



**Artist :** J. (JOZEF) ISRAELS  
(1824 Groningen - 1911 The Hague)

**Title :** *La Lettre (The Letter)*

**Technique :** Oil on canvas

**Size :** 96,5 x 68,5 cm

**Signature :** Signed lower right "Jozef Israels"

**Date :** 1880-1899

**Provenance :** Collection R.E. Peters, U.S.A.  
St. Paul, Minnesota U.S.A., Minnesota Museum of Art (on loan of Mr. R.E. Peters)  
Art Gallery Ivo Bouwman, The Hague, 1976  
Private collection The Netherlands, since 1976

**Exhibitions:** St. Paul, Minnesota U.S.A., Minnesota Museum of Art  
Zeist (Het Zeister Slot), "17 schilders in hun Haagse tijd", 12 July - 7 Sept. 1975, cat.no. 44 (ill.)

**Literature :** Anna Wagner, "17 schilders in hun Haagse tijd", Zeist 1975, cat.no. 44 (ill.)

Jozef Israels achieved his greatest renown as a painter of beach scenes and subjects drawn from the lives of fishermen in Scheveningen, Katwijk and Zandvoort. In Israels' work, the emotional dimensions of the harsh fishing life take precedence, in contrast to his friend and colleague Hendrik Willem Mesdag, who focused more specifically on fishing boats at sea and fishermen battling the elements.

Initially, Israels trained as a landscape painter, receiving his first instruction in his native Groningen. Gradually, his interest shifted towards history painting, and at the age of eighteen he went to Amsterdam to study with Jan Adam Kruseman and Jan Willem Pieneman. Between 1845 and 1847 he spent a period in Paris, where he came under the influence of the history painter François-Édouard Picot and other artists such as Horace Vernet, James Pradier and Paul Delaroche. While in Paris, he worked at the Louvre copying after Rembrandt and Diego Velázquez.

After completing his studies in Paris, Israels settled in The Hague, while also spending extended periods in Amsterdam. During the 1850s he found a new source of inspiration in the arduous lives of fishermen and their families. With deep empathy, he sought to convey the atmosphere and the difficult circumstances they endured. The titles of his works—such as *Along Mother's Grave*, *Drowned Fisherman*, *After the Storm*, *Alone in the World*, *As One Grows Older*, *The Unfortunate Woman*, and *The Last Breath*—reflect the somewhat sombre themes that captivated him. Through a strong use of chiaroscuro and impasto brushwork, Israels rendered the poignant and often melancholic mood surrounding the fishing community.

At the same time, Israels was equally sensitive to the more light-hearted aspects of coastal life. He frequently depicted children playing by the sea: paddling in the shallow pools left behind by the receding tide, playing with toy boats, and delighting in the simple pleasures of the shore. The boy with a small sailing boat already anticipates his future role as a fisherman, following in his father's footsteps. In these scenes, the palette shifts noticeably to lighter, more luminous tones, capturing the sunny and cheerful atmosphere of the beach and the sea.

From the 1870s onwards, Jozef Israels increasingly devoted himself to portraiture and to genre scenes with a pronounced portrait-like character. The present painting, entitled *The Letter*, represents a subject to which Israels returned on several occasions. Closely related is a theme best described as *Reverie*: women, usually depicted within an interior, gazing out of a window, absorbed in thought, sometimes holding a letter in their hand. Titles such as *Waiting*, *Gazing into the Distance*, *Sorrowful Thoughts*, *Melancholy*, and *Contemplation* reflect variations on this same introspective motif. The theme of the “woman with a letter” is, in fact, as old as the Bible itself.

Of Jewish descent, Israels was thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament. Themes drawn from Judaism, such as *A Jewish Wedding*, recur regularly in his oeuvre. As a history painter, he was moreover well acquainted with the work of the great seventeenth-century masters—foremost among them Rembrandt, who famously painted *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654, Louvre). That painting depicts the married Bathsheba at the moment she receives a letter from King David, summoning her to his palace (Old Testament, 2 Samuel 11:2–15). Rembrandt masterfully conveys her inner conflict and the moral dilemma she faces as a married woman.

In Israels’ treatment of the subject, the letter likewise functions as a catalyst for introspection. The emotional life of the sitter—her anticipation, doubt, longing or melancholy—forms the true subject of the work.



At the same time, Rembrandt’s pupil Willem Drost painted the same subject—also now in the Louvre—though he chose not to depict Bathsheba in her bath, as Rembrandt had done.

Johannes Vermeer painted *The Love Letter*, depicting a young woman reading a letter from her beloved near a window (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden).



As early as the seventeenth century, the sea was often used as a metaphor for love: a stormy sea indicated the end of love, while a calm sea suggested that hope in love was justified. In 1633, Dirck Hals painted two small panels showing women holding letters. In each interior, a painting hung on the background wall: in one, a stormy sea corresponded to a woman tearing up her letter, and in the other, a calm sea mirrored the joyful expression of a woman holding her letter (Mittelrheinisches Landesmuseum, Mainz, and J.G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia, respectively).

It is clear that Jozef Israels was well-versed in his classical precedents. Rembrandt remained a central model throughout Israels' career. His *Jewish Wedding* of 1902 and *Saul and David* a few years earlier cannot be seen apart from Rembrandt's analogous subjects (both works in the Rijksmuseum).

Initially, Israels painted in the glazed style characteristic of Romantic painters. During the 1860s and 1870s, his brushwork became progressively looser and broader, and by the 1890s, it approached the style of his son, Isaac Israels. Although Jozef had taught his son the fundamentals of painting, in his later years we can observe a reverse influence of the son upon the father. This influence is clearly visible in the portraits Israels painted in the 1890s.

Although an old label on the reverse of the present work lists the year 1872, the looser brushwork of *La Lettre* suggests a later date. It is more realistic to date the painting to the final two decades of the nineteenth century.

Between 1850 and 1874, Israels painted a portrait of Jeanette Bloemen



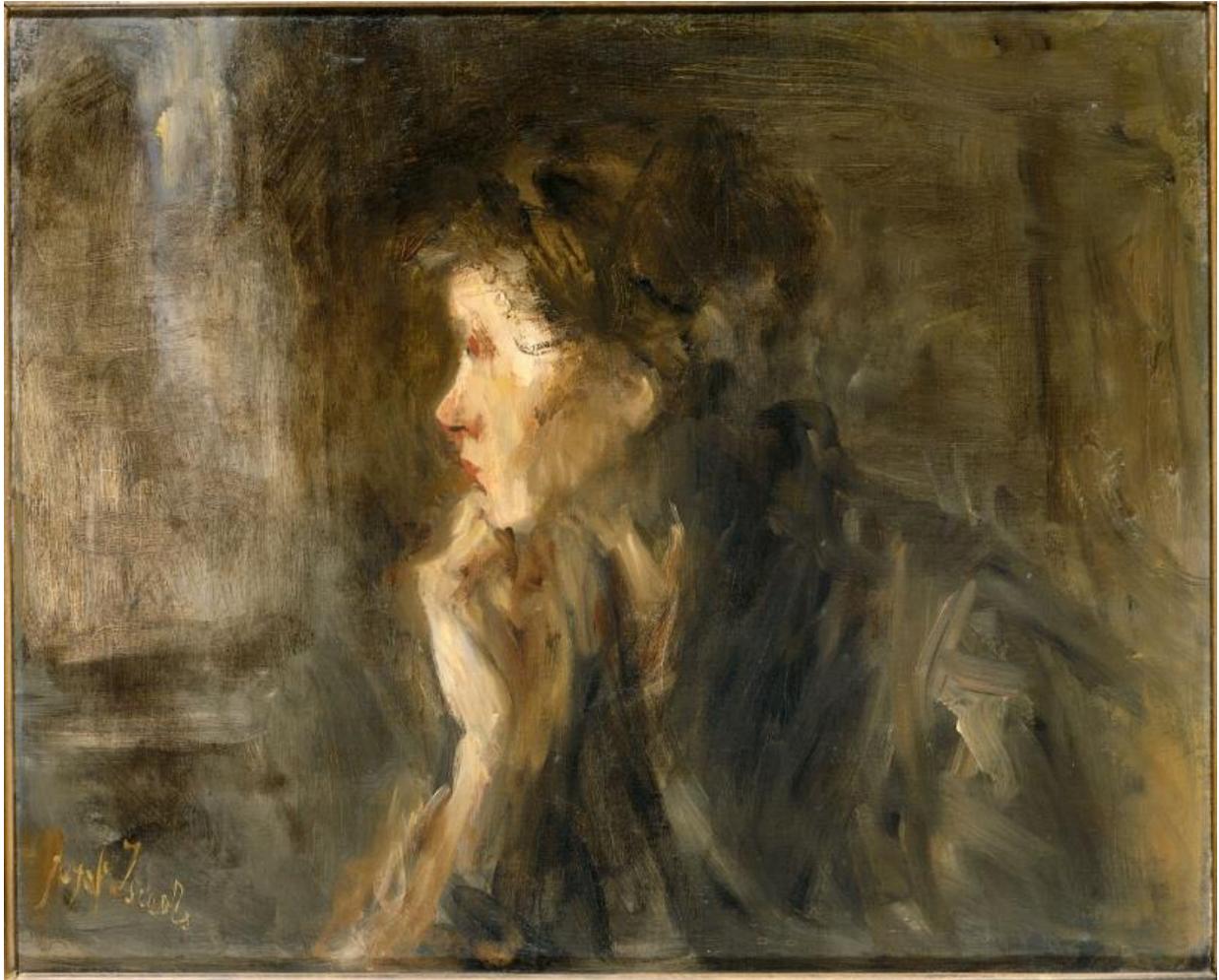
The sitter in *La Lettre* bears some resemblance to van Bommel", "dutch sitter 1880-1963"], the sixteen-year-old neighbour whom Jozef Israels painted in 1896 (Rijksmuseum). However, *La Lettre* does not yet reflect the influence of Isaac Israels



The pose in *La Lettre* closely resembles that of the painting in the Rijksmuseum entitled *Woman at a Window*, generally dated to after 1880. While the letter is absent in that work, the sitter appears almost identical to the model in *La Lettre*, gazing pensively out to sea. The hairstyle, with the hair swept up, and the slightly receding chin in relation to the mouth further support this connection.



In 1896, he painted the same model in a fully Impressionistic style. This work, now in the Rijksmuseum, is titled *Contemplation*. Here, the hands are not folded on the lap as a sign of resignation or expectation; instead, one hand supports the head. Through the loosely suggested window, she gazes outward, lost in thought.



Another work that appears to depict the same model with her hair up is a painting that appeared at a Munich auction in 1913. In this instance, the letter is present again as an anecdotal attribute, and the young woman gazes out of the window. In *La Lettre*, however, the window is omitted, replaced by a more abstractly suggested space, directing all attention to the sitter's emotional state.



The same applies to the painting entitled *Melancholy*. This work, also in the Rijksmuseum, is stylistically close to *La Lettre* and likewise dates from the period after 1880.



Although Jozef Israels achieved his greatest fame with the previously mentioned scenes of fishermen's lives, his portraits and portrait-like genre works reveal remarkable intensity and restraint. While his son Isaac Israels was more drawn to the frivolous aspects of life, Jozef primarily focused on social engagement, deliberately omitting elements that might distract from the serious narrative he wished to convey. His aim was above all to express the underlying motives and character of his subjects.

Contemporary and colleague Johan Gram put it in 1905 as follows: "Everything that could divert attention from the main idea, from the effect, is indicated by Israels merely as a suggestion. His instinct as a master colourist guides him in this. In the way Israels perceives and renders nature, he recalls Rembrandt in his best moments. Israels is the painter of the poor and unfortunate, the painter of the joys and sorrows of our fishermen; as such he is both famous and honoured."

Max Liebermann, who for a period explored the fishermen genre under Israels' influence, believed that Israels produced his best work only at a later age: "Israels only became himself at an age when most painters have already produced their finest work; had he been unlucky enough to die at forty, Holland would have lost one of its greatest sons." *La Lettre* fully confirms Liebermann's observation.

