

Letter 402
Nuenen, 21 April 1885

Dear Theo,

By the same mail you will receive a number of copies of the lithograph. Please give Mr. Portier as many as he wants. And I enclose a letter for him, which I am afraid you will think rather long, and in consequence unpractical. But I thought that what I had to say couldn't be expressed in more concise terms, and that the chief point is to give him arguments for his own instinctive feelings. And in fact what I write to him I say also to you.

There is a school – I believe – of impressionists. But I know very little about it. But I do know who are the original and most important masters, around whom – as round an axis – the landscape and peasant painters will turn. Delacroix, Corot, Millet and the rest. That is my own opinion, not formulated as it should be.

I mean there are (rather than persons) rules or principles or fundamental truths for drawing, as well as for colour, upon which one proves to fall back when one finds out an actual truth.

In drawing, for instance – that question of drawing the figure beginning with the circle – that is to say taking as one's basis the elliptical planes. A thing which the ancient Greeks already knew, and which will continue to apply till the end of the world. As to colour, those everlasting problems, for instance, that first question Corot addressed to Français, when Français (who already had a reputation) asked Corot (who then had nothing but a negative or rather bad reputation) when he (F) came to Corot, to get some information: "Qu'est-ce que c'est un ton rompu? Qu'est-ce que c'est un ton neutre?" [what is a broken tone? What is a neutral tone?]

Which can be better shown on the palette than expressed in words.

So what I want to tell Portier in this letter is my confirmed belief in Eugene Delacroix and the people of that time. And at the same time, as the picture which I have in hand is different from lamplights by Dou or Van Schendel, it is perhaps not superfluous to point out how one of the most beautiful things done by the painters of this country has been the painting of black, which nevertheless has light in it. Well, just read my letter and you will see that it is not unintelligible, and that it treats a subject that just occurred to me while painting.

I hope to have some luck with that picture of the potato-eaters.

I also have on hand a red sunset.

In order to paint rural life one must be master of so many things. But on the other hand I don't know anything at which one works with so much calm, in the sense of serenity, however much of a worry one may be having as regards material things.

I am rather worried just now about the moving, that's no easy job, on the contrary. But it had to happen some time, if not now, then later, and in the long run it is better to have a place of one's own, that's a fact.

To change the subject. How typical that saying is about the figures of Millet: "son paysan semble peint avec la terre qu'il ensement" [His peasant appears to be painted with the earth that he is sowing.] How exact and how true. And how important it is to know how to mix on the palette those colours which have no name, and yet are the real foundation of everything. Perhaps, I daresay for sure, the questions of colour, and more exactly, broken and neural colours, will preoccupy you anew. Art dealers speak so vaguely and arbitrarily about it, I think. So in fact do painters too. Last week I saw at an acquaintance's a decidedly clever, realistic study of an old woman's head, by somebody who is directly, or indirectly, a pupil of the school of The Hague. But in the drawing, as well as in the colour, there was a certain hesitation, a certain narrow-mindedness, much greater, in my opinion, than one sees in an old Blommers or Mauve or Mans. And this symptom threatens to become more and more general. If one takes realism in the sense of literal truth, namely exact drawing and local colour. There are other things than that.

Well, goodbye, with a handshake.

Yours, Vincent