

January 18, 1955

Dear Mr. Craeybeckx:

Thank you for your beautiful letter. I am deeply moved that my "Mother and Child" should touch you, the technical man, with its quiet pulsating and meaning. I have not words to thank you. Let me only tell you that your letter has cast a rosy glow over this winter day and will continue to do so.

It is especially gratifying that you should be the head of the Gevaert Company, whose products are my old and trusted friends. I enclose a memorandum of an early exhibit of mine where I used only Gavalux paper. If I remember rightly, it was quite new at that time. It still is, in my opinion, a most beautiful paper.

So it is a double pleasure for me to grant you permission to use any of this material as you see fit. I am only sorry that we can't talk it over together instead of writing about it. I shall try to be as helpful to you as possible.

First the matter of glossy paper. This has come up so many times that I no longer give it a thought. In the making of my own books I find that by controlling paper, printing and the makeup of the book, I can create a harmony between them which is in itself a contributing factor in the harmony of the whole. This, of course, is quite impossible under other conditions but I find that the mood comes through notwithstanding.

As to your requests for the technical-minded -- that is indeed a problem and not the first time that I have met it either. I feel a little like a violinist might feel if he were asked after a performance to say just how much time he gave to each note or how he achieved his singing tones. How can one say? Each picture for me is quite spontaneous and unstudied. Each one is unique in itself so that any data that I might take down would be quite useless for another picture. Such knowledge and the individual use of it are intangible things and I find it quite impossible to remember afterwards what I have done. Perhaps it might be helpful to remember generally some of the things which I do not. This would simplify it for me and perhaps be helpful for your purpose.

First, I do not use a light meter. If you ask me why I would say that it merely interrupts the mood and could tell me nothing which I wish or need to know. Many times there would not be light enough available in the room to take a reading and if there were, well, it might frighten the baby to have the meter thrust into his face or cause the young mother to remember that she was "having her picture taken" -- a most horrible feeling and one that I avoid at all costs.

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Second, I do not use artificial light for the same reasons and even more. At best they make a kind of stage setting necessary, all of which is disturbing and shatters completely the mystery or poetry or whatever that untouchable thing is that moves one to take a picture.

Third, I make as little stir in the room as is humanly possible, asking only to be a silent and, when possible, unobserved witness. It is a secret thing that you are after and you have to use all the skill of a fisherman not to frighten it away. Even the click of the shutter may do it. I try always to cover this with a quiet word or even a little song so that it goes unnoticed.

In rereading this paragraph I realize that somehow I have missed the truly significant thing which happens to me. I am at a loss for words here. I myself do not know what it is -- I only know that without it all else would be meaningless. It amounts almost to a kind of trance wherein myself and my subject are held in a new intimacy and reality. This moment has been lifted out of time and bathed in a cleansing and almost holy light. I have never to my own satisfaction captured this with my camera but is it not possible that it is this quality which you speak of in your letter as a "new style"? Beyond this I can only say that my pictures are of people, places and things that are dear to me. They are an affirmation of faith.

My favorite camera is my Rolaflex because it serves my purpose best. The new one this year even improves upon the old and that, indeed, is high praise.

In the darkroom it is quite a different matter. Here in this darkness a picture will be born. All now depends upon me -- my care and my skill. There is no substitute for knowledge here. Time and temperatures and controls of every kind are absolute and necessary. One must know what goes into making a formula -- and when to use which. One must know about papers and when to use which. One must also have "the infinite capacity for taking pains." One must feel unhurried and cut off from everything that can distract. This one picture that you are now about to make is the only thing in the world that matters. Later you may wonder why it was so important and whether it is really. But at the time when you are making it, you must never doubt.

I hope that some of this may be of help to your readers. Believe me most grateful for this opportunity. Thank you again for your beautiful letter.

Most sincerely,

Enclosures

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