

The Hague, 31 December 1882 and 2 January 1883

Dear Theo,

It is New Year's Eve and I want another chat with you.

When I wrote my last letter, I spoke of some large heads I was working on. At that time I was busy making an experiment of which I can tell you the initial outcome, as I had models for two drawings the day before yesterday, yesterday and today.

When I made the lithographs, it struck me that the lithographic crayon was very pleasant material, and I thought, I'll make drawings with it.

However, there is one drawback which you will understand – as it is greasy, it cannot be erased in the usual way; working with it on paper, one even loses the only thing with which one can erase on the stone itself, namely the scraper – which cannot be used strongly enough on the paper because it cuts through it.

But it occurred to me to make a drawing first with carpenter's pencil and then to work in and over it with lithographic crayon, which (because of the greasiness of the material) fixes the pencil, a thing ordinary crayon does not do, or, at least, does very badly. After doing a sketch in this way, one can, with a firm hand, use the lithographic crayon where it is necessary, without much hesitation or erasing. So I finished my drawings pretty well in pencil, indeed, as much as possible. Then I fixed them, and dulled them with milk. And then I worked it up again with lithographic crayon where the deepest tones were, retouched them here and there with a brush or pen, with lampblack, and worked in the lighter parts with white body colour.

In this way I made a drawing of an old man sitting reading, with the light falling on his bald head, on his hand and the book [F 1001, JH 278]. And the second one, the bandaged head of an injured man. The model who sat for this really had a head injury and a bandage over his left eye [F 1003, JH 285]. Just like a head, for instance, of a soldier, of the old guard in the retreat from Russia.

Now when I compare these two heads with the others I have done, there is a great difference in the power of effect. So I hope that the drawings done this way will lend themselves to reproduction by the process which you described to me. Especially if the paper you sent is not absolutely necessary for the reproduction.

And if it is, I should be more apt to get a better than a worse effect on this grey paper with the same ingredients.

When I looked at what Buhot had scratched on one of the samples, I saw at once that the black was of a very deep tone, and I can understand that this is a real necessity for the reproduction where photography and galvanography are used. So I at once began to try to find what kind of black to use and still stick to my usual way of sketching. First I tried it with ink, but that didn't satisfy me; however, I think that with the lithographic-crayon method the results will be better.

Well, I am not writing about it to worry you during your busy days; I am in no hurry for it, and am even very glad to have a little time for additional experiments.

But I am writing you about it so that you may know I am working heart and soul on it to get a good and useful result. What is called Black and White is in fact painting in black, meaning that one gives the same depth of effect, the same richness of tone value in a drawing that ought to be in a painting.

Some time ago you rightly said that every colourist has his own characteristic scale of colours.

This is also the case with Black and White, it is the same after all – one must be able to go from the highest light to the deepest shadow, and this with only a few simple ingredients. Some artists have a nervous hand at drawing, which gives their technique something of the sound peculiar to a violin, for instance, Lemud, Daumier, Lançon – others, for example, Gavarni and Bodmer, remind one more of piano playing. Do you feel this too? – Millet is perhaps a stately organ.

2 January

This is as far as I got on New Year's Eve, I had hoped your letter would come. If you haven't written already, do so now, for I haven't a cent left. But you are very busy, I suppose.

Since then I have again done a few sketches with the lithographic crayon – it makes drawing almost as delightful as painting, and it gives a great vigour and depth of tone.

I long very much indeed to see you again. I have so many plans – not all of which will be realized, I suppose, nor will they all be failures – and I want so badly to talk them over with you because I have so little time to think them over and I am so little in touch with what is in demand that I cannot judge what is practicable. Please do not let my having done nothing saleable this year worry you; you once said the same thing to me, and if I say so now, it is because I see a few things within my reach in the future which I couldn't see before.

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I sometimes think of the time, a year ago, when I came here to The Hague. I had imagined that the painters formed a kind of circle or society in which warmth and cordiality and a certain kind of harmony reigned. This seemed to me quite natural, and I didn't suppose it could be different.

Nor should I want to lose the ideas I had about it then, though I must modify them and distinguish between what is and what might be. I cannot believe so much coolness and disharmony is natural.

What's the reason??? I don't know and it's not my business to find out, but it's a matter of principle with me that I personally must avoid two things. First, one must not quarrel but, instead of that, try to promote peace – for others as well as for oneself. And second, my opinion is that if one is a painter, one must not try to be something other than a painter in society; as a painter, one must avoid other social ambitions and not try to keep up with the people who live in the Voorhout, Willemspark, etc. For in the old dark, smoky studios there was a good fellowship and genuineness which was infinitely better than what threatens to replace it.

If you should find some progress in my work when you come here again, I should have no other desire than to go on in the same way I have – that is, to continue my work quietly without mixing with anybody else. When there is bread in the house and I have some money in my pocket to pay the models, what more can I want? My pleasure lies in the progress of my work, and that absorbs me more and more.

Well, boy, if you haven't written already, do so soon, for I am rather hard up. Once more, my best wishes for the New Year. I had a nice letter from home. Adieu. With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent