

Letter 241
The Hague, 2 or 3 November 1882

Dear Theo,

Your letter and its contents were very welcome to me. The question you refer to will perhaps become more and more urgent. People will be obliged to acknowledge that many a new thing in which one at first thought to find progress proves in fact to be less sound than the old ones, and in consequence the need for strong men to redress things will manifest itself. As arguing about this can do little good, I think it rather superfluous to write more about it.

But I can hardly say that I share your thought which you express in the following words: "To me it seems quite natural that the desired change will occur." Just think how many great men are dead or will not be with us for long – Millet, Brion, Troyon, Rousseau, Daubigny, Corot – so many others are no longer among the living; think further back, Leys, Gavarni, de Groux (I name only a few), still further back, Ingres, Delacroix and Géricault, think how old modern art already is, add many others as well who have already reached old age.

Up to Millet and Jules Breton, however, there was always in my opinion progress, but to surpass these two – don't even mention it.

Their genius may be equalled in former, present or later times, but to surpass it is not possible. In that high range there is an equality of genius, but higher than the top of the mountain one cannot climb. Israëls, for instance, may equal Millet, but among genius superiority or inferiority is out of the question.

Now in the realm of art the summit has been reached. Certainly we shall still see beautiful things in the years to come, but anything more sublime than we have seen already – no. And I for my part am afraid that perhaps in a few years there will be a kind of panic in this regard. Since Millet we have greatly deteriorated; the word decadence, now whispered or pronounced in covert terms, (see Herkomer) will then sound as an alarm bell. Many an one, for instance I myself, keeps quiet now because one is already labelled as a mauvais coucheur, and to speak about it doesn't help. Speaking about it, that is to say, is not what one ought to do, one must work, even if it be with a sorrowful heart; those who will subsequently cry the hardest about decadence will be the most decadent themselves. I repeat – "By these fruits ye shall know them," by their work, nor will it be the most eloquent who will say the truest things, look at Millet himself, look at Herkomer; they are indeed no orators and they speak almost à contre cœur.

Enough of this, I find in you someone who understands many of the great men, and I think it delightful to hear now and then things about them which I did not know; for instance, what you tell me about Daumier. The series of portraits of deputies, etc., the pictures "Third Class Railway Carriage," "The Revolution," I know none of them. It is true that your writing doesn't make me see them myself, but in my imagination Daumier's personality becomes more important as a result of it. I prefer to hear about such men more than, for instance, about the last Salon.

Now what you write about the Vie Moderne, or rather about the kind of paper that Buhot promised you, – this is something which interests me very much. Do I understand rightly that this paper is such that when one makes a drawing on it (I suppose with autographic ink) this drawing just as it is, without the intermediary of a second draughtsman or engraver or lithographer, can be transferred on to a stone, or a cliché can be made of it, so that an indefinite number of copies can be pulled? – the latter then being facsimiles of the original drawing. If this is so, be so kind then as to give me all information you can pick up about the way in which one has to work on this paper, and try to get me some of it, so that I can give it a trial.

If I could have a trial before you come, we might on that occasion consult about what we can do with it. I think it possible that within a relatively short time there will perhaps be a greater demand for illustrators than there is at present.

As for me, if I fill my portfolios with studies from every model I can get hold of, I will have enough of a skill to hope to get employment. To keep illustrating, as did for instance Morin, Lançon, Renouard, Jules Ferat, Worms in their times, one needs quite a lot of ammunition, in the form of different studies of all kinds of subjects.

Those I try to get together, as you know, and as you will see when you come.

By the by, I have not so far received the package of studies, which according to your letter you returned to me via the Rue Chaptal. Do you think they have already arrived at the Plaats? If you think so I will send for them, as they will be of use to me in connection with things which I have recently produced.

Do you know whose portrait I drew this morning? Blok, the Jewish book dealer – not David, but the little one who stands on the Binnenhof [F 993, JH 254].

I wish I could draw more members of that family, for they are real good types.

It's awfully difficult to get the types that one likes best; meanwhile I think I'm right in working on those I can get, without losing sight of those I would draw if only I could get them.

I am very glad about Blok, he reminds me of things from many years ago. I hope he will come again some Sunday morning.

Of course one always feels, and one must feel, when at work, a kind of dissatisfaction with oneself, a longing to do it much better; but still it is delightful and comforting little by little to get a collection of all kinds of figures together, though the more one makes the more one wants to make.

One cannot do everything at once, but it will be absolutely necessary for me to make a number of horse studies, not only just scratches made in the street, but to take a model for them. I know an old white horse, just the poorest nag imaginable (at the gas-works); but the man, who lets the poor beast do the hardest possible jobs, and draws from it what he can get, asked me a lot for it, namely, three guilders a morning to come to me and one guilder and a half at least to come to him, but then it must be on a Sunday.

And when you consider that to get what I need, about thirty large studies for instance, I should have to work many a morning, it would prove to be too expensive. But I shall get a better chance some time.

I can get a horse here and there easily enough for a very short time, people are willing enough for that occasionally; but one cannot in a very short time do what really must be done, so that does not help me much.

I try to work quickly, for that is necessary, but a study that is of any use requires at least half an hour, on average, so one always falls back on to real posing. At Scheveningen, for instance, on the beach, I have had a boy or man standing for me for a moment, as they call it; the result was always a great longing in me for a longer pose, and the mere standing still of a man or a horse doesn't satisfy me.

If I am properly informed, the draughtsmen for the Graphic could always turn by turn find a model at their disposal in a studio at the office. Dickens tells a few good things about the painters of his time and their wrong way of working, namely, their following the model servilely, yet only half-way. He says: "Fellows, try to understand that your model is not your final aim, but the means of giving form and strength to your thought and inspiration. Look at the French (for instance, Ary Scheffer) and see how much better they do it than you do." It seems the English listened to him; they continued working with the model, but they have learned to view the model in a broader, stronger way and to use it for healthier, nobler compositions than those of the painters of Dickens's time.

Two things that in my opinion reinforce one another and remain eternally true are: Do not quench your inspiration and your imagination, do not become the slave of your model; and again: Take the model and study it, otherwise your inspiration will never become plastically concrete.

When your letter came, I immediately had many things to pay for. I hope it will not inconvenience you to send again not later than the 10th of November. That question of the process about which Buhot spoke to you seems very important to me, you know. I shall be very happy to learn it and will try my best to do so.

Adieu, with a handshake,

Yours,

Vincent

Do you know what effects one sees here at present early in the morning? – it is splendid – the sort that Brion painted in his picture at the Luxembourg: "The End of the Deluge," namely that streak of red light on the horizon with rain clouds over it. This brings me to the landscape painters. Compare those of the time of Brion with the contemporaries. Is it better now? I doubt it.

I will readily acknowledge that they are more productive now, but though I cannot help admiring what is produced now, the old landscapes done in a more old-fashioned way please me whenever I see them. There was a time for instance when I passed a Schelfhout thinking: that's not worth while.

But the modern way, though it has its attraction, doesn't make that strong, deep, durable impression, and when one has been looking for a long time at new things, one sees again with great pleasure a naive picture like a Schelfhout or a Ségé, a Jules Bakhuysen. It is really not intentionally that I feel rather disenchanted about the progress, on the contrary quite against my will; the feeling involuntarily entered my thoughts, because I feel more and more a kind of void, which I cannot fill with the things of today.

While looking for an example, I happened to think of some old woodcuts by Jacque, which I saw at least ten years ago at Uncle Cor's; it was a series called "The Months," done in the manner of those etchings which appeared in yearly series, or even more old-fashioned still. There is less of the local tone in it than in his later work, but the drawing and an element of pithiness remind one of Millet. Look here, in the many

sketches in today's magazines, it seems to me that a not quite unconventional elegance threatens to replace that typical, real rusticity of which the sketches of Jacque, which I mentioned, are an example.

Don't you think the cause of this lies also in the life and personality of the artists? I do not know your experience, but do you find, for instance at present, many people who like to take a lengthy walk in grey weather? You yourself would love it and enjoy it as I do, but for many people it would be unattractive. It also struck me that when one talks with painters, the conversation in most cases is not interesting. Mauve has at times the great power of describing a thing in such words that one sees it, and certainly others have that too, when they want to. But that peculiar open-air feeling when you speak to a painter – do you think it is as strong as it used to be?

I read this week in Forster's Life of Charles Dickens all kinds of particulars about long walks on Hampstead Heath, etc., outside London, with the object for instance of eating bacon and eggs in a little old inn far away, well out in the country. Those walks were very pleasant and merry, but for all that it was generally in this way that serious plans were made for books, or discussions were held about what changes Dickens should make in this or that figure. There is nowadays a hurry and bustle in everything that doesn't please me, and it seems as if the joy has gone out of most things. I wish your expectation would come true: "that the desired change will come," but to me it doesn't seem "quite natural."

However this may be, it is of very little use to fight back in words, I think, and the thing for everyone to do who has an interest in the matter is to try in his little circle to make something or to help make something.

I worked again on a watercolour of miners' wives carrying bags of coal through the snow [F994, JH 253]. But especially I drew about twelve studies of figures for it and three heads, and I am not ready yet. In the watercolour I think I found the proper effect, but I do not think it broad enough of character. In reality it is something like "The Reapers" by Millet, severe, so you understand that one mustn't make a snow effect of it, which would be merely an impression and would only then have its *raison d'être* if it were done by way of a landscape. I think I will start afresh, though I believe the studies that I have at the moment will please you, because they succeeded better than many others. It would really be fit for the *Vie Moderne*, I think. When I get the paper I shall anyhow have one of the figures to try out, but it must become a group of women, a small caravan.