

Letter 411  
Nuenen, early June 1885

Dear Theo,

Today I sent off the small box in question, containing, except what I mentioned already, another picture, "Cimiterie de Paysans."

I have omitted some details – I wanted to express how those ruins show that for ages the peasants have been laid to rest in the very fields which they dug up when alive – I wanted to express what a simple thing death and burial is, just as simple as the falling of an autumn leaf – just a bit of earth dug up – a wooden cross. The fields around, where the grass of the churchyard ends, beyond the little wall, form a last line against the horizon – like the horizon of the sea.

And now those ruins tell me how a faith and a religion mouldered away – strongly founded though they were – but how the life and the death of the peasants remain forever the same, budding and withering regularly, like the grass and the flowers growing there in that churchyard.

"Les religions passent, Dieu demeure" [Religions pass away, God remains], is a saying of Victor Hugo's whom they also brought to rest recently.

I do not know if either of these two pictures will please you – the cottage with the mossed roof reminded me of a wren's nest. Well, just look them over.

I must use this opportunity to explain once more, as I found new and clear words for it, why I wrote you, and write again, that I am far from sure that your present opinion is a definite conviction.

The house of Goupil & co. is not a good training school for becoming acquainted with pictures, even less so with painters.

I tell you my opinion is that one does not even learn to have an independent view. To whom did they pay great honour? To Paul Delaroche.

I need not tell you that Delaroche was one of those of whom very little remains; hardly anybody takes his part any more.

Another one who will not last, though he is better and once or twice made something very beautiful, of whom little will remain also --is Gérôme.

But his "Prisoner," his "Syrian Shepherds" are real, and I admire them just as much as anybody, and willingly and readily. But for the most part he is a second Delaroche, both are of equal value, considered in the framework of their time. Now what I assert and think most probable is that the whole situation will bore you more and more each year. Further, I assert that it is doing a bad turn to others, and especially to oneself, to let oneself be bored. In spite of many wise maxims I have never been able to believe that it may be of any practical use, or for one's own good, to be bored. A good many people have reformed themselves at the age of thirty and have changed considerably. Think this over in all calmness; I tell you that of all I have learned and heard at Goupil & co.'s about art, nothing has held true. If one reverses the commonplaces which count there as the highest wisdom in art matters, namely applauding the former and present Delaroche style and maligning the unorthodox modern painters, I repeat, if one reverses certain sayings – one breathes a purer air. In short, boy, in circumstances and in business such curious changes are not only possible but even usual.

It is odd that I doubt whether you will stay in business after all.

You need not pay attention to this or answer it, I just tell you it straightway to express my idea, not to open sterile discussions.

But it exists – that enchanted land – where one is not free.

Well, I hope to hear soon that you have received the box, and whether you like the pictures.

Tomorrow I am going to paint a spot in another village, also a cottage – in a smaller size. I found it last Sunday, on a long ramble made with a peasant boy to find a wren's nest.

We found six of them, it was a spot that Bodmer certainly would have loved. And they were all nests which the young birds had left, so one could take them without too many scruples. It was so full of character, I have some more beautiful nests. Goodbye, write soon, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

I should like you to varnish both pictures before you show them to Portier or Serret.

The village churchyard especially has sunk in badly because at first it was a total failure – then without hesitation I began anew, taking it from another angle and painting early in the morning instead of in the evening. And the other one – that of the cottage – was originally a shepherd. Last week the sheep were

shorn, I saw it, it was done on a table in the barn. I am glad I can show Portier something quite different this time.

For the rest I am very busy making drawings, in order to send you some full-size figures before long. But while I was working on those cottages – perhaps you will call them imitations of Michel, though they aren't – and looking for subjects, I found such splendid hovels that I cannot help painting some more variations of those "peasants' nests" which remind me so much of the wren's nest.

Oh, beyond all doubt – whoever paints peasants nowadays and has his heart in this work will have part of the public on his side, and not the worst part – though it may not be the largest. But for all that, the end or second half of the month will prove very meager for me. But the same happens to the peasant boys – and yet they enjoy their lives.

I wish you had been with me last Sunday when we took that long walk. I came home quite covered with mud, for we had had to wade through a brook for half an hour. But painting becomes stimulating and exciting to me, like hunting – in fact it is a hunt for models and beautiful spots.

Once more goodbye, and best wishes. It is already late, and at five o'clock I must be on duty, so goodbye.