

Drenthe, 29 October – 15 November 1883

Dear Theo,

After having written about it, I have thought it over out on the heath. The same thing I had thought over so often already. Among the old masters as well as among the modern ones, one often meets with the same instance of two brothers being painters, in whose work there is more resemblance than difference. They are quite different, yet they complement each other perfectly. Take, for instance, the Ostades, Adriaan and Isaac. Well, you know yourself many other cases. The Van Eycks too.

And in our time, Jules and Émile Breton, to name only a few. And already I have so often thought how delightful it must be to work together, and how productive the two can be together, just because one encourages the other, and saves the other so many periods of melancholy.

I cannot repeat to you often enough, boy, that when one is thirty, one is just beginning. Look at the biographies of artists, even many who had painted from their earliest years changed only then, found their own personality only then. I only ask you to take those things into consideration. I know one is faced with the problem “bread.”

The argument, I must eat, I must live somewhere, is not wrong; on the contrary, I think it absolutely correct.

Very well, but to everybody who says, “I haven’t the means,” I put one question; that question is: “Friend, what are your claims, how high is your standard? Is your character such that you think, for instance, like Corot, who didn’t mind buying a loaf at the baker’s and eating it in the fields when he couldn’t pay for a dinner? In short, can you be contented with little and not care in the least for the conventions of life?”

You are exactly that way basically, and would put up with many things. And though the “bread” problem may not be quite settled then, it will be cleared up a great deal. When I think of the possibility of your coming here sooner or later, and I begin to calculate, I arrived at the conclusion that together we shall need little more or no more than I alone.

And besides, I firmly believe that your presence would be a stimulus to me in so many things, that it would be such a help to me to talk and discuss things and exchange views with you that I should be able to work better.

Now hardly a day passes that I do not make something. As practice makes perfect, I cannot but make progress; each drawing one makes, each study one paints, is a step forward. It’s true, it is the same as on a road, one sees the church spire in the distance, but as the ground undulates, when one thinks one has arrived, there is another bit one had not seen at first, and which must still be covered. But one gets nearer and nearer. After a longer or shorter time, I do not know how long, I shall arrive at the point of beginning to sell.

All right, once I am so far, it won’t be by halves, for I don’t work by halves. And I try my hand at different things simultaneously, therefore I shall have more than one string to my bow, more than one arrow; that is what I, for my part, can throw into the Gulf called “bread.” Things may change for me, and though I do not sell now, notwithstanding all my drudging – I repeat: things may change.

We should need, let us say, at least 150 francs a month as a minimum, preferably 200 francs, we should have to find credit for that, not without a guarantee, but our work would be that guarantee. Now, let us suppose we should have to work for two years before we begin to earn well, more than we spend, so that we can pay off our debts.

200 francs a month in two years is 2400 francs. Well, let’s put it at 1500 guilders.

This may serve as a guarantee – I am now thinking of you and me working together, that we ourselves have invested a great deal already, and have laid a certain foundation. My skill is my own, some things of drawing, even some things of painting, are firmly rooted and were not acquired by pure chance, but by honest work. I call this another guarantee that we do not build castles in the air.

Look here, Theo, I shouldn’t be able to talk with you if you didn’t possess a certain self-confidence, a certain self-knowledge. I have told you before that I think you are an artist at heart, and I am more and more strengthened in that opinion. You will say, I cannot make anything – no, of course not now, but after a year’s work, when the first difficulties have somewhat cleared up, you will feel with the greatest serenity that, yes, perhaps not everybody can become a painter by sheer drudging when he lacks a certain predisposition to it – but in yourself you would perceive that disposition to mediate, to think and analyze, to feel the beauty in nature, and discover that you can be an artist for the very reason that you possess both diligence and energy, which now, however, are working in another direction, so that nothing is left for art.

But if that same diligence became the motive power of your sense of beauty, the result would be a true painter.

I must come back for a moment to that question of “bread.” A great many things which are said to be impossible are possible after all.

Permit me to suppose for a moment that you had arrived at a point where you had to make a change – the time hasn’t come yet, I’m only supposing it for the moment – then you will get a situation in some other concern; all right, but what ought to be bright is not the near future, but the deeper background, the horizon. And to me this background seems to be mighty dark. Now if you become a painter, look at the more distant future, the deeper background – there is no darkness in it – it is only in front of you, in the immediate foreground.

Your personal energy may turn you into a painter, and others will not be able to prevent it, but it might well be that this “personal energy” in the art-dealing business would not be exactly the commodity which certain employers, new ones included, would desire, particularly at moments when they are in a scrape.

For all of your personal energy, you might find yourself in the same straits as Wisselingh did, who most certainly is energetic, and who was with Goupil too.

I said, many things which are said to be impossible are possible after all. If circumstances made it unavoidable, why shouldn’t we go and live with Father? I do not say for nothing, but in case we should not earn enough to stick it out here in Drenthe. We might get credit. But never mind that, and take the first possibility. It would be hard work, but by the pleasure of being together, by living together in that unutterably beautiful scenery, and especially the consciousness of being two craftsman, boy, how delightful it would be. So delightful that I hardly dare to think of it, yet cannot help doing so, though that happiness seems too great, for you as well as for myself, because we are not used to getting pleasure out of life, and feel that is rather more for others than for us.

We should need credit to the amount of 1500 guilders. I do not know where and how to get it. I will work out for you how we should use the money. We should make an arrangement for two years with my landlord here, perhaps pay a part in advance. I think that for 1000 guilders he would give us both board and lodging during those years, would let us have this room where I am living now – in short, we should be free from all domestic cares during those two years, and should be able to work steadily and quietly.

Two years are a pretty long time, are all that you would need under the circumstances to reach a certain height.

Then we shall have some money left to lay up a big stock of colours, to supply ourselves well.

Then there will be few things which can upset us or make us change our plans. We will be in for it then, and must go on. We will have insured our lives as to board and lodging, and will not be able to go back, but must, must, must go forward and win.

As to you, I think you must act differently than I did. That’s past now. Up to the present I have acted as I thought best, but as for you, I wish you would start painting at once, I know exactly what you would like to make here.

I should like you to try your hand at landscape at once, in the spirit of Michel, which I see here all the time. It is absolutely Michel, that’s what it is here. I feel sure that I can show you the way in this, because just now I tried things of the same kind; I do not pretend they are as good as Michel, but I daresay that when you are as far advanced as that, you will be able to find your own way.

As for me, especially if you were here, I should concentrate more and more on the figure.

I will just make a scratch of the landscapes which I have on the easel.

These are the kinds of studies which I should like you to try it once: to learn to look at the landscape in a big way, and seek its simple lines and contrasts of light and brown. The little sketch at the top is what I saw today, it was absolutely Michel. In reality that earth was superb. I don’t think my study ripe enough yet, but I was struck by the effect, and as to light and shade, it was indeed as I draw it for you here.

The one at the bottom is a tender green little cornfield in the foreground, and withering grasses; behind the cottage, two piles of peat, again a glimpse of the heath, and a very light sky.

Look here, what I want to say is this: that’s the kind of thing you ought to start with, and from the very beginning I believe you will do well not to draw exclusively. I mean everything I write you here in full, full earnest. I have thought it over so long.

If all had remained well at Goupil’s, I should not have spoken about it, but under the circumstances it is only because of my own wretched financial position that I do not say much more positively: come here at once. If it were otherwise, I should not use more words than that.

The country is splendid, splendid, everything calls to you: paint! it is so full of character and so varied. Look here, boy, isn't it true that however things go, there are always financial obstacles, and where or how on earth can a time of struggle lead to a more definite peace? – to a great peace which nothing on earth can disturb. I for my part can say no better than that I give all my own studies as a pledge and guarantee for our giving back the money we shall absolutely need during the first two years. I think we must be able to find it. I have put down the minimum, because both you and I would live as economically as possible.

As for me, I have a lot of plans, but I do wish I had some 100 guilders to spend to replenish my painting materials. And I wish I knew for sure that I could stay here for two years, for instance. I now have so little security for the future, and I wish I knew for sure that I shall not have to leave again after some time. The plan which I have laid down here is open to changes.

But I think its basis remains, we must arrange things so that we can work in peace for two years.

After those two years I shall be so far that I can earn regularly, and hope to have regular work on such conditions that both you and I can go on in the same way.

The plan it is simple enough; people would gossip about you, too, but there would be six hours' walking distance of landscape à la Michel between their wretched little town of Hooegeveen and yourself, so it would not trouble you in the least, would it? You would be rid of everything, and in about your 30th year; even the house Goupil would seem like a dream to you, and you would hardly understand that once you were the head of the Gallery on the Boulevard, and were treated politely, always politely, by Monsieur the Director.

As to my coming to Paris, well, I think it's a long detour, though if you think it better, all right; but it depends so entirely on the change you are going to make, and if you change in a way other than by becoming a painter, I should be afraid that in the end it would have to happen after all, and that meanwhile I would again become more difficult. I cannot write differently than I do.

You are a man of business; for this very reason I do not think you will be so prejudiced as to reject all this. There are always, everywhere, financial obstacles and worries; one cannot avoid them anywhere, and after all this is something solid, as it will make you a handicrafts one. Is that taking a step backward? – no it is not! I think it is the right way. It would be a manly action, and action which demands *foi de charbonnier*. So I repeat: you must have that *foi de charbonnier*. Well, boy, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

Do write again soon.

Think of Barbizon, that story is sublime. When those who originally started working there came there, by no means all of them were externally what they were basically. The country formed them, they only knew, It is no good in a city, I must go to the country. I suppose they thought, I must learn to work, become quite different, yes, the opposite of what I am now. They said, I am no good now, I'm going to renew myself in nature.

As for me, I reason in the same way, and though I should go to Paris if I absolutely had to, and to find something to do there – I think my future here infinitely, infinitely better.

Theo, your case is curious, hugely interesting. To have the courage to risk it – look, for this you must have *foi de charbonnier*, *quand même*, in spite of everything. But now think with all coolness of your highly curious position. Now I cannot beat about the bush, my dear fellow – and take this in a friendly spirit – I shall have to say it the way things appear to me. You see your way in the art dealing business, which, as it appears to me, makes you something like Wisselingh, to mention a good one. I feel great respect for Wisselingh, I like him and all that, but even now I should like to tell him, Old fellow, go and be a painter, you are much too honest for today's art-dealing business, much too clever, etc. Now is not the right time for it. But on the contrary, if you will now persevere more vigorously, try to find more "personal energy" and "your own handicraft," then say, I will not hesitate, I will take the risk, I will push off to the open sea. And you will immediately get a certain somber earnestness – something mighty serious will rise up within you – one looks at the quiet coast, all right, it is pretty enough – but the Secret of the depth, the intimate, serious charm of the ocean of an artist's life – with Something on High over it – will take hold of you. All right, you are no longer a Wisselingh – you are something quite different. Personally you say that however small a little ship may be in a marine by Jules Dupré, you are even smaller – but you are greater – you are an artist and you can do nothing – certainly, your act of surrender has already changed you – in this respect your own power or lack of power is of no importance. No, the renewal of life changes your whole character, changes your thoughts and opinions, changes them to such a degree that you prefer to be silent about it and to work. Your work is unbeautiful – all right, let it be unbeautiful – it will grieve you, but it

will not discourage you – after a while you will see a hasty little sketch with a je ne sais quoi in it – fine, it this is the harbinger.

It varies – now you think, I can manage it – then again you think it will never succeed – but more and more you learn to have foi de charbonnier, and this grows more solid, even if the moments of bitter melancholy remain. Very soon art matters become so serious that what people say about it becomes something like the croaking of ravens. The heath speaks to you; you listen to this still voice of nature, and at times nature will seem a little bit less hostile, until at last you are her friend. Then your work too will be beautiful and calm. But nature demands a certain devotion, and she demands a period of struggling with her.

I can't help it, if I want to speak with thorough frankness, I am forced to say, Theo, be a painter, try to disentangle yourself and come to Drenthe. People will raise a clamour, but you won't hear much of it. A six-hour walk full of landscapes by Michel lies between you and the ordinary world.

You would wake up in the morning, and getting up you would find yourself near an open farmyard with a cradle in it. There you would think better, and feel what Corregio meant by his anch'io – I too am a painter; they would say, you are not – you would answer, Well, well.

Well, if you were here, I should have a comrade, and this would mean that the work would make better headway. For all that, you would not be without friends. Very soon you would be on much more jovial terms with Rappard than you were in the past. Wisselingh would also remain faithful to you – although he would probably advise you against it. If you were here, I should become prolific sooner. I say the same – for me alone it is almost too big, I always lacked the courage to go on alone. I need a person to talk things over with – who knows what a picture is.

The greatest attraction for me in Paris, the thing which would most help me to make progress, is being with you, and the exchange of ideas with somebody who knows what a picture is, and who understands the reasonableness of my quest. I approve of Paris because you are in Paris, and as I should be less alone there, I should make better progress even there.

Enough of this for a moment. I do not say it would be possible if we couldn't pay for our bread and our workshop. But with the sum I mentioned as a minimum, I should most decidedly think it possible.

For myself I have a simple method, I go out into the open air and paint what strikes me, breathe the fragrant air of the heath deeply, and believe that after a while I shall become fresher, newer, better.

So, boy, do come and paint with me on the heath, in the potato field, come and walk with me behind the plough and the shepherd – come and sit with me, looking into the fire – let the storm that blows across the heath blow through you.

Break loose from your bonds. I do not know the future, in what way it might be different if everything should go smoothly with us, but I cannot speak differently: Don't seek it in Paris, don't seek it in America; it is always the same, forever and ever exactly the same. Make a thorough change indeed, try the heath.

Goodbye, write soon. With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent