

Letter 403
Nuenen, late April 1885

Dear Theo,

I want to tell you that I am working on the potato eaters, and I have painted new studies of the heads; the hands especially are greatly changed [F 078, JH 734].

What I am trying to do most is to bring life into it.

I wonder what Portier will have to say about it when it is finished.

The Lhermites are superb. I am quite enthusiastic about them.

They are full of sentiment, calculated both in general and in detail, but especially broadly conceived and treated vigorously. I do hope that you will watch for the new months of the series being published. Tell me, please, what the best way to send a picture of a somewhat larger size is and which address it must be sent to.

I will not send the potato eaters unless I know for sure there is something in it.

But I am getting on with it, and I think there are completely different things in it than you can ever have seen in my work. At least, so distinctly.

I mean from life especially. I paint this from memory on the picture itself. But you know yourself how many times I have painted these heads!

And then I drop in every night to correct some details on the spot.

But in the picture I give free scope to my own head in the sense of thought or imagination, which is not so much the case in studies, where no creative process is allowed, but where one finds food for one's imagination in reality, in order to make it exact.

But you know I wrote to Mr. Portier, "Jusqu'à présent je n'ai fait que des études, mais les tableaux vont venir" [Up to now I have only made studies, but the paintings will come]. And I will stick to that.

I intend to send soon a few more studies from nature too.

It is the second time that a saying of Delacroix's has meant so much to me. The first time it was his theory about colours, but later I read a conversation he had with other painters about the making, namely the creation of a picture.

He pretended that the best pictures are made from memory. Par coeur! He said. And about that conversation I read that, when all those worthy people were going home in the evening, Delacroix, with his usual vivacity and passion, loudly called after them in the middle of the boulevard, Par coeur! Par coeur! Probably to the great astonishment of the respectable passers-by. Just like Jacque who, after he had spent the evening with a friend, kept on sending him messages by his boy, after midnight, and all through the night, "J'ai encore par la présente l'honneur de vous assurer que votre M. Ingres n'est qu'un imaginer, et que Daumier le surpasse infiniment" [Herewith I have the honour to assure you once again that your Mr. Ingres is only an image maker, and that Daumier surpasses him infinitely], or something like that.

I will not send the picture before I have heard from you, in fact it is not quite finished yet.

But the most difficult things – the heads, the hands, and the ensemble – are finished. Perhaps you will now find in it what you wrote some time ago, that though it is personal, yet it will remind you of other painters – with a certain family resemblance. Which you did not find in my studies then, but I think if you compare my studies with the other studies, there would also be a resemblance.

Once more thanks for the Lhermites, and the other illustrations; Le Chat Noir wasn't as good as I expected, though the title is good. I was glad to find some particulars about the life of Jules Dupré in the Vie Moderne. I sometimes think that perhaps Mistigris (le plus malin des paysagistes) in Balzac's Comédie Humaine might have been Dupré in his youth. But I do not know whom Balzac meant, and in fact the person plays no prominent part in the book. Do you know who also often works in that way of draawing with ellipses which Gigoux mentioned? Henri Pille. "Ne pas prendre par la ligne, mais par le milieu" – is an important truth. Meunier, Mellery and Rappard also often draw in that way, and Allebé.

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent