

Letter 404
Nuenen, c. 30 April 1885

My dear Theo,

My warmest good wishes for good health and peace of mind on your birthday. I should have liked to send the painting of the Potato Eaters for this day, but although it's coming along well, it isn't quite finished yet. Though the actual painting will have been completed in a comparatively short time, and largely from memory, it has taken a whole winter of painting studies of heads and hands.

And as for the few days in which I have painted it now – it's been a tremendous battle, but one for which I was filled with great enthusiasm. Even though at times I was afraid it would never come off. But painting, too, is “agir-cr  er.” [acting-creating.]

When weavers weave that cloth which I think they call cheviot, or those curious multicoloured Scottish tartan fabrics, then they try, as you know, to get strange broken colours and greys into the cheviot – and to get the most vivid colours to balance each other in the multicoloured chequered cloth – so that instead of the fabric being a jumble, the effet produit [overall effect] of the pattern looks harmonious from a distance. A grey woven from red, blue, yellow, off-white and black threads – a blue broken by a green and an orange, red or yellow thread – are quite unlike plain colours, that is, they are more vibrant, and primary colours seem hard, cold and lifeless beside them.

Yet the weaver, or rather the designer, of the pattern or the colour combination does not always find it easy to make an exact estimate of the number of threads and their direction – no more than it is easy to weave brush strokes into a harmonious whole.

If you could see the first painted studies I did on my arrival here in Nuenen side by side with the canvas I am doing now, I think you would agree that things are livening up a bit as far as colour is concerned. I feel certain that you too will get involved with the question of colour analysis one day. For as an art connoisseur and critic, it seems to me, one must also be sure of one's ground and have firm convictions – for one's own pleasure at least, and in order to substantiate one's opinion. And one should also be able to explain it in a few words to others who sometimes turn to someone like yourself for information when they want to know a little more about art.

But now I have something to say about Portier. Of course I am not wholly indifferent to his private opinion and I also appreciate his saying that he does not take back anything of what he has said. Nor do I mind that he apparently failed to hang these first studies. But – if he wants me to send him a painting intended for him, then he can only have it on condition that he shows it.

As for the Potato Eaters – it is a painting that will do well in gold – of that I am certain. But it would do just as well on a wall papered in a deep shade of ripe corn. However, it simply mustn't be seen without being set off in this way. It will not appear to full advantage against a dark background and especially not against a dull background. And that is because it is a glimpse into a very grey interior. In real life it is also set in a gold frame, as it were, because the hearth and the light from the fire on the white walls would be nearer the spectator – they are situated outside the painting, but in its natural state the whole thing is projected backwards.

Once again, it must be set off by putting something coloured a deep gold or copper round it. Please bear that in mind if you want to see it as it should be seen. Associating it with a gold tone lends brightness to areas where you would least expect it, and at the same time does away with the marbled aspect it assumes if it is unfortunately placed against a dull or black background. The shadows are painted with blue and the gold colour sets this off.

Yesterday, I took it to a friend of mine in Eindhoven who is doing some painting. In about 3 day's time I'll go back over there and give it some egg-white and finish off a few details.

This man, who is trying very hard himself to learn how to paint and to handle colour, was particularly taken with it. He had already seen the study on which I had based the lithograph and said that he would never have believed I could improve the colour and the drawing to such an extent. As he, too, paints from the model, he is well aware of what there is to a peasant's head or fist, and as for the hands, he said that he now had a quite different understanding of how to do them.

The point is that I've tried to bring out the idea that these people eating potatoes by the light of their lamp have dug the earth with the self-same hands they are now putting into the dish, and it thus suggests manual labour and – a meal honestly earned. I wanted to convey a picture of a way of life quite different from ours, from that of civilized people. So the last thing I would want is for people to admire or approve of it without knowing why.

I've held the threads of this fabric in my hands all winter long and searched for the definitive pattern – and although it is now a fabric of rough and coarse appearance, the threads have none the less been chosen with care and according to certain rules. And it might just turn out to be a genuine peasant painting. I know that it is. But anyone who prefers to have his peasants looking namby-pamby had best suit himself. Personally, I am convinced that in the long run one gets better results from painting them in all their coarseness than from introducing a conventional sweetness.

A peasant girl, in her patched and dusty blue skirt and bodice which have acquired the most delicate shades from the weather, wind and sun, is better looking – in my opinion – than a lady. But if she dons a lady's clothes, then her authenticity is gone. A peasant in his fustian clothes out in the fields [is] better looking than when he goes to church on Sunday in a kind of gentleman's coat.

And similarly, in my opinion, it would be wrong to give a painting of peasant life a conventional polish. If a peasant painting smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam, fine – that's not unhealthy – if a stable reeks of manure – all right, that's what a stable is all about – if a field has the smell of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano and manure – that's properly healthy, especially for city dwellers. Such pictures might prove helpful to them. But a painting of peasant life should not be perfumed.

I am eager to know whether you will find something in it to please you – I hope so.

I'm glad that just as Mr. Portier has said that he'll handle my work, I've got something more important for him than studies. As for Durand Ruel – though he didn't consider the drawings worth bothering with, do show him this painting. Let him think it ugly, I don't mind – but let him have a look at it all the same, let people see that we put some effort into our endeavours. No doubt you'll hear "quell croûte!" [what a daub!] Be prepared for that, as I am prepared myself. Yet we must go on providing something genuine and honest. Painting peasant life is a serious business, and I for one would blame myself if I didn't try to make pictures that give rise to serious reflection in those who think seriously about art and life.

Millet, De Groux, so many others, have set an example of character by turning a deaf ear to such taunts as "sale, grossier, boueux, puant" [nasty, crude, filthy, stinking], etc., etc., so it would be a disgrace should one so much as waver. No, one must paint peasants as if one were one of them, as if one felt and thought as they do. Being unable to help what one actually is. I very often think that peasants are a world apart, in many respects one so much better than the civilized world. Not in all respects, for what do they know of art and many other things?

I still have a few smaller studies – but you will appreciate that I'm being kept so busy by the larger one that I've been able to do little else. As soon as it is completely finished and dry, I shall forward you the canvas in a small packing case, adding a few smaller items. I think it would be as well not to delay the dispatch too long, which is why I'll make haste with it. The second lithograph of it will probably have to be abandoned in that case, though I realize that Mr. Portier, for instance, must have his opinion endorsed if we are to count on him once and for all as a friend. It is my sincere hope that we may.

I have been so absorbed in the painting that I almost forgot that I am moving house, something that has to be attended to as well. My worries won't be any the less, but the lives of all painters in this genre have been so full of cares that I shouldn't want to have things any easier than they did. and since they managed to get their paintings done anyway, I, too, may be held back by material difficulties, but not destroyed or undermined by them. So there you are.

I believe that The Potato Eaters will turn out well – as you know, the last few days are always tricky with a painting because before it's completely dry one can't use a large brush without running a real risk of spoiling it. And changes must be made very coolly and calmly with a small brush. That's why I took it to my friend and asked him to make certain I didn't spoil it, and why I'll be going to his place to apply those finishing touches.

You'll certainly see that it has originality. Regards, I'm sorry it wasn't ready for today – best wishes once again for your health and peace of mind, believe me, with a handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent

I'm still working on some smaller studies that will go off at the same time. Did you ever send that copy of the Salon issue?