

Letter 227
The Hague, 20 August 1882
Sunday afternoon

Dear Theo,

I have just received a nice letter from home which gave me very real pleasure, and from which it is clear that your visit and the things you told them about me and my work have had a reassuring effect on them. This is bound, I think, to have welcome repercussions, and I should like to thank you in particular for the way in which you spoke about me, although it seems to me that you had more good things to say than I as yet deserve.

At home they seem very much pleased with their new surroundings, and are still full of your visit.

For that matter, so am I, for several things you told me make me think of you more often than before, and certainly not with less affection. Especially what you told me about your health makes me think of you often. I am pretty well; my not sparing myself and acting as if I had never been ill works all right. But you realize that I have not entirely recovered. I feel it at times, especially in the evening when I'm tired; but fortunately it never got bad enough to prevent my working.

This week I have painted some rather large studies in the wood, which I tried to carry out more thoroughly and vigorously than the first ones.

The one which I believe succeeded best is of nothing but a piece of dug-up earth – white, black and brown sand after a pouring rain. Here and there the lumps of earth caught the light, and stood out in strong relief. After I had been sitting drawing that piece of ground for some time, there was another violent thunderstorm with a terrific cloudburst, which lasted for at least an hour. I was so eager to continue that I remained at my post and sheltered myself as well as I could behind a big tree. When it was over at last, and the crows flying again, I was not sorry I had waited, because of the beautiful deep tone which the rain had given to the soil. As I had begun before the rain, with a low horizon, on my knees, I now had to work kneeling in the mud, and it is because of such adventures, which often present themselves in different forms, that I think it is not superfluous to wear an ordinary workman's suit, which is less easily spoiled. The result of this was that I could bring that piece of ground home to the studio – though Mauve once rightly said, while speaking about a study of his, It is a hard job to draw those lumps of earth and get perspective into them.

The other study in the wood is of some large green beech trunks on a stretch of ground covered with dry sticks, and the little figure of a girl in white [F 008, JH 182]. There was the great difficulty of keeping it clear, and of getting space between the trunks standing at different distances – and the place and relative bulk of those trunks change with the perspective – to make it so that one can breathe and walk around in it, and to make you smell the fragrance of the wood.

It was with extreme pleasure that I made these two studies.

The same with a thing I saw at Scheveningen, a stretch in the dunes in the morning after the rain. The grass was comparatively green, and the black nets were spread over it in enormous circles, giving the soil deep reddish-black and greenish-grey tones. On this somber ground, women in white caps and men spreading or repairing the nets were sitting or standing, or walking around like dark fantastic ghosts. In nature it was as strikingly gloomy and serious as the most beautiful Millet, Israëls or De Groux one can imagine – over the landscape a simple grey sky with a light streak on the horizon. Notwithstanding showers of rain, I made a study of it on a sheet of oiled Torchon [F 007, JH 178]. Much will have to happen before I shall be able to make it as vigorous as I should like, but these are the things in nature that strike me most.

How beautiful it is outside when everything is wet from the rain – before – in – and after the rain. I oughtn't to let a single shower pass.

This morning I have put all the painted studies up in the studio. I wish I could talk them over with you.

As I had already expected and counted on, while I was busy, I had to buy a great many things, and the money is nearly all spent on them.

For two weeks I have painted from early in the morning until late at night, so to speak; if I continued this way, it would be too expensive as long as I do not sell.

I think it possible that if you saw the paintings, you would say that I ought to go on with it, not just at times when I feel particularly inclined, but regularly, as absolutely the most important thing, though it might cause more expenses. But though I myself love doing it, and for the present shall probably not paint as much as my ambition and desire demand because of the heavy expenses, I think I shall not lose by giving a great deal of my time to drawing, and I do this with no less pleasure. However, I am in doubt – painting comes easier to me than I expected – perhaps it would be better to throw myself into it with all my strength, first pegging away with the brush. I must say I cannot tell.

At all events, drawing in charcoal is something I am sure I must study now more than ever – at all events, I have enough to do and can go on. Even when I restrain myself a little in painting, I can work just as hard.

If I have now painted so many studies in a short time, it is because I work hard, literally working all day, scarcely taking time even to eat or drink.

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There are little figures in several of the studies. I also worked on a large one and have scraped it off twice, which you would perhaps have thought too rash if you had seen the effect; but it was not impatience, it was because I feel I can do even better by grinding and trying, and I absolutely want to succeed in doing better, however much time, however much trouble it may cost.

Landscape, as I have taken it up now, decidedly requires the figure too. They are studies for backgrounds which one must do so thoroughly because the tone of the figure and the effect of the whole depend on it.

What I like so much about painting is that with the same amount of trouble which one takes over a drawing, one brings home something that conveys the impression much better and is much more pleasant to look at – and at the same time, more correct too. In a word it is more gratifying than drawing. But it is absolutely necessary to be able to draw the right proportion and the position of the object pretty correctly before one begins. If one makes mistakes in this, the whole thing comes to nothing.

I am longing for autumn. I must be sure to have a stock of colours and other things against that time. I love so much, so very much, the effect of the yellow leaves; the green beech trunks stand out so well against them, and figures, too.

Lately I read part of a rather melancholy book, Letters and Diary of Gerard Bilders. [A Dutch painter who died young.] He died at the age when I began. When I read that, I was not sorry that I started late. He certainly was unhappy and was often misunderstood, but at the same time I find a great weakness in him, something morbid in his character. It is like the story of a plant which shoots up too soon, and cannot stand the frost, and gets stricken to the roots by it on a certain night and then withers. At first everything goes all right – he is with a teacher (as in a hothouse) – he makes quick progress but in Amsterdam he is almost alone, and with all his cleverness, he cannot stand it there, and comes back home to his father quite discouraged, dissatisfied, listless – he paints a little there, and then dies of consumption or of some other disease in his twenty-eighth year.

What I don't like about him is that while he paints, he complains of terrible dullness and idleness, as though it were something he couldn't do anything about; and he continues to run around with a, to him, too oppressive circle of friends, and persisting in the amusements and way of life which bore him to death. In short, he is a sympathetic figure; but I would rather read the life of father Millet or of Th. Rousseau or of Daubigny. Reading Sensier's book on Millet gives one courage, and Bilders's makes one feel terrible.

I often find an enumeration of difficulties in Millet's letters, but still, j'ai tout de me me fait ceci ou cela [I have done this or that after all], and then he always has other things in mind which he absolutely must do and which he will carry out.

And too often G. Bilders says, "I've been blue this week and have been making a mess of things – I went to this or that concert or theater, but came home even more miserable than when I went."

What strikes me in Millet is this simple, "I must do this or that after all."

Bilders is very witty, and can lament in a most ludicrous way about "Manila cigars" – which he likes and which he cannot afford – about tailors' bills which he cannot figure out how to pay. He describes his anxiety about money affairs so wittily that he himself and the reader have to laugh. But no matter how wittily these things may be told, I dislike it, and have more respect for Millet's private difficulties, "il faut tout de même de la soupe pour les enfants" [after all, there must be soup for the children]; he does not talk about "Manila cigars" or about amusements.

What I want to say is, Gerard Bilders's view of life was romantic, and he never got over the illusions perdues; for my part I think it a certain advantage that I started only when I had left romantic illusions behind me. I must make up for lost time now. I must work hard, but just when one has left the lost illusions behind, work becomes a necessity and one of the few pleasures left. And this gives a great quiet and tranquillity.

I regret that it will be a year perhaps before you will see all my paintings (even though I might send you something now and then) and before we can talk things over. I assure you that the things I have painted now will prove useful to me. Perhaps I shall succeed now where I did not succeed in January. The reason I enjoy painting so much is not its agreeable aspect, but its throwing light on various questions of tone and form and material. I used to be helpless before them, but now by means of painting I can attempt them. Now I also see a better chance of getting results with charcoal.

Please do not suspect me of being indifferent to earning money; I am trying to find the shortest way to that end. If only those means of earning money be real and lasting, which I personally can only see in the future if there is some real good in my work, not if I aim exclusively at saleability – one has to suffer for that later – but if I study nature carefully.

If you saw that my painting would have the best chance, of course I should not refuse to paint more. But if it would be a long time before it became saleable, I would be the first to say, Meanwhile we must practice the greatest economy, and, by drawing, many expenses are avoided and one makes solid though slow progress. I see a change in these painted things, and I am writing you about it because you can tell better than I how it may affect the eventual saleability. At all events it seems to me that the painted studies have a more pleasant aspect than my drawings.

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Personally, I attach less value to the more pleasant, less meager effect; my goal is the expression of more severe and virile things, for which I still have to drudge a great deal.

But if you said, Work on those landscapes or woods scenes or marines, I would have nothing against it, as it would not prevent my attempting larger or more serious things. I should only want the assurance that they are worth the brushes, the paint and the canvas, and that it is not throwing money away to do them, but that they are worth what they cost. In that case I should even work on them with great ambition. I will begin by letting them ripen a little more, by putting some more vigour into them. Then in a few months, for instance, I will send you something again, and we can see.

I believe most painters have eventually succeeded in reaching a higher level this way. I should not want to make things that were intrinsically bad, untrue, and of false conception, because I love nature too much. But this is the problem: I must still make many studies to reach something higher and better. What will be most profitable, drawing those studies or painting them?

If the painted ones are unsaleable, then certainly it will be more advantageous to draw with charcoal or something. But if it were possible to make good the expense of painted studies, then I want to tell you that in principle I have nothing against it, now that I see that they turn out rather well and may perhaps turn out to be a source of good fortune. In principle I am only against wasting paint on things which one can learn just as well another way, when there is no chance of selling them at present.

I should not want to cause either myself or you unnecessary expense, but I see clearly that the painted things have a more pleasant aspect. This makes me uncertain what to do. My money is not quite gone, but there is not much left. If I am not mistaken, today is the twentieth; I have spent less rather than more than usual on the household this month. It is true I have had to spend a good deal on painting materials, but much of this will last quite a while. But it is true that everything is very expensive. I hope you will be able to send something soon. Receive a warm handshake in thought and believe me,

Yours sincerely,

Vincent

I certainly hope that you will not infer from this letter that I am pretentious enough to think these first studies saleable. Formerly I could tell better than now what things were worth, whether they were saleable or not; now I notice daily that I do not know any more, and studying nature is more important to me than studying the prices of pictures. But I think I see that the painted studies have a much more pleasing aspect than either those drawn in black and white or the watercolours you saw recently. And therefore I am uncertain as to whether it might possibly be more profitable after all to make painting absolutely the principal thing, notwithstanding the greater expense. I would rather you decided this than I, because I think you are more competent to judge financial success, and I absolutely trust your judgment.

You told me to try to finish a little drawing in watercolour. I believe that by painting I shall actually be able to make better watercolours than before, if I start them again. But if it does not turn out well, you must not get discouraged, neither must I, and you must not be afraid to criticize me. I do not systematically ignore criticism, but it generally takes more time to change a thing than to indicate a change. Thus I have only just put into practice things that Mauve told me in January. And, for instance, I painted that piece of ground according to a conversation I had with him about a study of his.