

Letter 406  
Nuenen, 4 or 5 May 1885

Dear Theo,

I just prepared a little note for you to go with the picture in the box; I'll send it carriage-paid (to Antwerp, or all the way through if possible) to your address Rue de Laval.

If you have to pay anything more on it, it might be because they only prepay to Antwerp. But I didn't want you to have charges on it, as it will perhaps disappoint you.

If this should be the case, take your time looking at it.

Of course, I can't tell what Portier will say.

In the way of criticism, I myself could point out things which will probably escape most of the critics.

But the reason why I am sending it with a certain confidence is that, in contrast to many other pictures, there is rusticity and a certain life in it. And so, though painted in a different style, in another century than the old Dutch masters, Ostade for instance, it too comes from the heart of the peasant's life, and is original. Though I see, for instance, in the Salon number so many pictures which, if you like, are faultlessly drawn and painted as to technique, yet many of them bore me terribly because they give me neither food for the heart nor for the mind, because they have obviously been made without a certain passion. And there is some passion in what I am sending you.

I took great delight in making it, and I have worked at it with a certain enthusiasm.

It hasn't bored me; perhaps for that reason it will not bore others. Because I believe this, I send it to you.

Be sure, however, that I greatly admire things in the Salon number like "The Lark" by Jules Breton, Roll's picture, also the Fantin Latour, also "The Coast of Cornwall," Vernier and some others. I think they are splendid, though I can honestly say of many other enormous canvases that they bore me terribly.

That little woman with the spade by Lhermitte, how characteristic it is, how full of life, as if made by a peasant who could paint; it is a masterpiece.

If I were you, I should buy copies of the Lhermittes and keep them for ten years. For they are masterpieces one gets in this way for one's 50 centimes. How is it possible that the magazines are not better?

I heard Lançon is dead. I have followed his work for years and nothing of his has ever bored me.

There is life in every little pencil stroke.

If such a one dies – of that same race as the Régameys and Renouards, it is a loss and leaves an empty place.

Lançon's drawings were admirable, so manly and so broad.

I hear Tissot had an exhibition, did you see it?

It all depends on how much life and passion an artist is able to express in his figure; if there is real life in it, then a lady's figure by Alfred Stevens for instance or some Tissots are certainly beautiful too.

And the peasants by Lhermitte, Millet, are so splendid just because of the life there is in them.

In whatever direction one may work, be it Israëls, Herkomer, so many different styles – if there is life and feeling in it, then it is good.

I suppose there are still many beautiful pictures among those that have not been reproduced. But when I remember a Salon of '70 or '74, for instance, I think there used to be a higher standard, and since then it has been lowered. One has only to look over the Boetzel Albums, for instance. And the best masters are not even reproduced there, for instance Millet isn't.

I don't pretend to know it all myself. On the contrary, you see so many Daubignys, Corots, Millets, Duprés, Israëlses, Herkomers, Bretons, etc., and I never see any of them. But I think about it every day and feel that the colour scale of all those painters is lower than it seems, and that even those pictures which seem light, if one looks carefully and compares, are in lower colour scale than even Mauve's greys. Except perhaps the very best Mauves – for instance that old one in the Post Collection with that caravan of old nags and his picture at the Salon two years ago, the launching of that smack.

I hear or see so little, hardly anything at all, so I haven't the opportunity to test my opinions against the pictures themselves. But working and seeking and living with nature, as I told you before, that question gives me no rest. And there is nothing that expresses what I mean so well, there is nothing that gives me such a solid base for my theory as that saying which expresses Millet's colour and technique so perfectly: "Son paysan semble peint avec la terre meme qu'il ensemence."

Mauve – when he paints brightly – and the other light Dutch painters of good quality do not use different colours than the contemporary French painters or those of the old-Dutch school – namely very simple palettes – but here in Holland they use more white than Millet or Dupré or Daubigny or Corot.

If some pictures you might see should make you want to write about them sometime, I should be very glad.

I just read an article in the Graphic on an exhibition of 25 drawings by Fred. Walker. Walker died some ten years ago, you know. Pinwell too – while I'm on this subject, I'm thinking of their work too, and how clever they were. How they did in England exactly what Maris, Israëls, Mauve, have done in Holland, namely restored nature over convention; sentiment and impression over academic platitudes and dullness. How they were the first tonists.

But I remember peasants in the field by Pinwell, "The Harbour of Refuge" by Walker, of which one might also say, peints avec la terre. I ought to see more pictures in order to be able to draw conclusions, and I ask you only, Do you know anything about it? Wine, of course, contains a quantity of moisture or water, and there will always be water in it; but when too much water is added – it becomes weak. I do not pretend to say that one can, or must, paint light tones without white, no more than I should ever assert that wine must be dry. But I do say that one must take care in our days of clarity (?) and lightness (?), not to water wine too much, not to mix too much white in the wine of colour, so that some passion remains and the effects do not become too tame and weaken the whole thing.

Do you know where one could learn something about this?

From a picture by Leys, not from the first period, but from Ley's second and third period.

I remember "The Skaters" and "The Walk on the Ramparts."

In both pictures there are figures in the snow, and neither picture is grey; they are as light as the current Dutch painters would paint snow. That little picture by Millet which you mentioned once as the archetype of an impressionist picture, is it in the Luxembourg?

I believe that many a Dutch landscape would become white, and yet coloured compared to that tone. One thing I am sure of, namely that it is mostly painted with red, blue, and yellow, with perhaps a little, but probably not much, white.

I haven't seen it for ten or twelve years, but the more I think of it, while myself seeking certain effects in nature, the less I am inclined to believe that the best French painters use as much white as one seems to use nowadays.

I know something depends on the models too. When I think of the Scheveningen girl who sits regularly for Artz, and whom I remember quite well, she is as fair and as clean as some wh—s. That also is beautiful to paint, yes.

But peasants or fishermen in small villages and far from the city – they are different no matter where they are. They remind one of the earth, sometimes they seem modelled in it.

In the poems by Jules Breton, I remember the lines and I believe it is in the very poem he dedicated to Millet<sup>1</sup> (a peasant going home through the potato fields in the evening):

Par le crépuscle et le hâle  
Le paysan deux fois bruni.

[By the twilight and his suntan  
The peasant is twice browned.]

But don't suppose that I don't like bright pictures for that reason – to be sure I do; I know a Bastien Lepage – a bride painted quite blanc sur blanc with a little brown face in the middle of the picture, splendid, and so many Dutch pictures with snow, mist and sky – splendid.

I only want to point out that one may do as one likes, for instance Jaap Maris, who is sometimes very light – next day will paint a view of the city by night in the darkest colour scale. What I want to say especially is that pictures like some old Cabats, for instance, certain Duprés, though perhaps only painted with red, blue and yellow, without much white, are in my opinion not at all inferior to later greyer conceptions.

I got this far yesterday. I just received your letter with the enclosure, for which hearty thanks.

What you write about the Salon is very interesting.

From what you say about the picture by Besnard, I see that you understood what I wrote about broken colours, orange broken by blue and the reverse.

However, there are many other colour scales too, but that of orange against blue is logical; so is yellow against violet, so is red against green.

The box for the picture is ready, so I am sending it flat. It is a light box, but it must dry another day or two. I'm sending ten other painted studies at the same time.

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Please tell me some more about the picture by Uhde; you know Rembrandt painted the same subject in his large picture at the National Gallery.

I am in all the mess of moving. Once more, thanks for what you sent. With a handshake,  
Ever yours, Vincent