

Letter 384  
Nuenen, c. 1 November 1884

Dear Theo,

I received your letter and thank you for it, and for the enclosure. When you write that you are again faced with your bad half-year – for I think it lasts half a year – that is not exactly pleasant news for you to write, nor for me to receive.

But we must try to remedy it, try to make it better for both of us.

Before I received your letter and its enclosure, I had already done a thing which I don't think you will approve of, but I am sorry to say that I do not care much what your opinion of it is. I have once more tried to renew the relations with Mauve and, if possible, also with Tersteeg. I do not know if I shall succeed, but I must have a freer scope, for having been without any intercourse with the world of art for a full year and longer, as I have, notwithstanding all good will, one comes to a dead end and must renew oneself.

This is a thing you never feel or understand. You say "go on painting," but for the rest you know nothing. I do not take this in bad part, but on the other hand I do not think it intelligent of you, which please note. It is perfectly true what you say: "that it is more likely that I shall achieve something by making good pictures than by discussing revolutionary questions." I find this so true that, while you were writing it, I was just taking steps to promote the direct progress of my work by asking to be allowed to paint some studies in Mauve's studio again.

You are always contradicting yourself. In your letter the sentence quoted above is immediately followed by the question: can I perhaps point out to you some new ideas on the problem of reforming the art trade? Shall I point one out to you, which is in your personal interest as well as in mine? – don't bother about the thing in general, back my application to Mauve and Tersteeg.

Help me to get afloat and to earn money, not only by sending your money but also by your influence, and more sympathy, and a more unalloyed friendship. I say again, back the step I have taken, for instance; it should have been taken long ago, with the necessary support from you.

Do it unreservedly and energetically, not hesitating and hedging when it comes to the point.

I have strength enough to accomplish something, and to earn money too. And then – as you say – if I make progress in my painting, and gain a good independent position, I shall be worth more than I am now. Then later on, when I am somewhat better off, I shall be glad to try to give you new hints about that problem of reforming the art trade, about which I certainly have my own ideas, arising from my own experience with what hinders a painter's progress and with the kind of things that sometimes make a painter's life unbearable.

I don't think this the right moment to write much about it. I only say, If you or I need money to make progress, and if for financial reasons we can only work at half speed at the moment, we must try to get that money and plod on till we have it. Not argue, "We are confronting a half-year that will be financially bad, so make the best of it." What one must have, can be found.

I have written to Mauve and Tersteeg. If you back me, so much the better.

Ever yours, Vincent

Don't misunderstand me, however, I have not written to Mauve or Tersteeg in a complaining tone. On the contrary, but I said as forcibly as I could, Give me another opportunity to make a few studies at Mauve's! That's what I asked, nothing more, and that's the only thing I need. They must not be involved in financial matters in any way. If I can't spare it myself, you must do your very utmost to send me an extra 100 francs, for I am not going for long. If you absolutely cannot spare it, Father must try to advance the money. I will harp on it till Mauve gives in.

If I fail alone, we must ask Mauve together until he gives in. Then, after that, I shall have gained some hints for correcting my work here and improving it, and I shall again have a pied-à-terre with a solid, serious painter, and then I warrant you, something will happen before long – either I shall exhibit or I shall sell.

If I wrote you "A 912," then this is not a word, you see, Theo! But it is only a way to ask: Are we going to progress together, or would you rather lag behind?

I prefer progressing together, but there mustn't be any bother.

If the financial part should be a difficulty, for Father as well as for you, I might get the money from Rappard.

And so, courage! But let us progress together and toil on perseveringly until we have achieved it.

If you do not want to join me, then I shall have to go on by myself.

Now do give me an answer to this.

It is quite possible, of course, that I shall not hear anything, either from Mauve or from Tersteeg.

If I hear anything I'll let you know at once. And if they take their time answering, it must be repeated, either by me alone or by both of us, just as you like.

Rappard is doing very well, and many others too, but you can swear by it that they have not been patient and long-suffering and nothing else. We must make progress. Get used to the idea that we must get a move on.

Since my first meeting with Mauve, I have not been grinding in vain on the elements of drawing, as well as of colour and of the technique of painting. I have learned new things, but I need Mauve or somebody else who is very clever, not to make me think a great deal of myself, but to give me some courage, which oozes away if things drag too long. Forward – and what the devil do I care if I fail – if I fail, then I'll try again. It is necessary to carry on vigorously – with renewed energy – and then matters will be settled between us to our mutual satisfaction.

It is very true that primarily I have spent this year on my work, secondarily on myself, more than I did last year. I am not sorry for it however; I have also made progress, just in the things which will help to redress matters in painting – I only regret that I couldn't spend a few hundred guilders more. What I have gained by it is, that I can now easily brush a head from the model in one morning, for instance, and that at last my colour is becoming more solid, and more correct, and my technique is getting more character.

Now I can very well understand that my saying I needed money for it – and need it still – is criticized. But it cannot be denied that one needs a working capital for a painter's profession just as for the simple trade of a shoemaker, for instance. A working capital which, after a couple of years, can yield very good interest, at least to begin with say 20%, and can be fully amortized later on.

So that for instance the money I get from you – let's put it at 5000 francs – might be looked upon as my working capital if necessary. The interest from this – if through our combined energy we could raise it to 20% - would be proof of the correctness of your judgement as well as mine, and of taking a sound view of business matters. As to this result – getting 20% interest from 5000 francs – I want your co-operation in order to reach it. These are facts and figures, and you must try to recover your confidence and energy to realize them.

I must work hard to attain this result, but in my opinion you for your part might do what you said you would do before: side with me – not in a neutral way, but in an energetic, positive way.

Out of the fullness of my conviction I tell you once again from the business point of view – speaking as a dealer, if you like:

That the system of doing business solely if one is assured of success is not the best one, and is in reality no more than a commonplace way of looking at things.

Doing business quand même, doing something, moving for the sake of moving, hating stagnation and sterility, this, as I see it, is a more broad-minded and profitable way.

So it is always the same – not beating about the bush – not taking things too much to heart – but having a certain confidence in certain things – I spoke to you about it in the past, and about what your character had become a few years later; certainly gaining the ever-stronger conviction that carrying on a fight and concentrating oneself on a few well-defined points, but all the same risking one's all, is the best thing to do. But the cooler characters doubt this – the Bourdoncles – I am quite willing to appreciate these fellows too, and they decidedly have their good qualities, but in the matter of carrying something out, of persevering in it and winning through... if this is required of them, they relapse into their doubts and hesitations. And then it is only natural that the flow of business slows down and comes to a standstill. Well...

Look here now – I must paint 50 heads just for experience, because right now I am hitting my stride. As soon as possible, and one after the other. I have calculated, but without a little extra money, it is not possible to work with that vigour which, as far as taking pains and exertion go, I would willingly spend on it. I had to buy an overcoat because I am more particular about my clothes than before, and some other things; the bills for colours also take much out of what I get, so that in order to carry out my plans in a short time, working at full speed (instead of half speed for economy's sake, which never can be real economy), I must manage to get an extra 100 francs. In order to win Tersteeg and Mauve over, I must do something decidedly energetic, having now broached the matter. Is it absolutely impossible for you to let me have it now? I must strike while the iron is hot; but dear brother and friend, stir up the fire.

Adieu.

Ever yours, Vincent