

Letter 423  
Nuenen, early September 1885

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosed 150 francs. I also received the two Lhermites today. He is the absolute master of the figure, he does what he likes with it – proceeding neither from the colour nor from the local tone but rather from the light – as Rembrandt did – there is an astonishing mastery in everything he does, above all excelling in modelling, he perfectly satisfies all that honesty demands.

People talk a great deal about Poussin. Bracquemond also speaks of him. The French call Poussin the very greatest painter among the old masters. Well, it is certainly true that what is said about Poussin, of whom I know so very little, is also true of Lhermitte and Millet. But with this difference, that Poussin seems to me the original grain; the others, the full ear. As for me, I think the modern ones the most superior.

These last two weeks I have had a lot of trouble with the reverend gentlemen of the clergy, who gave me to understand, albeit with the best intentions and believing like so many others that they were obliged to intervene – that I ought not to be too familiar with people below me in station. But while they put the matter to me in these terms, they used quite a different tone with the “people of lower station,” namely, threatening them if they allowed themselves to be painted. This time I went straight to the Burgomaster and told him all about it, pointing out that it was no business of the priests, and that they ought to stick to their own sphere of more abstract concerns. In any case, for the moment I am having no more opposition from them and I hope it will stay like that.

A girl I had frequently painted was about to have a baby and they suspected me, though I had nothing to do with it. But I heard what had really happened from the girl herself, namely that a member of the priest’s own congregation in Nuenen had played a particularly ugly part in the affair, and so they could not get at me, at least not on that occasion. But you can see that it isn’t easy to paint people in their own home or to draw them going about their business.

Well, they will not easily get the better of me in this case, and this winter I hope to keep the very same models, who are thoroughly typical of the old Brabant race.

I again have a few new drawings, but I could by no means get anybody to pose for me in the fields these days.

Happily for me, the priest is getting rather unpopular. But it is a bad thing, and if it continued, I should have to move. You will ask, What’s the use of making yourself disagreeable? – but sometimes it cannot be avoided. If I had argued gently with them, they would undoubtedly have got the better of me. And when they hinder me in my work, I sometimes do not see any other way than an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. The priest even went so far as to promise the people money if they refused to be painted: but they answered quite spiritedly that they would rather earn money from me than beg some from him.

But you see they do it only for the sake of earning money, and they do nothing for nothing here.

You ask me if Rappard has ever sold anything. I know that at present he is better off than he used to be, that, for instance, for some time he took models from the nude every day, that now, for the picture of a brickyard, he rented a small house on the spot itself, and had it improved with a skylight; I know that he made another trip through Drenthe, and that he will also go to Terschelling. All these things are rather expensive, and the money for it must come from somewhere. Though he may possess some money of his own, he must certainly earn something too, otherwise he couldn’t do what he does. Perhaps his family buys, or friends – that may be – but somebody must.

But tonight I am much too occupied with Lhermitte’s drawings to go on writing about other things. When I think of Millet or of Lhermitte, I find modern art as great as Michelangelo and Rembrandt – ancient art is infinite, modern art infinite too – the ancient masters are geniuses – the modern ones are geniuses too. A person like Chenavard does not think so perhaps. But I, for my part, am convinced that in this respect one can have faith in modern art.

The fact that I have a definite belief about art makes me sure of what I want in my own work, and I shall try to reach it even at the risk of my own life.

Goodbye,

Ever yours, Vincent