

Dear Theo,

It is already late, but I will not put off acknowledging the good receipt of your letter, with enclosed 150 fr. By the way, let me begin by answering your question of some time ago, about the picture by Franck or Francken at St. André, which I saw today. I think it is a good picture – especially fine in sentiment – the sentiment is not very Flemish or Rubens-like. It reminds one more of Murillo. The colour is warm, in a reddish colour scheme like Jordaens sometimes is.

The shadows in the flesh are very strong, that is what Rubens has not, and Jordaens often has, and it gives something mysterious to the picture which one must appreciate in that school.

I could not get near enough to analyze the technique close up, which would have been well worth while. The head of Christ is less conventional than the Flemish painters usually conceive it.

But I imagine I can also do it in that way, and the picture did not tell me anything new. And as I am not satisfied with what I can do now, and try to make progress – enough – let's talk about other pictures. What struck me in that church was a sketch by Van Dyck or Rubens (?), "The Deposition from the Cross," which hung high, but seemed very beautiful to me. Much sentiment in the pale corpse – this by the way.

There is a painted window which I think superb – very, very curious. A beach, a green sea with a castle on the rocks, a sparkling blue sky of the most beautiful tones of blue, greenish, whitish, deeper, higher of tone.

An enormous three-master, quaint and phantasmal, stands out against the sky, diffusion everywhere, light in the dark, dark in the light. In the blue a figure of the Holy Virgin, bright yellow, white, orange. Higher up the window reappears dark green, with black, with fiery red.

Well – do you remember it? It is very beautiful, and Leys would certainly have fallen in love with it, or James Tissot in his old style or Thijs Maris.

I saw some pictures bought for the Musée Moderne, by Verhas and Farasyn. Verhas – Ladies mounted on donkeys, and fisherboys on the beach. Farasyn – A large picture of the old Antwerp Fishmarket.

Also an Emile Wauters – "A Market in Cairo." The Verhas looks well, at all events it is a clever picture, daring of colour, in a light colour scheme, several beautiful combinations, including a figure in orange against light blue, light green and white.

I am working on my portraits all the time, and at last I have made two which are decidedly good "likenesses" (one profile and one three-quarter). That isn't everything, it isn't even the most important thing. But it still seems to me worth while to aim at it, and perhaps it teaches one to draw. Besides, I am getting more and more fond of making portraits. Now, for instance, some of those very famous Rubenses – "Vierge au Perroquet," "Christ à la Paille," etc. I personally prefer to ignore them and look rather at that boldly painted portrait of a man – painted with such a remarkably firm hand – still sketchy here and there, which is hanging not far from Rembrandt's "Saskia."

In "The Deposition from the Cross" by Van Dyck, the large one, that one high up – there is also a portrait, decidedly a portrait – not only of a head, but, thank God, of a whole figure, splendid in yellow and lilac, a weeping woman bending over, the torso and the legs under the clothes well and intimately felt and expressed. Then art is high, when it is simple and true.

And an Ingres, a David, who as painters certainly did not always paint beautifully, yet how remarkably interesting even they become when, putting their pedantry aside, they forget themselves in being true, in reproducing a character like the two heads in the Musée Moderne. In short – oh, if only one could get the models one wants!!!

Now just tell me, always supposing that you want to be a financier – and I have nothing against it, it is even a thing that I highly approve of; but are you quite satisfied with your own argument when at the beginning of the year you say, to my disappointment, "I have so much to pay, you must try to manage till the end of the month." Just listen, this is what I have to say against it, and just think over whether I am right or not, at least if there is truth in my argument. Am I less than your creditors? – who must wait, they or I?? If one of us must wait, which belongs to the human possibilities.

A creditor is no friend to be sure, and I, even if you do not know it for sure, at least I am perhaps. And do you realize how heavy are my burdens which the work demands every day, how difficult it is to get the models, how expensive the painting materials are? Do you realize that sometimes it is almost literally impossible for me to keep going? and that I must paint; that too much depends on my continuing to work on here with aplomb immediately and without hesitation?

Too much hesitation might make me fall in a way which I could not redress for a long time. My situation is threatened from every side, and it can only be saved by working on vigorously. The colour bill is like a millstone round my neck, and yet I must go on!!!

I too must keep people waiting, and without mercy; they will get their money but they will have to wait, I passed this sentence on them – the less credit they give, the longer they will have to wait.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

The only way to win at present is with very good work, with something that is not ordinary. That higher work costs more in money, in trouble, and in strenuous exertion; but now more than ever it is the only way.

What I tell you is simple and clear. Do you understand or don't you, that I am perfectly right when I point out to you the absolute necessity of having my studio full of very good heads if I want to get orders for portraits here? That is possible, it is a thing we can see accomplished in the end, though on the whole it is not easy to get them done.

Now, shall we say like impotent dullards and blockheads, "We cannot do it, we have no money – there is nothing doing, I tell you No." This is what we'll say – and please let's both say it together, Personally we will endure poverty for it, and suffer want as long as it is necessary, like one does in a besieged city which one does not intend to surrender, but we will show that we are men.

Either one is brave or one is a coward. We must carry things to such a height that the public begins to like it. I mean, for instance, that the girls will begin to like having their portraits painted – I am sure that there are some who want them.

Today I spoke to a photographer's assistant, and asked him if he couldn't procure me orders for portraits. He wanted a commission for every woman he would bring to me for a portrait. I let the matter rest only in so far that I did not promise any commission before I knew my man somewhat better. But probably I shall see him again soon. And then I shall see if I can do anything with him directly, or if I shall go and speak to his boss; but sometimes the employee is better, it all depends. I told him now that I did not know him, and that I should like to see what he could do, but that it was a risk for me, because a portrait always entails expenses for me.

Well, I shall see later on; but the most urgent thing is that I have some fine heads to show. I must also try to make acquaintances among the prostitutes, which is not a pleasant task when one has a purse with very little in it. I can assure you it is no pleasure then.

But it is not taking trouble that I am afraid of But I believe that you have so accustomed yourself to thinking it all right that I am always to be neglected that you forget too easily how I have not had my due for so many years already.

And that my wanting to enlarge my business is not only good for me, but for you too, because only in that way can I earn something.

And now another thing. Theoretically at least you say that it is necessary to be well dressed and so on for the occasions when one has to go and see people, etc. Well, the time has come when it is necessary even for me, who, as you know, am not keen on such things. Are such things necessary or not??? Does anything depend on it – Yes or No?

Well, given that period of having to break through, the monthly allowance is too small for me to possibly make both ends meet.

You are thrifty yourself, you understand what is absolutely needed. And I ask you, can one do what is absolutely necessary with what remains for one's own use after paying for painting materials, models, and rent? If I had some friends, if I were a little known, yes, then it would be easier; but I have no friends, and my job is to try and make them.

But do not let me forget to thank you for sending the second volume of de Goncourt's book. It is a delightful thing to be able to study that period – from which so much can be learned by – to use the expression – notre fin du siècle in which we live.

I cannot tell you how glad I am that I went to Antwerp, and how many remarkable things there are here for me, who has been out of it all for so long.

How glad I am to see the city again, much as I like the peasants in the country. How the bringing together of contrasts gives me new ideas – the contrasts between the absolute quiet of the country and the bustle here. I needed it badly.

Ah, if only I could bring home to you how much more satisfaction you yourself might find, how much more you would be a friend to me if, instead of that frigid and unkind slighting and keeping me at a distance (only think of last summer, and the preceding summers!), you could at long last gain the conviction that this is not the right way.

Always to be in a state of exile, forever having to make great efforts, always half measures But never mind – the family stranger than strangers is one fact – and being through with Holland is a second fact. It is quite a relief.

That is my only feeling, and yet I have been so deeply attached to it all that at first the estrangement drove me crazy. But I have looked over the cards too narrowly to let myself hesitate now. And I have got my self-confidence and my serenity back. The secret of that clique – Delaroche-esqueness, mediocrity. Retrogression – I abhor it!

As far as you are concerned – you are still dangling between the two parties, and I have always told you that your character will have to set in a definite mold – that you will have to go through an inner struggle and possibly a social struggle for the sake of your position, both more serious than you ever went through in the past.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

I know you think this merciless to those at home. And yet I tell you that at times Father himself felt vaguely that he had made a mistake and had taken the wrong side. But he tried to reconcile irreconcilable things, and...he had not as much firmness of character as he seemed to have, and as I thought him to have when I was a boy and even later. Oh well...

As to the "Tassaert Exhibition," if ever a man was wronged, it is he. To mention another at the same time – I do not wait for exhibitions to form an opinion about painters – Chaplin will also have to be recognized. As to Tassaert's colour, he is a harmonist, and his work, painted almost in one tone, is beautiful because of the modelling, because of the delicate intuition of the female forms, because of something passionate in the expressions – and I think he belongs to the race of the Greuzes and Prudhons – better, more modern, more serious in sentiment than Greuze. Chaplin is a greater colourist than he.

And I think it rather a pity that Tassaert, who painted human flesh so well, did not put more glow and life into the colour. But he is certainly better than Scheffer and Delaroche and Dubuffe and Gérôme, who are so little painters.

What a great pity it is that a fellow like Gérôme, who painted "The Prisoner" and "The Russian Camp" and "The Syrian Shepherds," is so cold and sterile. They will also have to recognize Isabey, Ziem too, these two are real painters, and that is what is needed in painting after all.

I must finish. What colour is in a picture, enthusiasm is in life, therefore – it is no little thing to try to keep that enthusiasm.

Because of the models this month I think I shall go and see Verlat, who is the director of the academy here – and I must see what the conditions are, and if one could work there from the nude. I shall take a portrait and some drawings with me then.

I have an immense longing to improve my knowledge of the nude. I have seen a large bronze group by Lambeau – two figures – a man embracing a woman, superb. Something like Paul Dubois, for instance, or in short the first-class people. It has been bought for the museum.

I often envy the sculptors. But it is somewhat the same everywhere. I ought to be able to earn more in order to be able to work more.

I must also tell you that in view of that longing to study the figure, in case I should not succeed here, I should rather go farther away than go back to Holland before I had worked for a time at some studio. That "farther" might perhaps be Paris, without any hesitation.

You may be of the opinion that I am an impossible character – but that's absolutely your own business. For instance, I need not care, and I am not going to. I know that your business routine induces you again and again to lapse into the old evil with regard to me. What I seek is so straightforward that in the end you cannot but give in. So let's conclude by saying, The sooner the better.

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

As to the end of the month – I beg you most kindly but urgently – let one of your creditors wait, i.e. at least for 50 fr. (they can stand it, do not be afraid), but please do not let it be me, for even then it will still be tough for me.