LETTERS TO HIS BROTHER

DEAR BROTHER,

You.

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write to you again so soon. I do so only
in order to tell you how extraordinarily happy painting makes me feel.

Last Sunday I began something which I had had in mind for many a day:

It is the view of a flat green meadow, dotted with haycocks. A cinder path running alongside of a ditch crosses it diagonally. And on the horizon, in the middle of the picture, there stands the sun. The whole thing is a blend of colour and tone--a vibration of the whole scale of

colours in the air. First of all there is a mauve tinted mist through which the sun peers, half concealed by a dark violet bank of clouds with a thin brilliant red lining. The sun contains some vermilion, and above it there is a strip of yellow which shades into green and, higher up, into a bluish tint that becomes the most delicate azure. Here and there I have put in a light purple or gray cloud gilded with the sun's livery.

The ground is a strong carpet-like texture of green, gray and brown, full of light and shade and life. The water in the ditch sparkles on the clay soil. It is in the style of one of Emile Breton's paintings.

I have also painted a large stretch of dunes. I put the colour on thick and treated it broadly.

I feel quite certain that, on looking at these two pictures, no one will ever believe that they are the first studies I have ever painted.

Truth to tell, I am surprised myself. I thought my first things would be worthless; but even at the risk of singing my own praises, I must say that they really are not at all bad. And that is what surprises me so much.

I believe the reason of it is that before I began to paint, I made such a long and careful study of drawing and perspective that I can now sketch a thing as I see it.

Now, however, since I have bought my brushes and painting materials, I have slaved so hard that I am dead tired--seven colour studies straight off!... I literally cannot stand, and yet I can neither forsake my work

nor take a rest.

But what I also wanted to say is that when I am painting things present themselves to me in colour, which formerly I never used to see--things full of breadth and vigour.

All this looks as if I were already satisfied with my own work; but I feel just the contrary. Up to the present, however, I have progressed to the extent that when anything in Nature happens to strike me, I have more means at my command than I had formerly for expressing that thing with force.

Nor do I think that it would matter much if my health played me a nasty trick. As far as I am aware, they are not the worst painters who from time to time feel as if they can do no work for a week or two. For their compulsory idleness is probably due chiefly to the fact that they are the very ones who, as Millet says, "_y mettent leur peau_." That does not matter, and no one should pay any heed to such lapses. For a while you are utterly exhausted, but you soon get right again; and then at least you are the richer for having garnered a number of studies, as the peasant garners a load of hay. But for the moment I am not yet contemplating a rest.

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I know it is late, but I really must write you a few lines. You are not here and I miss you, though I feel as if we were not so very far from each other.

I have just decided to pay no further heed to my indisposition, or rather to all that is left of it. Enough time has been lost and I must not neglect my work. Therefore, whether I am well or not, I shall again draw regularly from morn till night. I do not want anybody to be able again to say of my work: "Ah, those are all old drawings!"

...In my opinion my hands have grown too delicate; but what can I do? I shall go out again, even if it cost me a good deal; for my chief concern is that I should not neglect my work any longer. Art is jealous; she will not allow illness to take precedence of her. And I give in to her.

...Men like myself really have no right to be ill. But you must understand what my attitude is to Art. In order to attain to real Art one must work both hard and long. The thing I have set my mind upon as the goal of all my efforts is devilish difficult, and yet I do not think that I am aiming too high. I will make drawings that will amaze some people.

In short I will bring it to such a pitch, that they will say of my work: "The man feels deeply and he is subtle withal"; in spite of my so-called coarseness, do you understand? maybe precisely on that account. At present it sounds presumptuous to speak in this way; but it is for this very reason that I wish to put vigour into my work.

For what am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity, or an oddity, or a disagreeable man, some one who neither has nor ever will have any place in society--in short something less than the least.

Well, granting that this is so, I should like to show by my work what the heart of such a nonentity, of such an insignificant man, conceals.

This is my ambition which for all that is the outcome more of love than of resentment, more of a feeling of peaceful serenity than of passion. And even though I often have to contend with all kinds of difficulties, yet I feel within me a calm, pure harmony and music.

Art requires resolute and unremitting industry, as well as incessant observation. By resolute industry I mean, in the first place, constant industry, as also the power of maintaining one's own point of view against the assertions of others.

Latterly I have had precious little intercourse with other painters and have not felt any the worse for it. One should not pay so much heed to the teaching of painters as to the teaching of Nature. I can understand better now than I did six months ago that Mauve should have been able to say: "Do not speak to me about Dupré; speak to me rather about the edge of your ditch, or things of that sort." It certainly sounds strange, but it is absolutely right. A feeling for things in themselves, for reality, is much more important than a sense of the pictorial. It is more fruitful and animating.

In regard to the difference between ancient and modern Art, I should like to say that I think modern painters are perhaps greater thinkers.

Rembrandt and Ruysdael seem to us great and sublime, just as they did to their contemporaries; but there is something more personal and more intimate in the modern painter, which makes a stronger appeal to us.

I made another study of the little child's cradle to-day, and have put in colour here and there. I trust I may yet be able to draw the little cradle a hundred times over resolutely.

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In order to make studies out of doors, and to paint a small sketch, a very strongly developed feeling for form is a pre-requisite. And this feeling is equally necessary for the subsequent further elaboration of one's work.

In my opinion, however, this is not acquired automatically, but chiefly through observation, and furthermore through strenuously working and seeking. A study of anatomy and perspective is undoubtedly necessary as well.

At my side there hangs a landscape study by Roeloffs (a pen-and-ink drawing); but I cannot describe the full expressiveness of its simple silhouette. For everything depends upon that.

Another and even more striking example is the large wood-engraving of Millet's _Bergère_, which I saw at your place last year, and of which I still have the most vivid recollection. While there are also Ostade's and Bauern-Breughel's small pen-and-ink drawings, for instance.

I have once more tackled the old pollard-willow, and I believe that it is the best of my water-colours. It is a dark landscape. My desire was to paint it in such a way that the spectator must read and sympathize

with the thoughts of the signal man with his red flag, who seems to say, "Oh, what a gloomy day it is!"

I am deriving great pleasure from my work just now, although from time to time I feel the after-effects of my illness somewhat severely. As to the market value of my pictures, I should be very much surprised if, in time, they did not sell as well as other people's. Whether this happens directly or later on does not matter to me. But to work faithfully and earnestly from Nature is, to my mind, a safe and sure road which must lead to one's goal.

Sooner or later a love of Nature always meets with response from people interested in Art. Therefore it is the painter's duty to become absorbed in Nature, to exercise all his intelligence, and put all his feeling into his work so that it may be comprehensible to others. But to work with a view to sell is, in my opinion, not the proper way, neither should we consider the taste of the art-lover--the great painters never did so. For the sympathy which sooner or later rewarded their efforts, they had to thank only their own honesty. That is all I know about it, and I do not believe that I require to know any more. To work in order to find people who will appreciate one, and in order to kindle love in them, is a very different thing, and naturally a very right one too. But nothing of the nature of a speculation should be attempted; for this might turn out wrong, and then much time would have been spent in vain.

Among the water-colours I have just painted, you will find many things that ought to be eliminated--but that will come in time. But please understand me, I have not the remotest idea of abiding by a system, or anything of the sort.

Now farewell! And believe me that I often have a hearty laugh at the thought that people should reproach me with certain absurdities and iniquities which have never so much as entered my head; for what am I but a friend of Nature, of study, of work, and above all of man?

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DEAR THEO,

A day or two ago I paid another visit to Scheveningen, and in the evening had the pleasure of seeing a fishing smack enter the harbour. Near the monument there is a wooden hut on which stood a man who was waiting. As soon as the smack sailed into view, this man appeared with a large blue flag, and was followed by a number of little children who did not reach to his knees. Apparently it was a great joy for them to stand near the man with the flag. They seemed to think that their presence contributed largely to the successful entry of the fishing smack. A few minutes after the man had waved his flag, another man came along on an old horse, who was to heave in the cable. Men and women, and mothers with their children, now joined the little group, in order to welcome the vessel.

As soon as the boat had drawn sufficiently near, the man on horseback entered the water and soon returned with the anchor.

Then the boatmen were carried ashore on the shoulders of men wearing jack-boots, and happy cries of welcome greeted each new arrival.

When they were all assembled on land, the whole party walked to their homes like a flock of sheep or a caravan, led by the man on the camel--I mean on the horse--who soared above the little crowd like a huge shadow.

[Illustration]

I naturally made the most frantic efforts to sketch the various incidents. I also painted a little, especially the small group, of which I give you a thumb-nail sketch herewith.... From the accompanying drawing you will be able to tell what I am endeavouring to do--that is, to represent groups of people pursuing this or that occupation. But how hard it is to make things look busy and alive, and to make the figures take their place and yet stand out from one another! It is a difficult thing to render the swaying of the crowd and a group of figures of which some are head and shoulders above the rest, though they all form a whole when seen from above. Whereas the legs of the nearest figures stand out distinctly in the foreground, the coats and trousers behind and above form a most bewildering muddle, in which, however, there is plenty of drawing. And then right and left, according to the point of vision, there is the further expansion or foreshortening of the sides. Every kind of scene and figure suggests a good composition to me--a market, the arrival of a boat, a group of men outside a soup-kitchen, the crowds wandering and gossiping in the streets--on the same principle as a flock of sheep--and it is all a matter of light and shade and perspective.

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It really is strange that you and I should always have the same

thoughts. Last night, for instance, I returned from the wood with a study--for this week I have been particularly busy investigating the question of increasing the intensity of colour--and I should have been glad to discuss this matter with you in connection with the study I had made, when lo and behold! in your letter this morning, you just happen to mention the fact that you were struck with the strong and yet harmonious colouring in Montmartre.

...Yesterday evening I was busy painting the gently rising ground in the wood, which is all strewn with dry withered beech leaves. It varied in colour from a light to a dark red-brown, and the cast shadows of the trees fell across it in faint or strongly marked stripes. The difficulty was--and I found it very trying--to succeed in getting the depth of the colour and the enormous strength and solidity of the ground--and I noticed while I worked how much light there was even in the dark shadows! The thing was to render the effect of light and also the glow, and not to lose the depth of rich colour. For one cannot imagine a more magnificent carpet than that deep red-brown ground, bathed in the glow of the autumn evening sunlight, softened by its passage through the trees.

Beech trees grow here, the trunks of which look bright green in the clear light and a warm black-green in the shade. Behind the trunks, above the red-brown ground one could see the delicate blue and warm gray of the sky--it was scarcely blue--and in front of it a diaphanous haze of green, and a maze of trees with golden leaves. The forms of a few peasants gathering wood crept about like dark mysterious shadows, while the white bonnet of a woman bending to gather a few dried twigs suddenly stood out from the deep red-brown of the earth. A coat caught the light,

a shadow was cast, and the dark silhouette of a man appeared high on the edge of the wood. The white bonnet, the shoulders, and bust of a woman stood out against the sky. The figures were large and full of poetry and, in the twilight of the deep shadows, seemed like gigantic terracottas fashioned in a studio. That is how I describe Nature to you. How far I have rendered the effect in my sketch, I do not know. I can only say that I was struck by the harmony of green, red, black, yellow, blue, and gray. It was quite in the style of de Groux; the effect was like that in the sketch of the "Départ du Conscrit."

To paint it was a herculean task. On the ground alone I used one and a half large tubes of white; and yet it is still very dark. I also used red, yellow, brown, yellow-ochre, black, raw sienna and bistre--and the result is a red-brown, which varies from a deep wine-red to a delicate pale pink. It is very difficult to succeed in getting the colour of the moss and the effect of the small border of fresh grass which shone so brightly in the sunlight. Believe me, this is a sketch which, if I may say so, people will think something of, for it makes a decided appeal.

While working upon it, I said to myself: "Do not put down your palette before your picture seems to partake of the mood of an autumn evening, before it is instinct with mystery and with a certain deep earnestness."

But, in order not to lose the effect, I have to paint quickly. The figures are painted in rapidly with a few vigorous and firm brush-strokes. I was struck with the sturdy manner in which the tree-trunks strike their roots into the ground. I began painting them with the brush and I did not succeed in rendering the character of the ground which was already laid on with thick colour,--a stroke of the

brush vanished to nothing upon it. That is why I pressed the roots and trunks out of the tubes direct, and then modelled them a little with the brush. And now they do indeed stand in the soil, and grow out of it, and strike firm roots into it.

In a sense I am glad that I never learnt to paint. If I had I should perhaps have learnt to overlook such effects. Now I say, "No!--this and only this must I have, and if it is impossible, well then, it is impossible, that's all. I will have a shot at it although I do not know the right way to do it."

I really do not know how I paint. Armed with a white panel I take up a position in front of the spot that interests me, contemplate what lies before me, and say to myself "That white panel must be turned into something." Dissatisfied with my work I return home, put my panel out of sight, and after taking a little rest, go back to my work, almost with qualms to see what it looks like. But even then I am not yet satisfied, for glorious Nature is still too vividly stamped upon my mind. Nevertheless I find in my work a certain reverberation of that which fascinated me. I know that Nature told me something, that she spoke to me, and that I took down her message in shorthand. Perhaps my stenographic transcript contains words that are undecipherable; belike there are faults and omissions in it too; still it may possess something that the wood, the beach, or the figures said. And this is never in a tame or conventional language that did not spring from Nature herself.

As you perceive, I am entering heart and soul into painting, and I am deeply engaged in the study of colour. Hitherto I had held myself aloof from it, and I am not sorry that I did. Had I not drawn, I could have

no feeling for a figure that looks like an unfinished terracotta, nor could I have undertaken to paint such a thing. Now, however, I feel that I am in mid-sea--now I must set about painting with all the strength at my command.

...I am certain that I have the feeling for colour, that I shall acquire it more and more, and that painting is in my very marrow.

It is not the extravagant use of paint that makes the painter. But, in order to lend vigour to a piece of ground and to make the air clear, one should not be particular about a tube or two. Often the very spirit of the thing one is painting leads one to paint thinly; at other times the subject, the very nature of the things themselves, compels one to lay the colour on thickly.

At Mauve's studio--who compared with J. Maris, and to an even greater extent with Millet or Jules Dupré, uses paint very moderately--there are as many old cigar boxes filled with empty tubes as there are empty bottles in the corner of a room after an evening's bout (as Zola describes such a function, for instance).

You inquire after my health. How is yours? I should say that my treatment ought to suit you--_i.e._, to be out in the air and to paint. I am quite well. I have to pay for a little fatigue, but still on the whole I feel if anything rather better. I believe it is a good thing for me to lead such a temperate life. But that which does me the most good of all is painting.

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DEAR THEO,

I wish that the three pictures, about which I wrote to you, had already been despatched. I fear that if I keep them here much longer, I may paint them over again, and I believe it would be better for you to get them just as they are.

Don't you think that, after all, it is better for us two to work diligently, even though we have to put up with a good deal in so doing, than to sit down and philosophize, especially at a time like the present? I do not know the future, Theo; but I know the eternal law of change. Think how different things were ten years ago--the circumstances of everyday life, the attitude of men's minds, in fact everything; and ten years hence many other things will have changed also. But fancy having created something lasting! And one does not repent so soon for having created something. The busier I am the better; I prefer a piece of work that is a failure to inactivity.

We shall not have to wait so very long before what we are now producing will have become important. You yourself can see well enough--and it is one of the signs of the times with which I am most pleased--that there is a growing tendency for people to give one-man shows, or exhibitions of the work of a few men who belong to the same school. In my opinion this is a development in the art-dealing world which will have a far greater future than other enterprises. What a good thing it is that people are beginning to understand that the effect is bad when a Bouguereau is placed beside a Jacques, or a figure by Beyle or Lhermitte is hung close to a Schelfhout or a Koekkoek.

If I kept my work by me for long, I feel sure I should paint many of the pieces over again. But owing to the fact that I send them either to you or to Pottier the instant they are free from my brush, a number of them will probably not be worth much,--though by this means many studies will be preserved which otherwise would not have been improved by repeated retouching.

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Peasant life provides such abundant material that "_travailler comme plusieurs nègres_," as Millet says, is the only possible way of accomplishing anything.

People may laugh at Courbet's having said: "Paint angels? But who on earth has ever seen an angel?" Yet on the same principle I should like to say of Benjamin Constant's "La Justice au Harem," for instance, who has ever seen a court of justice in a harem? And the same thing applies to so many other Moorish and Spanish pictures,--"The Reception at the Cardinal's, etc." And then there are all the historical pictures which are always as long as they are broad--what is the good of them all? And what do their painters mean by them? They will all lose their freshness and look like leather in the space of a few years, and will grow ever more and more tedious.

...When, nowadays, connoisseurs stand before a picture like the one by Benjamin Constant, or before a reception given by a Cardinal, painted by some Spaniard or other, they have acquired the habit of gravely muttering something about "clever technique." If, however, the same men

were to stand before a scene from peasant life--a drawing by Raffaëlli--they would criticize the technique with the same gravity.

...I do not know what you think, but as far as I am concerned, the more I study peasant life, the more it absorbs me, and the less I care for the kind of thing painted by Cabanel (with whom I also reckon Jacques and the modern Benjamin Constant) and for the highly respected and unspeakably dry technique of the Italians and the Spaniards. "Mere illustrators!" I am always reminded of these words of Jacques. Still, I am not prejudiced; I can appreciate Raffaëlli, who is something very different from a painter of peasants; I can also appreciate Alfred Stevens and Tissot. And, to speak of something which has nothing in common with peasant life, I can appreciate a beautiful portrait. Zola, who, by-the-bye, in my opinion, is stupendously at sea in regard to painting, says something very fine about art in general in "Mes Haines": "_Dans l'oeuvre d'art je cherche, j'aime l'homme, l'artiste_." Now I think that is absolutely right. Just tell me what sort of a man, what sort of an observer, thinker and character, is at the back of these pictures, the technique of which is held in such high esteem? Very often nobody. But a Raffaëlli _is_ somebody, a Lhermitte _is_ somebody. And in the presence of a number of pictures by almost unknown painters, one is conscious of the great energy, feeling, passion and love with which they are painted.

When one thinks how far one has to go and how much one must slave in order to paint an ordinary peasant and his cot, I almost believe that this journey is longer and more fatiguing than that which many painters undertake in order to get their outlandish subjects--"La Justice au Harem" or "The Reception at the Cardinal's," for instance--and to paint

their frequently far-fetched and eccentric stories. Fancy living the daily life of the peasants in their cots and in the country, enduring the heat of summer and the snow and frost of winter--not indoors but out in the fields, and not for a leisurely walk--no! but for daily work like that of the peasants themselves.

Apparently nothing is more simple than to paint a rag-picker, a beggar or any other kind of workman; but there are no subjects which are so difficult to paint as these everyday figures. I do not think there is a single academy where one can learn to draw or paint a man digging or sowing seed, a woman hanging a pot over the fire or doing needlework. But in every city, however insignificant it may be, there is an academy with a whole selection of models for historical, Arabian, and in short, all kinds of figures, which do not exist in the real everyday world of Europe.

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All academic figures are grouped together in the same manner, and we will readily acknowledge that _on ne peut mieux_. Quite impeccable--faultless! But you are already aware of what I mean: they teach one absolutely nothing new.

Not so the figures painted by a Millet, by a Lhermitte, by a Régamey, or a Daumier. All their figures are also well grouped, but in a very different way from that taught by the academy. My belief is that an academical figure, however accurate it may be, is at present quite superfluous--even though it be painted by Ingres himself (I would in any case except his "Source," which was indeed something new, and will

remain so)--if it lack that essential quality of modernity, that intimate feeling, that quality of having been created to meet a need.

In what circumstances, then, do figures cease from being superfluous, however faulty, and grossly so, they may be? When the man who digs is really digging, when the peasant is a peasant, and the peasant woman a peasant woman. Is that something new? Yes, even the figures of Ostade and Terborch have not the same effect as those in modern pictures.

I should like to say a good deal more about these things, but in any case I feel I must tell you how many of the studies that I have started I should like to improve, and how much higher than my own work I consider that of a few other artists. Now tell me, do you know of a single picture of a man digging or sowing seed in the old Dutch School? Did they ever attempt to paint a workman? Did Velasquez attempt it in his "Water Carrier" or in his types of the people? No!

The figures of the old masters do not "work." At present I am very busy with the figure of a woman whom I saw pulling mangels out of the snow. Now, this is what Millet and Lhermitte did, and this is practically what the peasant painters of this century and Israels did. They thought it was more beautiful than anything else. But even in this century, among the host of painters who pay particular attention to the figure, _i.e._, for the sake of form and of the model, there are precious few who cannot conceive their figures otherwise than at work, and who feel the need of representing activity as an end in itself. The ancients did not feel this need, nor did the old Dutch masters, who concerned themselves extensively with conventional forms of activity.

Thus the picture or the drawing ought to be not only a study of a figure for the sake of the figure, and the incomparably harmonious form of the human body--but at the same time "a gathering of mangels in the snow"! Have I made myself clear? I hope so, for, as I once said to Seurat, a nude by Cabanel, a lady by Jacques, and a peasant woman, not by Bastien-Lepage himself, but by a Parisian painter who has learnt drawing at the academy, will always have her limbs and body expressed in the same way--often quite charmingly, and, as far as proportions and anatomy are concerned, quite correctly. When, however, Israels, Daumier or Lhermitte, for instance, draw a figure, one is much more conscious of the form of the body, although--and that is why I include Daumier in the number--the proportions will tend to be almost arbitrary. The anatomy and structure of the body will not always seem quite correct in the eyes of the academician. But it will have life, particularly if it come from the brush of Delacroix.

I have not expressed myself quite satisfactorily yet: tell Seurat that I should despair if my figures were correct; tell him that if you take a photograph of a man digging, in my opinion, he is sure to look as if he were not digging; tell him that I think Michelangelo's figures magnificent, even though the legs are certainly too long and the hips and the pelvis bones a little too broad; tell him that in my opinion Millet and Lhermitte are the true painters of the day, because they do not paint things as they are, dryly analysing them and observing them objectively, but render them as they feel them; tell him it is my most fervent desire to know how one can achieve such deviations from reality, such inaccuracies and such transfigurations, that come about by chance. Well yes, if you like, they are lies; but they are more valuable than the real values.

Men who move in artistic and literary circles, like Raffaëlli in Paris, ultimately think very differently about such things from what I do, who live in the country. I mean that they are in need of a word which is expressive of their ideas. Raffaëlli proposes the word "character" as the feature of the figures of the future. I think I agree with the intention here, but I question the correctness of the word, just as I question the correctness of other words, and just as I question the accuracy and appropriateness of my own expressions. Instead of saying, there must be character in a man who is digging, I paraphrase the thing and say, the peasant must be a peasant, the digging man must dig, and in this way the picture acquires a quality which is essentially modern. But I am well aware that conclusions may be drawn from these words which I do not in the least intend.

You see, to render "the peasant form at work" is, I repeat, the peculiar feature, the very heart of modern art, and that is something which was done neither by the Renaissance painters, nor the old Dutch masters, nor by the Greeks.

At the start the figure of the peasant and of the workman constituted a "genre" picture; but at the present moment, with Millet, the immortal master in the van, this theme has become the very soul of modern art and will remain so.

People like Daumier ought to be esteemed very highly, for they are pioneers.... The more artists would paint peasants and workmen the happier I should be. And as for myself, I know nothing that I would do more gladly.

This is a long letter, and I do not know whether I have expressed my meaning clearly enough. Maybe I shall write just a few lines to Seurat. If I do so, I shall send them to you to read through, as I should like them to contain a clear statement of the importance I attach to figure painting.

...What impressed me most on looking back at the old Dutch pictures, was the fact that in the majority of cases they were painted rapidly, and that great masters like Hals, Rembrandt, Ruysdael, and many others, painted as much as possible _du premier coup_ and avoided overmuch retouching.

What I admired above all were hands by Rembrandt and Hals, hands full of life, though unfinished; for instance, some of the hands in the "Syndics of the Cloth Hall," and in the "Jewish Bride." And I felt much the same in regard to some heads, eyes, noses and mouths, which seemed to be laid on with one single stroke of the brush, and without any sign of retouching. Bracquemond has made such good engravings of them that one can appreciate the painter's technique in the print.

But, Theo, how necessary it is, especially at the present day, to study the old Dutch pictures, and such of the French as those by Corot, Millet, etc. At a pinch one can well dispense with the others, for they often lead one further astray than one imagines. The thing is to keep at it, and to paint everything as far as possible at one go! What a real joy it is to see a Franz Hals! How different these pictures are from those in which everything seems to be painted in the same smooth way, like lacquer.

On the very same day on which I saw the old Dutch masters, Brouwer, Ostade, and above all Terborch, I just chanced to see a Meissonier--the one of the Fodor Museum.[20] Now Meissonier worked in exactly the same way as they did; his pictures are very deeply thought out and deliberated, but painted at one stroke, and probably with every touch quite right from the start.

I believe it is better to scrape an unsuccessful portion of one's picture completely away and to begin again, than to keep on trying to improve it.

I saw a sketch by Rubens and another by Diaz almost at the same time. They were certainly not alike, but the creed of the artists who painted them was the same--the conviction that colour expresses form when it is in the right place with the right associations. Diaz in particular is a painter to the backbone, and is conscientious to the finger-tips.

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I must refer once more to certain modern pictures, which are becoming ever more and more plentiful. About fifteen years ago people began to speak about "luminosity" and "light." Even if this was right in the first place--and one cannot deny that the system produced very masterful works--it is now beginning to degenerate ever more and more throughout the whole of the art-world into an excessive production of pictures which have the same lighting on all four sides, the same general atmosphere as I believe they call it, and the same local colour. Is that good??? I do not think so.

Does the Ruysdael of van der Hoop (the one with the Mill) give one the impression of open air? Is there any atmosphere in it--any distance? The earth and the air constitute a whole and belong to each other.

Van Goyen is the Dutch Corot. I stood for a long while before the monumental picture in the Dupper collection.

As for Franz Hals's yellow, you can call it what you like, _citron amorti_ or _jaune chamois_, but what have you gained? In the picture it appears to be quite light, but just you hold something white against it.

The great doctrine bequeathed to us by the Dutch masters is, I think, as follows: Line and colour should be seen as one, a standpoint which Bracquemond also holds. But very few observe this principle, they draw with everything, save with good colour.

I have no desire to make many acquaintances among painters.

But to refer to technique once more. There is very much more sound and skilful stuff in Israel's technique--above all in the very old picture "The Zandvoort Fisherman," for instance, in which there is such splendid chiaroscuro, than in the technique of those who, owing to their steely cold colour, are uniformly smooth, flat, and sober throughout.

"The Zandvoort Fisherman" may safely be hung beside an old Delacroix, such as "La Barque de Dante," as they are both members of the same family. I believe in these pictures, but grow ever more and more hostile to those which are uniformly light all over.

It irritates me to hear people say that I have no "technique." It is just possible that there is no trace of it, because I hold myself aloof from all painters. I am, however, quite right in regarding many painters as weak precisely in their technique--more particularly those who talk most nonsense about it. This I have already written to you. But if ever I should happen to exhibit my work with either the one or the other in Holland, I know beforehand with whom I shall have to deal, and with what order of technicians. Meanwhile I much prefer to remain faithful to the old Dutchmen, the pictures of Israels and his school. This the more modern painters do not do; on the contrary, they are diametrically opposed to Israels.

That which they call "luminous" is, in many cases, nothing else than the detestable studio lighting of a cheerless town studio. They do not seem to see either the dawn or the setting sun; all they appear to know are the hours between 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.--quite pleasant hours forsooth, but often quite uninteresting ones too!

This winter I wish to investigate many things which have struck me in regard to the treatment in old pictures. I have seen a good deal that I lack. But above all that which is called _enlever_,[21] and which the old Dutch masters understood so perfectly.

No one nowadays will have anything to do with _enlever_ in a few strokes of the brush. But how conclusively its results prove the correctness of it! How thoroughly and with what mastery many French painters and Israels understood this! I thought a good deal about Delacroix in the Museum. Why? Because, while contemplating Hals, Rembrandt, Ruysdael, and

others, I constantly thought of the saying, that when Delacroix paints, it is exactly like a lion devouring a piece of flesh. How true that is! And, Theo, when I think of what one might call "the technique crew" how tedious they all are! Rest assured, however, that if ever I have any dealings with the gentlemen, I shall behave more or less like a simpleton, but _à la Vireloque_--with a _coup de dent_ to follow.

For is it not exasperating to see the same dodges everywhere (or what we call dodges)--everywhere the same tedious gray-white light, in the place of light and chiaroscuro, colour, local colour instead of shades of colour....

Colour as colour means something; this should not be ignored, but rather turned to account. That which has a beautiful effect, a really beautiful effect, is also right. When Veronese painted the portraits of his _beau monde_ in the "Marriage at Cana," he used all the wealth of his palette in deep violets and gorgeous golden tones for the purpose, while he also introduced a faint azure blue and a pearly white which do not spring into the foreground. He throws it back, and it looks well in the neighbourhood of the sky and of the marble palaces, which strangely complete the figures; it changes quite of its own accord. The background is so beautiful that it seems to have come into being quite naturally and spontaneously out of the colour scheme.

Am I wrong? Is it not painted differently from the way an artist would have painted it who had conceived the figures and the palace as a simultaneous whole?

All the architecture and the sky are conventional and subordinate to the

figures, they are simply calculated to throw the latter into relief.

This is really painting, and it yields a more beautiful effect than a mere transcript of things does. The point is to think about a thing, to consider its surroundings, and to let it grow out of the latter.

I do not wish to argue studying from Nature or the struggling with reality, out of existence; for years I myself worked in this way with almost fruitless and, in any case, wretched results. I should not like to have avoided this error however.

In any case I am quite convinced that it would have been foolery on my part to have continued to pursue these methods--although I am not by any means so sure that all my trouble has been in vain.

Doctors say, "_On commence par tuer, on finit par guérir_." One begins by plaguing one's self to no purpose in order to be true to nature, and one concludes by working quietly from one's palette alone, and then nature is the result. But these two methods cannot be pursued together. Diligent study, even if it seem to be fruitless, leads to familiarity with nature and to a thorough knowledge of things.

The greatest and most powerful imagination has also been able to produce things from reality, before which people have stood in dumb amazement.

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...I will simply paint my bedroom. This time the colour shall do everything. By means of its simplicity it shall lend things a grand

style, and shall suggest absolute peace and slumber to the spectator. In short, the mere sight of the picture should be restful to the spirit, or better still, to the imagination. The walls are pale violet, the floor is covered with red tiles, the wood of the bed and of the chairs is a warm yellow, the sheets and the pillow are a light yellow-green, the quilt is scarlet, the window green, the washstand is orange, the wash-basin is blue, and the doors are mauve. That is all--there is nothing more in the room, and the windows are closed. The very squareness of the furniture should intensify the impression of rest. As there is no white in the picture, the frame should be white. This work will compensate me for the compulsory rest to which I have been condemned. I shall work at it again all day long to-morrow; but you see how simple the composition is. Shadows and cast shadows are suppressed, and the colour is rendered in dull and distinct tones like crape of many colours.

I have already taken many walks along the docks and dikes. The contrast is very strange, especially when one has just left the sand, the hearth, and the peace of a country farm behind one, and when one has lived for some time in quiet surroundings. It is an abyss of confusion.

Once the war-cry of the Goncourts was, "Japonaiserie for ever." Now the docks are a splendid piece of Japonaiserie, both odd, peculiar, and terrific. At least they may be looked at in this way.

All the figures are constantly moving. They are seen in the very strangest environment--everything is monstrous, and the whole is full of the most varied and most interesting contrasts.

Through the window of a very stylish English restaurant one obtains a glimpse of the dirty mud of the harbour and of a ship of the horrid cargo type, from which foreign seamen are unloading hides and bullocks' horns. And close by, in front of the window, there stands a very dark, refined, and shy-looking girl. The room with the figure, all tone and light, the silvery sheen over the mud and the bullocks' horns--all these things produce the most striking contrasts.

Flemish seamen with extravagantly healthy faces, broad shoulders, powerfully and strongly built, and Antwerpian to the backbone, stand there eating mussels and drinking beer, and there is plenty of shouting and movement. On the other side, a short little form, dressed in black, with her hands on her hips, steals silently alongside of the gray wall.

Her little face, encircled in a halo of jet-black hair, is a note of tawny or orange yellow?--I don't know which. She has just looked up and cast a bashful glance with a pair of coal-black eyes. She is a Chinese girl, mysterious and as quiet as a mouse, small and beetle-like[22] in character, a contrast to the great Flemish consumers of mussels.

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Thank Heaven! my digestion has so far recovered that I have been able to live on ships-biscuit, milk and eggs for three weeks. The beneficent heat is restoring my strength to me. It was wise of me to go South just now, when my bad state of health needed a cure. I am now as healthy as other people--a thing I have but seldom been able to say of myself--not since I was at Nuenen. It is very gratifying (among "other people," I mean, the miners on strike, old Tanguy, old Millet, and the peasants).

The healthy man should be able to live on a piece of bread and keep at work all day. He should also be able to bear a pipe of tobacco and a good drink; for without these things nothing can be done. And withal he ought to have some feeling for the stars and the infinite heavens. Then it is a joy to live!

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I should like to make copies of "The Tarascon Diligence," "The Vineyard," "The Harvest," and "The Red Cabaret," especially of the night café, for its colouring is exceptionally characteristic. There is only one white figure in the middle which will have to be painted in afresh and improved in drawing, although it is good as far as its colour is concerned. The South really looks like this, I cannot help saying so. The whole scheme is a harmony in reddish green.

I do not need to go to the Museum and to see Titian and Velasquez. I have studied my trade in Nature's workshop, and now I know better than I did before I took my little journey, what is above all necessary if one wishes to paint the South. Heavens! what fools all these painters are! They say that Delacroix does not paint the Orient as it is. Only Parisians--Gérôme, etc.--can paint the Orient as it is--is that their claim? It really is a funny thing, this business of painting, out in the wind and the sun. And when the crowd looks over one's shoulder, one simply sets to like mad, as if the devil himself were at one's back, until the canvas is covered. It is precisely in this way that one discovers what everything depends upon. And this is the whole secret.

After a while one takes the study up again and attends a little more to the form. Then, at least, the thing looks less rough and more harmonious, and one also introduces something of one's own good cheer and laughter into it.

I am well aware of the fact that, to be healthy, one must resolutely wish to be so. Pain and even death must be faced, and all individual will and self-love must be renounced. That is nothing to me. I wish to paint and see men and things, the whole of pulsating life, even if it be only deceptive appearance. Aye! The true life is said to consist of something else: but I am not one of those who do not love life, and who are ready at all times to suffer and to die.

A man with my temperament can scarcely have success, lasting success. I shall probably never attain as much as I might and ought to attain.

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I still believe that Gauguin and I will one day work together. I know that Gauguin is capable of greater things than he has given us already. Have you seen the portrait he painted of me while I was painting some sunflowers? My expression has certainly grown more cheerful since then, but at that time I looked just like that--absolutely exhausted and charged with electricity. If I had then had the strength to pursue my calling, I should have painted saintly figures of men and women from nature. They would have looked as if they belonged to another age. They would have been creatures of to-day and yet they would have borne some resemblance to the early Christians.

But that sort of thing is too wearing, it would have killed me. Nevertheless, I will not swear that later on, perhaps, I may not take up the struggle again. You are quite right, a thousand times right! One should not give a thought to such things. Painting studies is simply a taking of herbs to calm one, and when one is calm, well ... then one does what one is fitted for.

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It really is a pity that there are so few pictures of poor people in Paris. I think that my peasant would look quite well by the side of your Lautrec. I even flatter myself that the Lautrec would look all the better for the strong contrast, while my picture would necessarily profit too from the peculiar juxtaposition; because sunniness and scorched tawny colouring, the hot sun and the open air, are thrown into stronger relief by the side of the powdered faces and the smart dresses. What a shame it is that the Parisians show so little taste for vigorous things, such as the Monticelli's, for instance.

Of course I am well aware of the fact that one must not lose courage because Utopias do not come true. All I know is this, that everything I learnt in Paris is going to the deuce, and I am returning to that which seemed to me right and proper in the country, before I had become acquainted with the impressionists. I should not be at all surprised if, within a short time, the impressionists found a great deal to criticize in my work, which is certainly much more under the suggestion of Delacroix' painting than of theirs. For, instead of reproducing exactly what I see before me, I treat the colouring in a perfectly arbitrary fashion. What I aim at above all is powerful expression. But let us drop

theory, and allow me rather to make my meaning clear to you by means of an example.

Just suppose that I am to paint the portrait of an artist friend--an artist who dreams great dreams and who works as the nightingale sings, simply because it is his nature to do so.

Let us imagine him a fair man. All the love I feel for him I should like to reveal in my painting of the picture. To begin with, then, I paint him just as he is, as faithfully as possible--still this is only the beginning. The picture is by no means finished at this stage. Now I begin to apply the colour arbitrarily. I exaggerate the tone of his fair hair; I take orange, chrome, and dull lemon yellow. Behind his head, instead of the trivial wall of the room--I paint infinity. I make a simple background out of the richest of blues, as strong as my palette will allow. And thus, owing to this simple combination, the fair and luminous head has the mysterious effect, upon the rich blue background, of a star suspended in dark ether.

I proceed in much the same way with the portrait of the peasant. But one ought to picture this sort of fellow in the scorching noonday sun, in the midst of the harvest. Hence this flaming orange, like a red-hot iron; hence the luminous shadows like old gold. Ah, dear friend, the public will see only a caricature in this exaggeration. But what do we care? We have read "La Terre" and "Germinal," and when we paint a peasant, we wish to show that this reading has become part of our flesh and blood.

I can only choose between being a good and a bad painter. I choose the

former.