

Letter 400  
Nuenen, 13 April 1885

Dear Theo,

Many thanks for your registered letter of yesterday and the enclosure. I am writing at once in reply and enclose a small scratch, based more closely than the one before on my last study. I haven't been able to get as far with it as I would have liked. I worked on it continually for three days from morning till night, and by Saturday night the paint had begun to get into a state which prevented further work until it had dried out completely.

I went to Eindhoven today to order a small lithographic stone, as this is to become the first of a series of lithographs, on which I intend to start again. When you were here I asked you about the costs of reproduction by the G. & Co. process. I think you said it would be 100 francs. Well, the old-fashioned, almost neglected, ordinary lithographic process is quite a lot cheaper – especially in Eindhoven, perhaps. I get the use of the stone, graining, paper and the printing of 50 copies for 3 guilders. Anyway, I intend to do a series of subjects from peasant life – les paysans chez eux [peasants at home]. Today I went for a splendid walk for a few hours with an acquaintance of mine whose first watercolour of a figure I showed you.

I don't say that the scenery isn't even more stirring and more dramatic, say in Brittany, in Katwijk or in the Borinage – yes indeed, but even so, the heath and the villages here are very beautiful as well, and once there, I find an inexhaustible source of subjects from peasant life – and the only thing that matters is to get down to it, to work.

I've a great mind to do some watercolours and drawings again as well – and when I'm in my studio, I'll be able to make time for that in the evenings.

I was tremendously pleased that you sent me the 100 francs. As I said, it was absolutely essential that I pay several things off – and that was on my mind. Not that people were bothering me for it, but I knew they needed the money. And that is why I wrote that I might have to keep something back when the estate is settled. But that won't be necessary now – although I can tell you that this year is bound to be very grim. But I keep thinking of what Millet said, “Je ne veux point supprimer la souffrance, car souvent c'est elle, qui fait s'exprimer le plus énergiquement les artistes.” [I would never do away with suffering, for it is often what makes artists express themselves most forcefully.]

I think I'll be moving by the first of May – although I'm getting on well of course with Mother and our sisters, I can still see and sense it is *pour le mieux* [for the best] this way – since in the long run it would hardly be feasible to live together. Which I can put down neither to them personally nor to myself personally so much as to the incompatibility of the ideas of people who seek to maintain a certain social standing and a painter of peasant life who gives the matter no thought.

When I say that I am a painter of peasant life, that is a fact, and it will become increasingly apparent to you in the future that I feel at ease as one. It was not for nothing that I spent so many evenings musing by the fire in their homes with the miners and the peat cutters and the weavers and the peasants – unless I was working too hard for that.

By continually observing peasant life, at all hours of the day, I have become so involved in it that I rarely think of anything else.

You write that the public attitude – that is, indifference to Millet's work, as you have just had occasion to observe at the exhibition – is not encouraging, either for artists or for those who have to sell paintings. I quite agree – but Millet himself felt and knew this – and on reading *Sensier* I was very struck by something he said at the beginning of his career, which I don't remember word for word, only the purport of it, namely, “that (i.e. that indifference) would be bad enough if I had need of fine shoes and the life of a gentleman, but – *puisque j'y vais en sabots – je m'en tirerai.*” [As I go about in clogs, I'll manage]. And so it turned out.

What I hope never to forget is that “*il s'agit d'y aller en sabots*” [what matters is going about in clogs], that is, being content with the kind of food, drink, clothes and sleeping arrangements with which the peasants are content.

That is what Millet did and indeed he wanted nothing else – and to my mind this means that he set an example to painters as a human being, which Israëls and Mauve, for instance, who live rather luxurious lives, have not, and I repeat Millet is father Millet, that is, counsellor and mentor in everything to the younger painters. Most of those whom I know, but then I don't know all that many, would not subscribe to this view. For my part, I do, and fully believe in what he says.

I'm talking at some length about this dictum of Millet's because you write that when city-dwellers paint peasants, their figures, splendidly done though they may be, cannot but remind one of the faubourgs [suburbs] of Paris. I used to have the same impression too (although in my opinion B. Lepage's woman digging potatoes is certainly no exception), but isn't this because the painters have so often failed to immerse themselves personally in peasant life? Millet said on another occasion, Dans l'art il faut y mettre sa peau [one has to put one's all into art].

De Groux – that is one of his qualities – painted peasants properly. (And they, the State, demanded historical pictures from him! Which he also did well, but how much better he was when he was allowed to be himself.) It will always be a shame and disgrace that De Groux is not yet as fully appreciated by the Belgians as he deserves. De Groux is one of the best Millet-like masters. But although he neither was nor is acknowledged by the public at large, and although, like Daumier and Tassaert, he remains in obscurity, there are people, Mellery, for example, to name but one, who are working along his lines again today. I saw something recently by Mellery in an illustrated paper, a bargee's family in the little cabin of their boat – husband, wife, children – round a table.

As far as popular support is concerned – years ago I read something on the subject in Renan which I have always remembered and which I shall always continue to believe – that anyone who wishes to accomplish something good or useful must not count on or seek the approval or appreciation of the general public, but, on the contrary, must expect only a very few warm hearts to sympathize and go along with him – and then only perhaps.

If you come across the “Chat noir” people, you might show them this small sketch to be going on with, but I can do a better one if they like, for this one was done in a great rush and is simply meant to give you a clearer idea of the effect and the composition than the first one. Regards and thanks, with a handshake,  
Ever yours, Vincent

You needn't tell the “Chat noir” that I also intend to make a lithograph of this subject for myself. That lithograph won't be for publication, anyway, but is entirely a private affair. For that matter, I don't much care if they don't want to have it – because I shall certainly make lithographs myself of whatever I want to have lithographed.