

Letter 115
Amsterdam, 4 December 1877

Dear Theo,

I have just returned from a visit to the Reverend Mr. Jeremie Meyes. I found him at home this time, but he had to go to the church-warden's committee, so I only saw him for a moment. I also saw his wife and the two youngest children, and Mrs. Meyes read aloud part of a letter from their son, who is at the Naval institute at Den Helder. Now that I myself am in for examinations, I sympathize with others who have to take them; judging from some expressions, I can imagine how they feel. Everybody who wants to reach a social position must go through a time of great difficulties and exertion – success may depend on trifles. If one says or writes a word amiss at an examination, it may cause failure. But it is better to think of those who succeed and overcome the obstacles than of those who fail.

Of course you know that Uncle Hein has died; we must thank God that the end was comparatively calm and that he is at rest at last.

Write me as soon as you can when you intend to go to Etten and if we can arrange it so that we can travel together. I should like very much to use this opportunity to stay over one train in Haarlem, and especially to stay over at Dordrecht – couldn't we go together at Dordrecht?

I had a few writings, which I wanted to keep in good condition, bound; it was a pleasant feeling to get them home. I had it done at a nearby bookbinder's, in one of the narrow streets of Kattenburg where they publish all kinds of religious works. The shop belongs to two brothers whose looks remind me of two things, namely a barn owl and the lion's head on doorknockers.

I have walked a great deal this week; there is no harm in knowing the city well.

Today while I was working I had in front of me a page from the Cours de Dessin Bague (the drawing examples) part 1, No. 39, "Anne of Brittany." It was hanging in my room in London with No. 53; "A Young Citizen" was hanging in between. What I liked and admired in the beginning, I like and admire still. The expression on Anne of Brittany's face is noble, and reminds one of the sea and rocky coasts. I should like to know her history someday. She is a real king's daughter. De Lemud would have drawn her figure well.

I should like so much to be with you in Haarlem; anyway, write when and for how long you get leave. Oh, boy! I long so much for Christmas and for home and for you. Bring all the prints you can with you; even though I know them, I shall enjoy seeing them again.

So another year has almost passed by, in which many things have happened to me; I look back on it with thankfulness. When I think over the time I spent at Braat's and the months of study here, upon the whole they have really been two good things. Boy, if next Christmas I might be at the university and had overcome the difficulties at the start, as I am now over the beginnings of Latin and Greek, how happy I should be.

"Indefessus favente Deo" [unwearied by God's favour] is a good state to be in; it is a saying that Mendes loves. He spoke to me about it last Saturday.

Today I wrote to Harry Gladwell, and also sent your regards. I hope that he will go home for Christmas. Today I sent you for your St. Nicholas two maps from Stieler – the British Isles, and Normandy and Brittany. Put them up in your room for a while, promise that you will; I copied them both carefully, as you know, that of England even twice. On the one that turned out best I wrote the divisions of the country and the names in Latin and changed the surrounding countries to the way they were in the time of the Romans – for example, Lake Flevo instead of the Zuider Zee. In order to do this I went earlier than usual to Mendes's for a few mornings, and there compared my map with that of Britannia, Caledonia, and Ierne in the Atlas Antiquus by Sprüner Menke. I do not need these any more, and it is a good thing for you to have them to look at for a time. At the Reverend Mr. Meyes's I also heard about Stieler's maps; the son who is at the Naval Institute at Den Helder owns a complete Atlas, and one of the things he wrote in his last letter was that he had copied the map of the world.

You know, perhaps, that Uncle Cor also has an Atlas; it is kept in the room where the large picture by Bernier hangs. Some time ago I saw at Uncle's a large drawing by Bosboom, "The Vestry," also two by Miss van Bosse that were very beautiful, especially the one representing a farmyard.

Along with the maps you will receive Gruson's Histoire des Croisades. I gave this same little book to Mendes, who was glad to have it. Even if you have no time to read it from the beginning to the end, you might look through it; the most eloquent passages will strike you instantly. If the work of Thijs Maris is beautiful, this is, too.

As Uncle Jan sent a box to Etten, I sent Cor for his St. Nicholas a lithograph after J. Maris, representing a little girl returning from the churchyard. There is a proverb, “Quand il n’y a plus rien, il y en a toujours encore” [when there is nothing left, there is always something still], and I experienced it this morning when I thought I could not give a St. Nicholas present to anyone. I have found something for everybody, though it is not much; Father and Mother are getting a map which I drew.

Twilight is falling, and the view of the yard from my window is simply wonderful, with that little avenue of poplars – their slender forms and thin branches stand out so delicately against the grey evening sky; and then the old arsenal building on the water – quiet as “the waters of the old pool” mentioned in the Book of Isaiah – down by the waterside the walls of that arsenal are quite green and weather-beaten. Farther down is the little garden and the fence around it with the rosebushes, and everywhere in the yard the black figures of the workmen, and also the little dog. Just now Uncle Jan with his long grey hair is probably making his rounds. In the distance the masts of the ships in the dock can be seen, in front the Atjh, quite black, and the grey and red monitors – and just now here and there the lamps are being lit. At this moment the bell is ringing and the whole stream of workmen is pouring toward the gate; at the same time the lamplighter is coming to light the lamp in the yard behind the house.

You will probably be very busy these days, but if you have a moment, write me; let me know as soon as you can when you will go to Etten. Couldn’t we go together to Dordrecht, Friday or Saturday before Christmas? One must take as much advantage as one can of the journeys and trips one makes.

My kindest regards to the Roos family, also to the Haanebeeks and v. Stockums if you happen to go there; does Mr. Tersteeg know these maps by Stieler? À Dieu, Theo, if I do not write again before we meet safe and sound, goodbye for the present, a warm handshake in thought, believe me always,

Your loving brother, Vincent