

Dear Theo,

Yesterday evening I received de Goncourt's book. I began to read it at once, and though of course I shall read it over again quietly, this morning I already had a general view of the whole – I had been longing for it so much. I do not think he praises Boucher too much.

If I knew nothing of Boucher but the contrast of those three things, a rich blue (sky), a bronze (man's figure), and a mother-of-pearl white (woman's figure) especially together with that anecdote of "La Duchesse d'Orleans," I would admit that he is a personality in the world of painters. Besides, he doesn't praise him too much, because he certainly also calls him *canaille*, in the way in which one may call the pictures by Bouguereau, Perrault, etc., *canaille* without doing an injustice to the honest fellows. Because they miss something touching and intimate, don't they? In my opinion he does not praise Boucher too much, because I do not fear for a single moment that de Goncourt would deny the superiority of, for instance, Rubens. Rubens who was even more productive than Boucher, not less than he, but even more so, as a painter of nude women. Which very often in Rubens does not prevent the poignant pathos and intimacy I mean, especially in those portraits of his wives, in which he is then himself, or surpasses himself.

But Chardin!

I have often longed to know something about the man (Watteau was just as I expected).

Tiers état, Corot-like as to *bonhomie* – with more sorrow and adversity in his life.

It is a splendid book. Latour-witty and Voltaire-like.

Pastel is a process which I should like to know. I shall certainly try it someday. If one can paint a head, one ought to be able to learn it in a few hours.

I enjoyed immensely what he says about Chardin's technique. I am more convinced than ever that the true painters did not finish their things in the way which is used only too often, namely correct when one scrutinizes it closely.

The best pictures, and, from a technical point of view the most complete, seen from near by, are but patches of colour side by side, and only make an effect at a certain distance.

That is what Rembrandt stuck to, notwithstanding all the trouble it caused him (the honest citizens greatly preferred Van der Helst, because his work can also be looked at up close).

In that respect Chardin is as great as Rembrandt. Israëls is the same, and I for my part think Israëls always admirable, especially in his technique. It would be too good if everybody knew this, and thought like this, as Bonnemort would say.

But to work like that one must be something of a magician, to learn which costs a great deal, and the sad sarcastic saying of Michelangelo's: "Ma maniera est destinée a faire de grands sots" – is also true of the colourists who dare dash on their colours, this too cannot be imitated by cowards and weaklings.

I think that I am making progress with my work. Last night something happened to me which I will tell you as minutely as I can. You know those three pollard oaks at the bottom of the garden at home; I have plodded on them for the fourth time. [F 044, JH 962] I had been at them for three days with a canvas the size of, let's say, that cottage, and the country churchyard which you have.

The difficulty was the tufts of havana leaves, to model them and give them form, colour, tone. Then in the evening I took it to that acquaintance of mine in Eindhoven, who has a rather stylish drawing room, where we put it on the wall (grey paper, furniture black with gold). Well, never before was I so convinced that I shall make things that do well, that I shall succeed in calculating my colours, so that I have it in my power to make the right effect. This was havana, soft green and white (grey), even pure white, direct from the tube (you see that I, for my part, though I speak about black, have no prejudice against the other extreme, even the utmost extreme).

Now, though that man has money, though he took a fancy to it, I felt such a glow of courage when I saw that it was good that, as it hung there, it created an atmosphere by the soft melancholy harmony of that combination of colours that I could not sell it.

But as he had a fancy for it, I gave it to him, and he accepted it just as I had intended, without many words, namely little more than, "The thing is damned good."

I don't think so yet myself. First I must see a little more of Chardin, Rembrandt, old Dutch and French painters, and think it over well – because I want to make it more elaborate with less paint than I used, for instance, in this thing.

Now as to that acquaintance of mine and his opinion of pictures; when someone with a clear intelligent head paints still life and works out-of-doors every day, if only for a year, he need not therefore be an art critic, neither does he feel he is a painter yet, but for all that he will observe more originally than many others.

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Besides, his character is not just like everybody's, for instance, he was originally intended to become a priest, at a certain moment he flatly refused this, and carried his point, in which not exactly every one in Brabant succeeds. And there is something broad-minded and loyal about him.

Zola once referred to this something in a conversation between Mouret and his school-fellow, when he let Mouret get serious and say that it had cost him a great deal to free himself from that time and its influence, but that he had wanted to live and that he had lived. Many who undertake to change fall back, don't come any further than a certain insipid methodism because they don't take their measures energetically enough. But this is not the case with him, he is a man of importance in his little world.

Do you know that the de Goncourts have made etchings and drawings? You must not think me unpractical when I persist in encouraging you either to draw or to paint. You wouldn't be a failure either. If you just set yourself to it, the result would not be unsatisfactory either. And especially as an art dealer, especially as an art expert, it would give you an edge over many others. An edge which one really needs.

I refer once more to that acquaintance of mine; it is exactly a year ago that I saw him for the first time, when I made that large sketch of a water mill [F 125, JH 525] which you perhaps know (its colour is ripening well). Herewith a description of a study by that acquaintance of mine – some roofs, backs of houses, factory chimneys, dark against an evening sky. That evening sky blue, changing at the horizon into a glow between clouds of smoky colour, with orange or rather ruddy reflections. The masses of houses, dark yet of a warm stone colour, a silhouette that has something gloomy and threatening. The foreground, a vague plot in the dusk, black sand, faded grass, a bit of garden with a few dark melancholy apple trunks, with here and there a tuft of yellow autumn leaves.

It was all his idea alone, but isn't it a good conception, a real impression, well felt? But one doesn't become a painter in one year, nor is it necessary.

But there is already one good thing among the lot, and one feels hopeful, instead of feeling helpless before a stone wall.

I do not know how I shall fare in the future. At present when I read of that splendid devil, that famous Latour, by God, how real it is, and how well that fellow, except for his enormous passion for money, has attacked life and painting.

Only recently I saw Frans Hals. Well, you know how enthusiastic I was about it, how I immediately wrote you a long letter about painting in one stroke. How great is the similarity between the ideas of Latour, for instance, and Frans Hals, when they express life with pastel which one could almost blow off. I don't know what I shall do and how I shall fare, but I hope not to forget the lessons which I am thus learning these days: in one stroke – but with absolutely complete exertion of one's whole spirit and attention.

At present – I like nothing better than working with the brush, drawing with it too – instead of making a sketch in charcoal.

When I ask myself how the old Dutch masters worked, I find so relatively few real drawings. And how wonderfully they draw. But – I think in most cases they began, continued and finished with their brush.

They did not fill in.

A Van Goyen, for instance – I just saw that one of his in the Dupper Collection, an oak tree on a dune in the storm; and the Cuyp, view of Dordrecht.

An astonishing technique, but done with nothing and quite naturally – clear of paint, and – apparently – quite simple.

But either in figure or in landscape, how the painters always did try to convince people that a picture is something different from nature in a mirror, different from imitation, i.e. re-creation.

I should like to tell you a great deal more, especially about what Chardin made me think about colour and that not painting the local colour. I think it splendid.

“Comment surprendre – comment dire de quoi est faite cette bouche démeublée, qui a d'infinies délicatesses. Cela n'est fait que de quelques traînées de jaune et de quelques balayures de bleu!!!” [How to surprise – how to tell what that toothless mouth is done with, which is so infinitely delicate. It is done only with some streaks of yellow, and some broad strokes of blue!!!]

When I read this I thought of Van der Meer of Delft; if one sees his city view at The Hague close up, it is incredible, and painted with entirely different colours than one would suspect at a few steps' distance.

Goodbye, I had to tell you at once how I admire de Goncourt's book.

Ever yours, Vincent