” Stallaert. And yet even this man may have something good in him, and if I knew him better, I might think differently of his Honour. But it will be difficult to hammer it into my head that his Honour does not have something damned bad in him too, which eclipses his possible good qualities. Nothing pleases me more than discovering good qualities even in such fellows. It always hurts me, it always makes me nervous, when I meet a man of whose principles I am obliged to say, “But this is really too bad, this doesn’t hold water,” and I go on having this choking feeling until someday I discover something good in him.

Never think it gives me pleasure to notice something wrong; it grieves me and gives me so much pain that at times I cannot keep it to myself. Ca m’agace [it exasperates me].

I do not like catching myself at “having a beam in mine eye,” and yet – yet I have happened to catch myself at it, but then I didn’t let it go at that, and I tried to remedy it.

And exactly because I know from my own experience how terrible such a “beam in one’s eye” is, I sympathize with others suffering from the same complaint.

Please, please do not take me for a fanatic or a partisan. Certainly I have the courage to take sides, like any other man; at times one is compelled to do so in life, one is compelled to speak one’s mind and to give one’s opinion candidly, and stick to it.

But seeing that I do my utmost to look at the undeniably good side of things in the first place, and only afterward, most unwillingly, look at the bad side too, I make bold to believe that, even if I have not quite succeeded in it, I shall eventually arrive at what I may call in general a mild and broad and unprejudiced judgment. And therefore it is to me a petite misère de la vie humaine to meet a man who thinks he is always right, and who demands to be taken for someone who is always right; and this is because I am so convinced of my own fallibility and, at the same time, of the fallibility of all the children of men.

Now as to you, I believe that you too are striving after a mild and broad and unprejudiced judgment of things, in life but more especially in art. And therefore nothing is further from my mind than looking upon you as a Pharisee, either in the moral or in the artistic sense.

But for all that, such people as you and I, who decidedly have honest intentions, are not perfect after all, and often make very bad mistakes, and besides, are influenced by their environment and by circumstances. And we should be deceiving ourselves if we thought we stood so firm in our shoes that we had no need to take heed lest we fall.

You and I “think we stand,” but malheur a nous if we should become foolhardy and careless because we feel sure – and rightly so – that we possess some more or less good qualities. Attaching too much importance to the good that is in us, even if it is really and truly there, may lead us to Phariseism.

When you are making vigorous studies after the nude like the ones you showed me, whether at the academy or somewhere else, when I am drawing potato diggers in a field – then we are doing good things by which we shall make progress. But, as I see it, for all that we must be especially distrustful of ourselves and be on our guard against ourselves as soon as we perceive that we are on the right road. When we must say: Let me be very careful, for I am just the kind of man to spoil things for myself when they seem good – unless I am careful. How must we be careful???...this I cannot define, but I am most decidedly of the opinion that in the case I mentioned, being careful is necessary, for from my own bitter experience, through my own sufferings and shame, I have become conscious of what I underlined just now. The fact that my being conscious of my own fallibility will keep me from making many mistakes will certainly not prevent my making a great many mistakes after all. But after we fall, we stand up again...!

So I think it a very good thing that you are painting from the nude at the academy, just because I am confident that you will not consider yourself righteous like the Pharisees on account of it, nor think those whose views differ from

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yours insignificant. Your work, far more than your words and expressions, has given me this conviction, and it has grown stronger and stronger.

Today, I drew another digger. And also since your visit, a boy cutting grass with a sickle [F851, JH 061].

And a man and a woman sitting by the fire besides [F897, JH 063; F 1216, JH 064].

We all enjoyed your visit very much; I am so glad to have seen your watercolours, you have made progress indeed.

Yet I should like to see you draw or paint ordinary people with their clothes on. I shouldn't be surprised if you made a success of it; I often think of that clerk whose portrait you drew during the sermon of the Very Reverend and Learned Dr. Kam. But since then I have not seen any more drawings by you like that one, which I regret – have you been reclaimed, by any chance, and are you listening more to the sermon nowadays instead of paying attention to the speaker and his audience? In some cases the speaker can carry us with him to such an extent that we forget everything around us, but this often happens in church, and I should wish it were always like that in church.

Well, I hope that you will write soon, and that you will have a good time and good luck in Brussels. And don't forget to drop in on your return journey, if it is possible; let's agree on that as a matter of principle.

Kind regards from my parents and a handshake in thought from me. And believe me

Ever yours,

Vincent