

Letter 426
Nuenen, 10 or 11 October 1885

Dear Theo,

I have been to Amsterdam this week. I hardly had time to see anything but the museum. I was there three days, I went on Tuesday and came back on Thursday. The result is that I am very glad I went in spite of the cost, and I made up my mind not to go so long without seeing pictures again.

On account of the expenses I had put this trip off and off, like so many other things. But it is far better that I can no longer think this the right way. It is too important for my work, and when I look at the old masters, whose technique I understand much better now than before, then for the rest I need perhaps very little conversation.

I do not know whether you remember the one to the left of the "Night Watch," as pendant of "The Syndics," there is a picture (unknown to me till now) by Frans Hals and P. Codde, about twenty officers full length. ¹ Did you ever notice that??? that alone – that one picture – is worth the trip to Amsterdam – especially for a colourist. There is a figure in it, the figure of a flag-bearer, in the extreme left corner, right against the frame – that figure is in grey, from top to toe, I shall call it pearl-grey – of a peculiar neutral tone, probably the result of orange and blue mixed in such a way that they neutralize each other – by varying that keynote, making it somewhat lighter here, somewhat darker there, the whole figure is as if it were painted with one same grey. But the leather boots are of a different material than the leggings, which differ from the folds of the trousers, which differ from the waistcoat – expressing a different material, differing in relation to colour – but all one family of grey. But just wait a moment!

Now into that grey he brings blue and orange – and some white; the waistcoat has satin bows of a divine soft blue, sash and flag orange – a white collar.

Orange, "blanc," bleu, as the national colours were then – orange and blue, side by side, that most splendid colour scale, against a background of a grey, cleverly mixed by uniting just those two, let me call them poles of electricity (speaking of colours though) so that they annihilate each other against that grey and white. Further, we find in that picture – other orange scales against other blue, further, the most beautiful blacks against the most beautiful whites; the heads – about twenty of them, sparkling with life and spirit, and a technique! a colour! the figures of all those people superb and full size.

But that orange blanc bleu fellow in the left corner...I seldom saw a more divinely beautiful figure. It is unique.

Delacroix would have raved about it – absolutely raved. I was literally rooted to the spot. Well you know "The Singer," that laughing fellow – a bust in a greenish-black with carmine, carmine in the flesh colour too.

You know the bust of the man in yellow, citron amorti, whose face, by the opposition of tones, has become a dashing masterly bronze, purplish (violet?).

Bürger has written about Rembrandt's "Jewish Bride," just as he wrote about van der Meer of Delft, ² as he wrote about "The Sower" by Millet, as he wrote about Frans Hals, with devotion, and surpassing himself. "The Syndics" is perfect, is the most beautiful Rembrandt; but "The Jewish Bride" – not ranked so high, what an intimate, what an infinitely sympathetic picture it is, painted d'une main de feu. You see, in "The Syndics" Rembrandt is true to nature, though even there, and always, he soars aloft, to the very highest height, the infinite; but Rembrandt could do more than that – if he did not have to be literally true, as in a portrait, when he was free to idealize, to be a poet, that means Creator. That's what he is in "The Jewish Bride." How Delacroix would have understood that picture. What a noble sentiment, infinitely deep.

"Il faut être mort plusieurs fois pour peindre ainsi" [One must have died several times to paint like that], how true it is here. As to the pictures by Frans Hals – he always remains on earth – one can speak about them.

Rembrandt is so deeply mysterious that he says things for which there are no words in any language.

Rembrandt is truly called a magician...that's not an easy calling.

I have packed several still lifes, which you will receive next week, together with two souvenirs from Amsterdam [F 113, JH 944; F 211, JH 973], which I caught on the wing, and also a few drawings. In a few days I shall also send you a book by de Goncourt, Chérie. De Goncourt is always beautiful, and his way of working is so honest and he drudged on it so hard.

In Amsterdam I saw two pictures by Israëls, "The Fishermen of Zandvoort," and – one of his very latest – an old woman huddled together like a bundle of rags near the bedstead in which the corpse of her husband lies.

Both pictures are masterpieces, I think. Let them jabber about technique as much as they like, in Pharisaical, hollow, hypocritical terms – the true painters are guided by that conscience which is called

sentiment, their soul: their brains aren't subject to the pencil, but the pencil to their brains. Besides, the canvas is afraid of the real painter, and not the painter afraid of the canvas.

In Amsterdam I also saw pictures of today, Witkamp and others. Witkamp is one of the best, reminds one of Jules Breton; others whom I have in mind but I shall not name, who always talk about what they call technique, I found weak in that very technique.

You know all those cold grey tones which they think distinguished, but which are flat and uninteresting, childishly mixed. Nowadays they bring on the market ordinary colours purposely mixed with pure white, for the convenience of painters who paint in what they call a distinguished light colour scale.

Just listen, the technique, the colouring, the modelling of "The Fishermen of Zandvoort," for instance, is in my opinion Delacroix-like and superb; today's cold flat greys are technically not worth much, but remain paint, and with Israël's one forgets the paint. But remember, I do not mean Jaap Maris, Willem Maris, Mauve, Neuhuys, who work in the right manner, each in his own colour scale, Blommers too. But those painters' school, their followers, Theo, I don't think are worth much.

I have also seen the Fodor museum. "The Shepherd" by Decamps is really a masterpiece; do you remember the Meissonier, a sketch of a deathbed? The Diaz?

Well, Bosboom, Waldorp, Nuyen, Rochussen, the original painters of that period of forty years back – I always like to see them.

Rochussen possesses an élan like Gavarni's.

The still lifes I am sending are colour studies, I intend to make more of them; don't think this is useless.

After a while they will get darker, but in a year, for instance, they will be better than now, when, being dry to the core, they will have got a solid varnish. If you use some drawing pins and put a great number of my studies, the old as well as the new ones, pell-mell on a wall of your room, then I think you will see that there is a connection between those studies, that the various colours harmonize.

Speaking of black – the more I see of those pictures in a cold, childish colour scheme, the more I am glad that my studies are found too black.

Look at "The Fishermen of Zandvoort" and see what colours it is painted with – it is painted with red, with blue, with yellow, with black and some dirty white, with brown (everything well mixed and broken), or isn't it? When Israël says that one must not paint black, he certainly never means what they now make of it, he means that there must be colour in the shadows, but that excludes neither a single colour scheme, however dark it may be, nor of course that of the blacks and browns and deep blues.

But what's the good of thinking about it; it is much better to think of Rembrandt, of Frans Hals, of Israël's, than to think of that fashionable impotency.

I am writing you rather a long letter – though perhaps you may not believe what I say about the colours, and though you may find me pessimistic when I say that much of what is called delicate grey is a very ugly grey; though you may find me pessimistic or worse when I also disapprove of the smooth polishing of faces, hands and eyes, because the great masters all worked in quite a different way, perhaps by and by your own study of art, which I am glad you took up again thoroughly, will change you too.

Now I have another favour to ask; that acquaintance of mine in Eindhoven, who went with me to Amsterdam, bought at Uncle Cor's: Bürger's Musées de la Hollande, Van der Hoop Rotterdam, but they did not have the first volume, Musées de la Haye et d'Amsterdam. However, we must have it; it is out of print, but you will be able to pick one up somewhere, and he will even pay 10 fr. for it, though preferably less of course. I shall send you the money immediately, as it is to be his and on that condition he has given me the order. So will you try to get it, please?

If you find one, first read it through once more yourself, it is so beautiful.

I did not enter Uncle Cor's shop with him.

The small panels I painted in Amsterdam were done in a great hurry. One even in the waiting room of the station, when I was too early for the train, the other in the morning, before I went to the museum at 10 o'clock. Yet I am sending them to you, look upon them as "Dutch tiles," on which something is dashed off in a few strokes.

As to the end of the month, boy, I am literally cleaned out, what's to be done? Can't you send 20 fr. more, or however little it may be? Next month I also have to pay for colours, the first of November, 25 guilders rent.

As to connections for my work, I spoke with somebody about it, and whenever I go again, I shall take some work with me. There is a general slackness which makes it easy enough to find an occasion for exhibition. Let us paint much, this is necessary if we want to have success; just because times are slack we must work

hard; then, instead of finding all harbours closed to us, we will one day sweep the seas with a broomstick in the mast.

Goodbye,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. The so-called "Lean Company."
2. Vincent means Vermeer van Delft