

Letter 410
Nuenen, c. 1 June 1885

Dear Theo,

Thanks for this month's early remittance. I am very pleased to hear what you write about the picture, Portier's and Serret's remarks, and that they found good things in it. I myself criticize it too, and perhaps more seriously than they, especially regarding the torsos – so I don't want them to approve of it entirely. When you see them someday, just tell them that it is quite possible I shall change the present brass and soft-soap-like colours, but that I hope this change will be twofold, that is to say that I expect to paint some in a lighter colour scale, more like flesh and blood, but that at the same time I am trying to get an even stronger soft-soap and brassy effect. In reality I daily see in the gloomy huts effects against the light or in the evening twilight which are so curious that up to now my work appears too light for these effects, which I compare to soft soap and the brass colour of a worn-out 10-centime piece – *faute de mieux*, and paint them with those colours – *faute de mieux*. But I should like to succeed also with the sombre aspect I have often mentioned, “*le paysan, peint avec la terre qu'il enseme.*”

I hope to send you this week a small box marked V2, containing:

1 picture la Chaumière [Hovel with thatched roof] [F 083, JH 777]

1 watercolour id.

1 “ “ vente pour cause de démolition [Auction because of demolition] [F 1230, JH 770]

12 études peintes.

Among the latter you will find a head which I had to paint after reading *Germinal*.

“Did I tell you how she died?”

“Whom do you mean?”

“My woman over there in Russia.”

Étienne made a vague gesture, wondering at the trembling of the voice, and at this sudden need of confidence in this habitually reticent fellow, in his stoical detachment from others and from himself. He only knew that the woman was his mistress, and that she was hanged in Moscow.

Souvarine resumed: “The last day in the square, I was there... It was raining – the clumsy fellows lost their heads, upset by the pelting rain, they had taken twenty minutes to hang four others. She stood waiting. She did not see me, she was looking for me in the crowd. I got on top of a stone pillar and she saw me, our eyes never left each other. Twice I wanted to cry out, to hurl myself over the heads to join her. But what would have been the good of it? One man less, one soldier less; and I guessed that she was saying no with her big fixed eyes, when they met mine.”

You will find a variation among them – profile – a background of “the flat plain of sugar-beet fields under the starless night, dark and thick like ink.”

Standing out against this, the head of a hercheuse or scôneuse with an expression as of a lowing cow, a person from: “the countryside was pregnant with a race of men who grew, a black avenging army, germinating in the furrows, increasing for the harvest of future ages, and this germination would soon burst the earth.”

But that last expression is, I think, better in the study which I have signed, and which I made before I read it, so without thinking of *Germinal*, simply a peasant woman coming home from planting potatoes, all covered with dust from the field.

I think I shall make a second picture of the cottage. The subject is so striking, those two half-mouldered cottages under one and the same thatched roof reminded me of an old couple, worn with age, who have grown into one being and are seen leaning on each other.

For you see there are two cottages and a double chimney. In fact, what one sees here frequently.

I can't spare the time, otherwise I should have much to say about *Germinal*, which I think splendid. Just one passage though: “Bread! Bread! Bread! Fools, repeated Mr. Hennebeau, am I happy? A fit of anger rose within him against those people who did not understand. He would gladly have made them a present of his huge revenues if he could only have a tough skin like theirs and their easy indulgence without regrets. Oh, that he could not let them sit down at his table and stuff them with his pheasant, while he went out to fornicate behind the hedges, tumbling the girls without caring a rap about those who had tumbled them before him! He would have given everything, his education, his well-being, his luxury, his power as a director, if only he could have been for a single day the least of the wretches who obeyed him, master of his flesh, enough of a brute to slap his wife's face and take his pleasure with the women of the neighbourhood.”

He also wanted to starve, to enjoy an empty belly, his stomach twisted by cramps that staggered his brains by fits of dizziness; perhaps this would have killed the eternal pain. Ah! Live like a beast, having no possessions of his own, flattening the corn with the ugliest, dirtiest female coal trammer, and being able to find contentment in it. How stupid those hollow dreams of the revolutionaries were, they would increase the unhappiness of the earth, someday they would howl with despair when they had left behind the easy satisfaction of their instincts by raising them to the unappeased suffering of the passions.”

As to what you write about Portier, “He may be more of an enthusiast than a merchant,” and as to your doubting whether he can do anything with my work, I think that neither you nor I nor he can decide this for the moment.

But when you see him, tell him frankly that my idea is: when, after the sympathy he professed for my work, I try my utmost to send him work and thus remain consistent, I firmly count on his persevering in showing my work.

Tell him my idea is that part of the public in Paris will not always remain the dupe of convention, however attractive it may be, but, on the contrary, things which have kept the dust of the cottages or of the fields most will find there some very faithful friends, though I cannot say why or how.

So that he must not be easily discouraged, for neither you nor I would blame him if he did not succeed at once, but he must go on showing it and I shall go on sending.

If he will write me his observations, I think they may be useful to me, and he must not hold them back. I must tell you that I sometimes long very much to see the Louvre and the Luxembourg again, and that sooner or later I shall have to study the technique and colour of Millet, Delacroix, Corot and others. But it is not immediately urgent; I think the more I work, the greater use it will be to me when it happens someday.

But it is a fact that one needs both nature and pictures.

It is especially that question of the colour scale in which they are painted, and the breaking and juxtaposition of the colours, which preoccupies me daily.

Has Lhermitte’s “May” appeared already?

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent