

Letter 180
The Hague, c. 11 March 1882

Dear Theo,

Perhaps you will think what I wrote you about Tersteeg rather harsh. But I cannot take it back. He must be told straight out, or else it doesn't penetrate his armour. For years he has considered me a kind of incompetent dreamer; he still does; and even says of my drawing, "That is a kind of narcotic which you take in order not to feel the pain not being able to make watercolours causes you."

Well, that's a very fine idea, but it is thoughtless, superficial and not to the point; the main reason for my not being able to make watercolours is that I must draw even more seriously, paying greater attention to proportions and perspective.

Enough of that. I don't deserve his reproaches, and if my drawings don't amuse him, then it doesn't amuse me to show them to him.

He condemns my drawings, which have a great deal of good in them, and I did not expect this of him. If I make serious studies after the model, it is much more practical than his practical talks about what is saleable or unsaleable; I do not need so much instruction on that as he supposes, having been in the business of selling pictures and drawings myself. So I would rather lose his friendship than give in to him in this matter.

Though there are moments when I feel overwhelmed by care, I am still calm, and my calmness is founded on my serious method of work and on earnest reflection. Though I have moments of passion aggravated by my temperament, yet I am calm, as he who has been acquainted with me so long knows quite well. Even now he said to me, "You have too much patience."

That's not right – in art one cannot have too much patience – it's out of all proportion. Perhaps in my case Mr. Tersteeg has too little patience.

He must see now, once and for all, that I take things seriously and will not let myself be forced to produce work that does not show my own character. My own character has begun to show especially in my last drawings and studies, which Tersteeg condemned.

Perhaps, perhaps I could succeed even now in making a watercolour that would sell if one tried very hard. But that would be forcing watercolours in a hothouse. Tersteeg and you must wait for the natural season, and that is not here yet.

He spoke English when he was here because of the model. I said to him, In due time you will have your watercolours, but not now – they are not due yet, take your time. And that is all I have to say. Enough of it. Since Tersteeg's visit I made a drawing of a boy from the orphanage, blacking shoes. It may be this is done by a hand that does not quite obey my will, but still the boy's type is there. And though my hand may be unruly, that hand will learn to do what my head wishes. So I have made a sketch of the studio with the stove, the chimney, easel, footstool, table, etc., of course not quite saleable at present, but very useful for practicing perspective.

I am longing for your visit, there are so many things for you to see that I have made since you were here last summer. Theo, I count on your judging my work with sympathy and with confidence, and not with hesitation and dissatisfaction.

Because I work so much, Tersteeg thinks it is so easy; in that he is also quite wrong. For in fact I am a drudge or a plodding draft ox.

Do not forget the Ingres paper when you come. It is especially the thick kind that I like to use and which I think must also be good for studies in watercolour.

Believe me, in art matters the saying, "Honesty is the best policy," is true; rather more trouble on a serious study than a kind of chic to flatter the public. Sometimes in moments of worry I have longed for some of that chic, but thinking it over I say, No, let me be true to myself, and express severe, rough but true things in a rough manner. I shall not run after the art lovers or dealers; let whoever wants to come to me. In due time we shall reap, if we faint not!

Say, Theo, what a big man Millet was! I borrowed Sensier's great work from De Bock; it interests me so much that I wake up at night and light the lamp and sit up to read. For I must work in the daytime.

Do send me some money soon, if possible. I wish Tersteeg had to live for a week on what I have to spend, and had to do what I have to do. Then he would see that it is not a question of dreaming and brooding, or of taking narcotics, but that one must be wide-awake to fight against so many difficulties. Neither is it easy to find models and get them to sit for me. This discourages most painters. Especially when one must save on food, drink, and clothes to pay them.

Well, Tersteeg is Tersteeg, and I am I.

But let me tell you that I am not opposed or hostile to him, but I must make him understand that he judges me too superficially, and – and I believe that he will change his opinion; I fervently hope so, for it grieves and worries me when there is an unfriendly feeling between us.

I hope your letter will come soon – I spent my last penny on a stamp for this letter. It is true I received the 10 guilders from Tersteeg only a few days ago, but that same day I had to pay 6 of those guilders to the model, to the baker, to the little girl who sweeps the studio.

Adieu, I wish you health and courage; in spite of everything, I myself am not without good courage.

Je te serre la main,

Vincent

I have had a very pleasant visit from Jules Bakhuyzen [A Dutch painter], and I may go to see him whenever I like.

[Postscript]

Theo, it is almost miraculous!!!

First comes your registered letter, second, C. M. asks me to make 12 small pen drawings for him, views of The Hague, apropos of some that were ready. (The Paddemoes [F918, JH 111], the Geest and the Vleersteeg were finished.) At 2.50 guilders apiece, price fixed by me, with the promise that if they suit him, he will take 12 more at his own price, which will be higher than mine. In the third place, I just met Mauve, happily delivered of his large picture, and he promised to come and see me soon. So, “ça va, ça marche, ça ira encore!”

And another thing touched me – very, very deeply. I had told the model not to come today – I didn't say why, but nevertheless the poor woman came, and I protested. “Yes, but I have not come to pose – I just came to see if you had something for dinner.” She had brought me a dish of beans and potatoes. There are things that make life worth living after all. The following words in Sensier's Millet appealed to me, and touched me very much, sayings of Millet's:

“L'art c'est un combat – dans l'art il faut y mettre sa peau.”

“Il s'agit de travailler comme plusieurs nègres: J'aimerais mieux ne rien dire que de m'exprimer faiblement.”

[Art is a fight – one must put one's hide (i.e. one's utmost) into art.

The thing to do is to work like a lot of Negroes: I would rather say nothing than express myself feebly.]

It was only yesterday that I read this last saying of Millet's, but I felt the same thing before; that's why I sometimes like to scratch what I want to express with a hard carpenter's pencil or a pen instead of with a soft brush. Take care, Tersteeg, take care, you are decidedly wrong.