

Letter 437
Antwerp, 28 November 1885

My dear Theo,

I just wanted to send you a few more impressions of Antwerp. This morning I took a long walk in the pouring rain, the object of the outing being to fetch my things from the custom house. The various warehouses and storage sheds on the quays look splendid.

I've walked in many different directions along the docks and quays several times already. The contrast is particularly marked for one who has just arrived from the sand and the heath and the tranquillity of a country village and has been in quiet surroundings for a long time. It's all an impenetrable confusion. One of de Goncourt's sayings was, "Japonaiserie for ever." Well, those docks are one huge Japonaiserie, fantastic, peculiar, unheard of – or at any rate, that's one way of looking at them. I would love some day to take a walk there in your company, just to find out if we see things in the same way.

Everything could be done there, townscapes, figures of the most diverse character, ships as the main subject with water and the sky a delicate grey – but, above all – Japonaiseries. The point I'm trying to make is that there are always figures in motion there, one sees them in the strangest setting, everything looks fantastic, with interesting contrasts at every turn. A white horse in the mud in a corner where piles of merchandise lie covered with a tarpaulin – against the old, black, smoke-stained walls of the warehouse. Perfectly simple, but with a Black and White effect.

Through the window of a very elegant English public house one can look out on the filthiest mud and on a ship from which, say, such pleasing wares as hides and buffalo horns are being unloaded by docker types as ugly as sin, or by exotic sailors, while a very fair, very delicate English girl stands at the window looking out at this or at something else. The interior with figure wholly in tone, and for light – the silvery sky above the mud and the buffalo horns – again a series of fairly strong contrasts.

Flemish sailors with excessively ruddy faces and broad shoulders, lusty and tipsy, Antwerpers through and through, are to be seen eating mussels or drinking beer with a great deal of noise and commotion. In contrast – there goes a tiny little figure in black, small hands clasped close to her body, scuttling noiselessly past the grey walls. In an encadrement [frame] of jet-black hair, a small oval face. Brown? Orange-yellow? I'm not sure. For a moment she looks up and gives a slanting glance from a pair of jet-black eyes. She is a Chinese girl, quiet as a mouse, stealthy, small, naturally bedbug-like. What a contrast to the group of Flemish mussel-eaters!

Another contrast – one walks down a very narrow street between tremendously tall buildings, warehouses and storehouses. But at ground level in the street – allehouses for every nationality, with males and females to match, shops for food, for seamen's clothing, colourful and bustling. The street is long, at every turn one sees a typical scene, a commotion, perhaps, more intense than usual, as a squabble breaks out. For example, there you are walking along, just looking around – and suddenly cheers go up and there's a lot of yelling. A sailor is being thrown out of a brothel by the girls in broad daylight and is being pursued by a furious fellow and a string of prostitutes, of whom he seems to be terrified – anyway, I see him clamber over a pile of sacks and disappear through a window into a warehouse.

When one has had enough of this hullabaloo – with the city behind one at the end of the landing stages where the Harwich and Havre steamers lie, there is nothing, absolutely nothing to be seen in front except for an infinite expanse of flat, half-flooded pasture, immensely melancholy and wet, with undulating dry reeds, and mud – the river with a single small black boat, water in the foreground grey, sky misty and cold, grey – still as the desert.

As to the overall impression of the harbour, or of one of the docks – at one moment it is more tangled and fantastic than a thorn hedge, so chaotic that one finds no rest for the eye, grows giddy, and is forced by the "papillot-ering" [flickering. Vincent "Dutchified" the French *papillotement*] of colours and lines to look first here, then there, unable to distinguish one thing from another – even after looking at the same point for a long time. But if one moves on to a certain spot with an undefined stretch of land in the foreground, then one again encounters the most beautiful, most peaceful lines and those effects which Mols, for instance, so often achieves.

Here one may see a splendidly healthy-looking girl, who is, or at least seems, wholly honest and unaffectedly cheerful; there a face so slyly vicious, like a hyena's, that it frightens one. Not to forget faces ravaged by smallpox, the colour of boiled shrimps, with dull, grey little eyes, no eyebrows and sparse, greasy, thinning hair the colour of pure hog bristle, or a bit yellower – Swedish or Danish types.

I'd like to do some work around there, but how and where, for one would get into trouble exceedingly quickly. All the same I've roamed through quite a number of streets and alleyways without mishap, have even sat down to talk in a very friendly way with various girls, who seemed to take me for a bargee. I think it not unlikely that painting portraits may help me to come by some good models. I got my gear today, and some materials, to which I'd been looking forward very eagerly. So now my studio is all ready. If I could come by a good model for a song, I'd be afraid of nothing. Nor do I mind very much that I haven't enough money to force the pace. Perhaps the idea of doing portraits and getting the subjects to pay for them by posing is a safer method. You see, in the city things aren't the same as when one deals with peasants.

Well, one thing is certain, Antwerp is a splendid and very remarkable place for a painter.

My studio isn't at all bad, especially now that I've pinned up a lot of small Japanese prints which I enjoy very much. You know, those small female figures in gardens or on the beach, horsemen, flowers, gnarled thorn branches.

I'm glad I came here – and hope not to sit still and do nothing this winter. Anyway, it's a relief to have a small hideaway where I can work when the weather is bad. It goes without saying that I won't be living in the lap of luxury.

Try to send your letter off on the first, for while I've enough to live on until then, I shall be getting the wind up after that.

My little room has turned out better than I expected and certainly doesn't look dreary.

Now that I have the 3 studies I took along with me here, I shall try to make contact with the marchands de tableaux [picture dealers], who seem, however, to live for the most part in private houses, with no display windows giving on to the street.

The park is beautiful too. I sat there one morning and did some drawing.

Well – I've had no setbacks so far, and I'm well off as far as accommodation is concerned, for by sacrificing another few francs I've acquired a stove and a lamp. I shan't easily get bored, believe me.

I've also found Lhermitte's Octobre, women in a potato field in the evening, splendid, but not his Novembre yet. Have you kept track of that by any chance? I've also seen that there's a Figaro illustré with a beautiful drawing by Raffaelli.

My address, as you know, is 194 Rue des images, so please send your letter there, and the second de Goncourt volume when you've finished with it. Regards,

Ever yours, Vincent

It's odd that my painted studies look darker here in the city than in the country. Is that because the light isn't as bright in the city? I'm not sure, but it might matter more than one might think at first sight. I was struck by it and can imagine that some of the things that are with you now also look darker than I thought they were in the country. Yet those I brought along with me don't seem the worse for it – the mill, avenue with autumn trees, a still life, as well as a few small things.