

Dear Theo,

Last Sunday I saw for the first time the two large pictures by Rubens, and as I had looked at those in the museum repeatedly and at my ease, these two – “The Deposition from the Cross” and “The Elevation of the Cross” – were the more interesting. “The Elevation of the Cross” has a peculiarity that struck me at once, and that is – there is no female figure in it. Unless on the side panels of the triptych. Consequently, it is none the better for it. Let me tell you that I love “The Deposition from the Cross.” But not because of any depth of feeling such as one would find in a Rembrandt or in a picture by Delacroix or in a drawing by Millet.

Nothing touches me less than Rubens expressing human sorrow.

To explain my meaning more clearly, let me begin by saying that even his most beautiful weeping Magdalenes or Mater Dolorosas always simply remind me of the tears of a beautiful prostitute who has caught a venereal disease or some such small misery of human life.

As such they are masterly, but one must not look for more in them.

Rubens is extraordinary in painting ordinary beautiful women. But he is not dramatic in the expression.

Compare him, for instance, to that head by Rembrandt in the Lacaze Collection; to the man’s figure in “The Jewish Bride” – you will understand what I mean, as for instance, that his eight pompous figures of fellows performing a feat of strength with a heavy wooden cross in “The Elevation of the Cross” seem absurd to me from the standpoint of modern analysis of human passions and feelings. That Rubens’s expressions, especially of the men (the real portraits always excepted), are superficial, hollow, pompous, yes – altogether conventional, like those of Jules Romain and even worse fellows of the decadence.

But I still love it because he, Rubens, is the very man who tries to express, and really succeeds in expressing, a mood of cheerfulness, of serenity, of sorrow, by the combination of colours – though sometimes his figures may be hollow, etc.

Thus in “The Elevation of the Cross” the pale spot of the corpse in a high accent of light – is dramatic in its contrast to the rest, which is kept in such a low colour scale.

Of the same order, but in my opinion far more beautiful, is the charm of “The Deposition from the Cross,” where the pale spot is repeated in the blonde hair, the fair face and neck of the female figures, whereas the somber surroundings are enormously rich because of the various low-toned harmonizing masses of red, dark green, black, grey and violet.

And once again Delacroix has tried to make people believe in the symphonies of the colours. And one would almost say in vain, if one remembers how almost everybody understands by good colour the correctness of the local colour, the narrow-minded exactness which neither Rembrandt nor Millet nor Delacroix nor whoever else, neither Manet nor Courbet, has aimed at, as little as Rubens or Veronese.

I have also seen several other pictures by Rubens in various churches.

And it is very interesting to study Rubens, because his technique is so very simple, or rather seems to be so. His means are so simple, and he paints, and particularly draws, with such a quick hand and without any hesitation. But portraits and heads of women are his specialty. There he is deep and intimate too. And how fresh his pictures remain because of the very simplicity of his technique.

What more shall I say? That I feel increasingly inclined to do all my figure studies over again, very calmly and quietly, without any nervous hurry. I want to progress so far in the knowledge of the nude and the structure of the figure that I might be able to work from memory.

I should still like to work sometime either at Verlat’s or in some other studio, besides working for myself as much as possible from the model.

For the moment I have deposited five pictures – two portraits, two landscapes, and one still life in Verlat’s painting class at the academy. I have just been there again, but he was not there either time. But I shall soon be able to tell you the result, and I hope that I shall be allowed to paint from the model all day at the academy, which will make things easier for me, as the models are so awfully expensive that my purse cannot stand the strain.

And I must find something to help me in that respect. At all events I think I shall remain in Antwerp for some time, instead of going back to the country; that would be much better than putting it off, and here there is so much more chance of finding people who would perhaps interest themselves in it. I feel that I dare undertake something, and can achieve something, and things have been dragging on far too long already.

You get angry whenever I expostulate with you, or rather you don’t give a damn, and all the rest of it, which we know by now, and yet I believe a time will come when, of your own accord, you will come to the conclusion that you have been too weak to persevere in trying to help me regain some credit with people. But never mind, we are not faced by the past but by the future. And again I tell you – I am convinced that time will make you see that, if only there had been more cordiality and warmth between us, we might have built a business of our own together. Even if you had stayed with Goupil & Co.

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Indeed, you said to me that you know perfectly well you will be rewarded with stinking ingratitude, but are you quite sure this isn't a misunderstanding of the type Father himself laboured under? I for one shall not take it lying down, you can be sure of that. For there is still too much work to be done, even at present.

The other day I saw for the first time a fragment of Zola's new book *L'oeuvre*, which, as you know, appears as a serial in *Le Gil Blas*.

I think that this novel, if it penetrates the art world somewhat, may do some good. The fragment I read was very striking.

When you get right down to it, I'll admit that when one is working exclusively from nature, something more is needed: the facility of composing, the knowledge of the figure, but, after all, I do not believe I have been drudging absolutely in vain all these years. I feel a certain power within me, because wherever I may be, I shall always have an aim – painting people as I see and know them.

Whether impressionism has already had its last say or not – to stick to the term impressionism – I always imagine that many new artists in the figure may arise, and I begin to think it more and more desirable that, in a difficult time like the present, one seeks one's security in the deeper understanding of the highest art.

For there is, relatively speaking, higher and lower art; people are more important than anything else, and are in fact much more difficult to paint, too.

I will try hard to make acquaintances here, and I think that if I worked some time, for instance under Verlat, I would learn to know better what is going on here, and how to fit in with the rest.

So let me struggle along my own way, and for Heaven's sake do not lose courage, and do not slacken. I do not think you can reasonably expect me to go back to the country for the sake of perhaps 50 fr. a month less, seeing that the whole series of future years will depend so much on the relations I must establish in town, either here in Antwerp or later on in Paris.

And I wish I could make you understand how probable it is that there will be great changes in the art trade. And, consequently, many new chances will present themselves too if one has something original to show.

But that is certainly necessary if one wants to be of some use. It is no fault or crime of mine if I must sometimes tell you we must put more vigour into such and such a thing, and if we haven't got the money ourselves, we must find friends and new relations. I must earn a little more or have some more friends, preferably both. That is the way to success, but recently it has been too hard for me.

As for this month, I absolutely must insist on your sending me at least another 50 fr.

At present I am losing weight, and moreover my clothes are getting too shabby, etc. You know yourself that it isn't right as it is. Yet I feel sort of confident that we shall pull through.

But you wrote that if I fell ill, we should be worse off. I hope it will not come to that, but I should like to have a little more ease, just to prevent illness.

Just think how many people there are who exist without ever having the slightest idea what care is, and who always keep on thinking that everything will turn out for the best, as if there were no people starving or completely ruined! I begin to object more and more to your pretending to be a financier, and thinking me exactly the opposite. All people are not alike, and if one does not understand that in drawing up accounts some time must have passed over the account before one can be sure to have counted right, if one does not understand this, one is no calculator. And a broader insight into finances is exactly what characterizes many modern financiers. Namely not pinching, but allowing freedom of action.

I know, Theo, that you may also be rather hard up. But your life has never been so hard as mine has these last ten or twelve years. Can't you make allowances for me when I say, Perhaps it has been long enough now?

Meanwhile I have learned something that I did not know before, that has renewed all my chances, and I protest against my always being neglected. And if I should like to live again in the city for some time, and afterward perhaps to work in a studio in Paris too, would you try to prevent this?

Be honest enough to let me go my own way, for I tell you that I do not want to quarrel, and I will not quarrel, but I will not be hampered in my career. And what can I do in the country, unless I go there with money for models and colours? There is no chance, absolutely none, of making money with my work in the country, and there is such a chance in the city. So I am not safe before I have made friends in the city – and that comes first. For the moment this may complicate things somewhat, but after all it is the only way, and going back to the country now would end in stagnation.

Well, good-bye. De Goncourt's book is fine.

Ever yours, Vincent