

Letter 405
Nuenen, early May 1885

Dear Theo,

This afternoon I received your letter and will answer it at once. I am anxious to get some idea of the Salon, especially of the picture by Roll.

I'm not surprised that, for instance, Durand Ruel has not yet taken any notice of the drawings.

And I should even prefer that Portier did not exaggerate his admiration of them – at least I feel I can do better, just because I am now changing again, so much so that I think my former work but hesitantly done. I think you will see what I mean in the picture of the potato eaters, I think Portier will understand. It is very dark, however, and in the white, for instance, hardly any white has been used, but simply the neutral colour, which is made by mixing red, blue, yellow, for instance vermilion, Paris blue and Naples yellow.

Therefore that colour is in itself a pretty dark grey, but in the picture it looks white.

I'll tell you why I do it that way. Here the subject is a grey interior, lit by a little lamp.

The dirty linen tablecloth, the smoky wall, the dirty caps in which the women have worked in the field – when seen through the eyelashes in the light of the lamp, all this proves to be very dark grey; and the lamp, though a yellow-reddish glow, is even lighter – even a great deal – than the white in question.

As to the flesh colours – I know quite well that considered superficially, that is without thinking about it, they seem what is called flesh colour.

But when starting the picture, I tried to paint them that way, with yellow ochre, red ochre and white, for instance.

But that was much, much too light and was decidedly wrong.

What was to be done? All the heads were finished, and even finished with great care, but I immediately repainted them, inexorably, and the colour they are painted in now is like the colour of a very dusty potato, unpeeled of course.

While doing this I thought how perfect that saying of Millet's about the peasants is: "Ses paysans semblent peints avec la terre qu'ils ensemencent." [These peasants seem to be painted with the soil in which they have been planting.]

A saying which I can't help being constantly reminded of when I see them at work outdoors as well as indoors.

And I am quite sure that if one asked Millet, Daubigny or Corot to paint a snow landscape without using white, they would do it, and the snow would look white in the picture.

What you say about the lithograph, that the effect is wooly, I think too, and it is not my own fault in that the lithographer insisted that, as I had left hardly any white on the stone, it would not print well. At this suggestion I had the light spots corroded; if I had simply printed it as the drawing was, the general effect would have been darker, but not crude, and there would have been atmosphere between the planes. But what should I do with the picture? It is the same size as last year's woman spinning.

Just now I again took it to the cottage to give it some last touches from nature. But I think I shall get it finished, always in a comparative sense, for in reality I shall never think my own work ready or finished. I can do it in a smaller size, however, or make a drawing of it if you prefer it, for the thing is so fixed in my mind that I could literally almost paint it with my eyes shut.

Can you see how splendid the thing I scratch here was?

When I went to the cottage tonight, I found the people at supper in the light of the small window instead of under the lamp – oh, it was splendid! The colour was extraordinary too; you remember those heads painted against the window – the effect was like that, but even darker.

So the two women and the interior were exactly the colour of dark soft soap. But the figure of the man to the left was just lit up by light streaming through a door farther on. So the head and hands became the colour of a 10-centime piece, namely dull brass. And where the light touched it, the blouse became of the most tender faded blue.

In your next letter tell me, please, what you want me to do with the picture. Of course we must see to it that Portier gets something new. But I can just as well copy it in half-size for him, and send this large one to Antwerp, for instance.

As to the light pictures at present, I have seen so little of them these last years.

But I have thought a great deal about the question itself. Corot, Millet, Daubigny, Israëls, Dupré and others also paint light pictures, that is to say, one can see through every corner and depth, however deep the colour scale may be.

But those painters mentioned above, none of them paint the local tone literally; they follow the colour scale in which they started, express their own ideas in colour and tone and drawing. And that their light is generally a rather dark grey in itself, which gives the impression of being light in the picture, is a truth which you have the opportunity to observe daily.

Well, goodbye. Understand me well – I do not say that Millet didn't use white when he painted snow, but I mean that he and the other tonists could have done so if they had wanted to, in the same way as Delacroix tells that Paul Veronese painted pale, fair, nude women with a colour which, considered separately, looked like street dirt.

With a handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent

I think you will see from the picture that I have my own way of looking at things, but that there is some conformity with others, for instance, certain Belgians. What a shame they refused Josephson's picture. But why don't the rejected painters join hands and do something for themselves? Union is strength.