

Dear Theo,

I think I already told you in my last letter that I also wanted to start a large man's figure besides that woman spinning. Enclosed you will now find a sketch of it. Perhaps you remember two studies of the same nook, which I already had in the studio when you were here.

I have read *Les Maitres d'Autrefois* [The Masters of the Past] by Fromentin with great pleasure. And that book frequently deals with the same questions which have greatly preoccupied me of late, and which, in fact, I am continually thinking of, especially because when I was last in The Hague I heard things Israëls had said about starting with a deep colour scheme, thus making even relatively dark colours seem light. In short, to express light by opposing it to black. I already know what you're going to say about "too black," but at the same time I am not quite convinced yet that a gray sky, for instance, must always be painted in the local tone. Mauve does it, but Ruysdael does not, Dupré does not. Corot and Daubigny???

Well, it is the same with figure painting as it is with landscape. I mean Israëls paints a white wall quite differently from Regnault or Fortuny.

And consequently, the figure stands out quite differently against it.

When I hear you mention so many new names, it is not always easy for me to understand because I have seen absolutely nothing of them. And from what you told me about "impressionism," I have indeed concluded that it is different from what I thought, but it's not quite clear to me what it really is.

But for my part, I find Israëls, for instance, so enormously great that I am little curious about or desirous for other or newer things.

Fromentin says of Ruysdael that at present they are much further advanced in technique than he was, also much more advanced than Cabat, who sometimes greatly resembles Ruysdael in his stately simplicity, for instance in the picture at the Luxembourg.

But has what Ruysdael, what Cabat, said become untrue or superfluous for that reason? No, it's the same with Israëls, with De Groux too (De Groux was very simple).

But if one says what one has to say clearly, strictly speaking, isn't that enough? And it may become more pleasant to hear if it is said with more charm, something I do not disdain, yet it does not add very much to the beauty of what is true, because truth has a beauty of its own.

The measurements of the foregoing sketch are about 105 x 95 cm., and that of the little woman spinning, 100 X 75. They are painted in a tone of bistre and bitumen, which, in my opinion, are well suited to expressing the warm chiaroscuro of a close, dusty interior. Artz would certainly find it too dingy.

It has already annoyed me for a long time, Theo, that some of the present-day painters rob us of the bistre and the bitumen, with which surely so many splendid things have been painted, and which, well applied, make the colouring ripe and mellow and generous, and at the same time are so distinguished and possess such very remarkable and peculiar qualities.

But at the same time they require some effort in learning to use them, for they must be used differently from the ordinary colours, and I think it quite possible that many are discouraged by the experiments one must make first and which, of course, do not succeed on the very first day one begins to use them. It is now just about a year ago that I began to use them, chiefly for interiors; at first I was awfully disappointed in them, but I could not forget the beautiful things I had seen made with them.

You have better opportunities than I to hear about art books. If you come across good books, such as that book of Fromentin's on the Dutch painters, for instance, or if you remember any, don't forget I should be very glad if you bought some – provided they treat technical matters – and if you deducted the money from my usual allowance. I certainly intend to study theory seriously, I do not think it at all useless, and I believe that what one feels by instinct or by intuition often becomes definite and clear if one is guided in one's efforts by some really practical words. Even if there might be just one or very few things of that kind in a book, it is sometimes worth while not only to read it but even to buy it, particularly now.

And then in the time of Thoré and Blanc there were people who wrote things which, alas, are already being forgotten. To give you an example.

Do you know what "un ton entier" and "un ton rompu" is? Of course you can see it in a picture, but can you also explain what you see? What is meant by rompre? Such things one ought to know theoretically also, either practically as painter, or in discussing colour as a connoisseur.

Most people give it whatever meaning they like, and yet these words, for instance have a very definite significance.

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The laws of the colours are unutterably beautiful, just because they are not accidentals. In the same way that people nowadays no longer believe in fantastic miracles, no longer believe in a God who capriciously and despotically flies from one thing to another, but begin to feel more respect and admiration for and faith in nature – in the same way, and for the same reasons, I think that in art, the old-fashioned idea of innate genius, inspiration, etc., I do not say must be put aside, but thoroughly reconsidered, verified – and greatly modified. However, I do not deny the existence of genius, or even its being innate. But I certainly do deny the inference that theory and instruction should, as a matter of course, always be useless.

The same thing which I applied in the woman spinning and the old man spooling yarn, I hope, or rather I shall try, to do much better later on.

But in these two studies from life I have been a little more myself than I succeeded in being in most of the other studies – except perhaps in some of my drawings.

With regard to black – accidentally I did not use it in these studies, as I needed, among other things, some stronger effects than black; and indigo with terra sienna, Prussian blue with burnt sienna, really give much deeper tones than pure black itself. When I hear people say “there is no black in nature,” I sometimes think, There is no real black in colours either.

However, you must beware of falling into the error of thinking that the colourists do not use black, for of course as soon as an element of blue, red, or yellow is mixed with black, it becomes a grey, namely, a dark, reddish, yellowish, or bluish grey. I found very interesting, for instance, what Ch. Blanc says about Velázquez’ technique in Les Artistes de mon temps; his shadows and half-tones consist mostly of colourless, cool greys, the chief elements of which are black and a little white. In these neutral, colourless mediums, the least cloud or shade of red has an immediate effect.

Well, goodbye, do write soon if you have anything to tell me.

It sometimes surprises me that you do not feel as much for Jules Dupré as I should like you to do.

I am firmly convinced that, if I again saw what I saw of his work in the past, far from thinking it less beautiful, I should think it even more beautiful than I always instinctively did. Dupré is perhaps even more of a colourist than Corot and Daubigny, though these two are that too, and Daubigny especially is very daring in this colour. But in Dupré’s colour there is something of a splendid symphony, complete, studied, manly. I imagine Beethoven must be something like that...

That symphony is enormously calculated, and yet simple, and infinitely deep as nature itself. That is what I think of Dupré.

Well, goodbye, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

[Sketch “Old Man Reeling Yarn” JH 498, enclosed with letter.]