

Letter 420
Nuenen, mid August 1885

Dear Theo,

That colour dealer writes me that I can send him the pictures. But he wants me to send them as soon as possible, because there are many foreigners in The Hague just now. He is perfectly right there.

Now I must beg you to try to send me enough money to have a box made and to pay the carriage. Deduct it from the next month's allowance if you like, but I haven't got a cent and I want to send the pictures at once. Your visit has really left me no comforting impression; more than ever I believe that more difficulties are threatening you in the coming years than you suppose.

I go on insisting that it is fatal that your energy has manifestly taken another direction, instead of being turned to making a success of painting for both of us. And yet it is only a very short time ago that you wrote you had more confidence now, and that my work was good.

You take it as though I were misbehaving toward you, or were your enemy, because at present I object to quite a number of things. And I am very uneasy about the future. For all that, I cannot speak otherwise than I did.

In my opinion you don't in the least belong among the rising men. Resent this if you like, and in the future treat me just as you like because of it.

I will take back my objections as soon as I see quite different things in you – but that I made them on the occasion of your visit – yes.

Though you say today, "I am selling to the tune of 500,000 fr. a year" – this does not impress me the least little bit, as I am too much convinced of the difficulty of keeping it up for one-half, or one-fifth, and of delivering the goods in the years to come.

It is too high up in the air for my taste, too little on solid ground. And, after all, art itself is solid enough, that isn't the trouble. But being a counting house is a passing thing, "être un comptoir cela passe," is not a phrase of my own but of somebody whose sayings have come terribly true.

I wish you were or would become a painter.

I say this straight out, more emphatically than before, because I really believe that the great art-dealing business is in many respects a speculation like the bulb trade was. And the situations in it, dependent on chance and freaks of fortune.

Make a mistake in a calculation – even supposing it is only an insignificant slip – and what will become of the enormous figure of your present turnover? This figure is wholly dependent on a whim of Messrs.

Goupil & Co.'s.

And connoisseurship, the clean aspect of it without claptrap, is more nearly related to the practice of art than you would be inclined to think. Dealing in pictures is quite different when one is entirely on one's own from doing business in the employ of big distributors. And the same is true of a lot of other things.

So, in short – work hard – but at the same time try to work sensibly. The trouble you have taken along with me – for furnishing money is taking trouble too, and I don't in the least try to get away from it – this trouble anyway has been an act of personal initiative, of personal will and energy – but what shall I have to say and think of it if there is nothing to compensate for the gradual but undeniable weakening of financial aid?

In my opinion, at least, now is just the moment to try to do something with my work. I have looked for addresses in Antwerp, too, and expect to hear more definitely from there shortly. Then I could probably send something there, too. But if you should know of anything, help me carry it through.

You told me yourself, "Where there's a will there's a way." Well, I am going to take you at your word a little, at least as to your really wanting us to make progress together.

If I were to demand extravagant things and you refused – well, all right then – but when it is a question of the most urgent, the very simplest necessities of life, and it is increasingly and ever more badly becoming downright starvation, only then do I think you go too far in your economizing, and that in this respect it is far from useful.

Goodbye,

Ever yours, Vincent

A few more words about Serret and Portier. Tell them the simple facts, namely that I did have some studies ready, but that I had to pay a colour dealer who was getting troublesome just now. That in order to put a stop to it I wrote him that his colours were invested in my studies, and that in consequence I requested him

to do his best to sell something for me instead of bothering me. That I must follow this up and send him some things.

That as to the drawings I said I should show Serret, I need them myself, as I am in a hurry to do new things. But to a certain extent I attach importance to his knowing that I really had them when you came here, and to your telling him that you saw them in my house – and after that tell him exactly what you think. I will not influence your own opinion.

However, that I feel sad at your approving of things as they are – yes, that is a fact.

But I do not refuse to take such measures – and even if such a colour-selling gentleman should want to sell up my poor sticks, he would be welcome to fill my cup to the brim. It is certain that the colour-dealing gentlemen are quite capable of being ruthless.

However, I am more than tired of talking about it – I’ve said my say – and you – you may take my hint as you think proper.

If those fellows want to attack me, and sell me up, seeing that they emphatically threatened to resort to legal measures to collect their money, and this in a matter of less than 30 guilders, then I shall not be able to resist them, and I shall let them have their way, but it will happen as it were under your very nose, as it is only a short while ago that you were here.

That I am unable to stop working at the height I have risen to now, that is a fact – every day I need colours, etc., I must push on, and if I want to pay for what I need today, yesterday’s arrears will have to wait.

For your further guidance, here is a survey of my circumstances for the remainder of the current year, precise and in detail.

I have to pay three dealers, who are all three troublesome; I owe one 45 guilders; the second, 25 guilders; the third, 30 guilders¹. These amounts are exactly what remain of the bills – which were, of course, much bigger – incurred in the course of one year, and which I am paying off cash down as much as is possible for me with the utmost exertion.

Accordingly, deficit	100 guilders
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Add rent for November	25 guilders
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125 guilders or 250 fr.	

Now suppose I get from you in September, October, November and December 4 X 150 fr. = 600 fr. Then 350 fr. remain for me until New Year’s. Add to this that for the current month I am left with literally nothing, and that I must live during this month.

So from August until the first of January, i.e. nearly five months, I shall have to live and paint on 350 fr. Which I can do on 150 fr. a month, although not comfortably, but all right, it can be done by way of a minimum.

But in the course of four months 250 fr. must be deducted for the payment of colours and rent; well, then my work is hampered and obstructed to such an extent that I am at my wit’s end, and I prefer to tell the fellows: Sell the whole lot! But let me work!

This month I unhesitatingly threw in all I had in order to appease these fellows, but the cares arising from it are bad enough.

And my last word in this matter is that if my work were bloodless and rotten, I should think you were right to say, “There is nothing I can do about it.”

But now – seeing that larger and smaller painted studies as well as new drawings ought to make it clear to you that we are making progress, I am not so sure that “there is nothing I can do about it” must inevitably be your last word.

Discuss it with Serret, discuss it with Portier – and tell them how much I should like to work on, and how small are the opportunities I myself have of finding buyers, as the painting of rustics does not take me to the cities but to the countryside as my field of work.

Vincent

1. Total 100 guilders, at the time equivalent to £8/6/8 (£8.34) or \$40.