

Letter 442
Antwerp, 28 December 1885

My dear Theo,

It's more than time I thanked you for the 50 fr. you sent, which enabled me to get through the month, although from today onwards things will be more or less back to normal.

But – a few more studies have been done and the more I paint the more progress I think I make. The moment I received the money I took on a beautiful model and did a life-sized painting of her head. It's all quite light, except for the black hair. Yet the head itself stands out in tone against a background into which I have tried to put a golden glimmer of light. [Painting lost]

Anyway, here is the colour range: a flesh colour full of tonal values, with more bronze in the neck, jet-black hair – black which I had to do with carmine and Prussian blue – off-white for the little jacket, light yellow, much lighter than the white, for the background. A touch of flame in the jet-black hair and again a flame-coloured bow in the off-white.

She's a girl from a café-chantant and yet the expression I was looking for was somewhat "ecce homo-like." But that was because I was aiming for the truth, especially in the expression, though I also wanted to put my own thoughts into it. When the model arrived, it was obvious she had had quite a few busy nights – and she said something that was fairly characteristic: "Pour moi le champagne ne m'égaye pas, il me rend tout triste." [For me, champagne doesn't cheer me up, it makes me very sad.] Then I knew how matters stood and tried to produce something voluptuous and at the same time heart-rending.

I've started a second study of the same subject in profile [F 207, JH 979].

Apart from that I've done the portrait about which, as I told you, I'd been negotiating, and a study of the same head for myself. And now, during these last few days of the month, I'm hoping to paint another head of a man. I feel very cheerful, especially as far as work is concerned, and being here is doing me good.

I imagine that no matter what the girls may be, one can make money painting them, sooner than anything else. There's no denying that they can be damned beautiful, and that it is in keeping with the times that just that kind of painting should be gaining ground. Nor can there be any objections to that from even the highest artistic standpoint – painting human beings, that was the old Italian art, that was Millet and that is Breton.

The only question is whether one should start from the soul or from the clothes, and whether one allows the form to serve as a peg for hanging ribbons and bows from, or if one looks upon the form as a means of conveying an impression, a sentiment – or again, if one does modelling for the sake of modelling because it is such an infinitely beautiful thing to do. Only the first is ephemeral, the other two are high art.

What rather pleased me was that the girl who posed for me wanted to have one of the portraits for herself, preferably just like the one I'd done. And that she's promised to let me paint a study of her in a dancer's costume at her room, as soon as possible. It can't be done right away because the man who runs the café where she stays objects to her posing, but she's about to take lodgings with another girl, and both she and the other girl would like to have their portraits done. And I really very much hope that I'll get her back, for she has a remarkable head, and she's witty.

However, I must first get into practice because it certainly takes a special knack – they don't have much time or patience. Actually, the work needn't be the worse for being done fairly quickly, and one must be able to paint even if the model doesn't sit stock-still.

Well, you can see that I am working with a will. If I could sell something so that I could earn a bit more, I should work even harder.

As for Portier – I haven't lost heart yet – but poverty is dogging my steps and at present all dealers are suffering a little from the same defect, that of being more or less "une nation retirée du monde" [a people withdrawn from society] – they are so much sunk in gloom that how is one really to feel inspired to go grubbing about in all that indifference and apathy – the more so as the disease is contagious.

For it's just a lot of nonsense that business is slack, one has to work quand bien même with self-confidence and enthusiasm, in short with some zeal.

As for Portier – you wrote to me yourself that he was the first to show the impressions and that he was overwhelmed by Durand-Ruel – well, one is bound to conclude from this that he has the initiative not just to say things but also to do them. It could be put down to his 60 years, however – and anyway, perhaps it was just one of those many cases when, at the time when paintings were all the rage, and trade was doing well, a great many intelligent people were being wantonly brushed aside, as if they were incompetent and of no importance, simply because they couldn't bring themselves to believe that the sudden rage in paintings and the enormous rise in prices would last. Now that business is hanging fire, one sees those same

dealers who were so very entreprenant [enterprising] a few years ago – let's say about 10 years ago – turning more or less into “une nation retirée du monde.” And we haven't yet seen the end of it.

Personal initiative with little or no capital is perhaps the seed corn for the future. We shall see.

Yesterday I saw a large photograph of a Rembrandt I didn't know – I was tremendously impressed by it – it was the head of a woman, the light falling on breast, throat, chin, the tip of the nose and the lower jaw.

Forehead and eyes in the shadow of a large hat, with feathers that are probably red. Probably more red or yellow in the low-necked jacket. Dark background. The expression a mysterious smile like that of Rembrandt himself in his self-portrait with Saskia on his knee and a glass of wine in his hand.

My thoughts are full of Rembrandt and Hals these days, not because I see many of their paintings but because I see so many types among the people here that remind me of that period. I still keep going to those bals populaires [dance halls] to look at the heads of the woman and of the sailors and soldiers. One pays an entrance fee of 20 or 30 centimes and drinks a glass of beer – for there isn't much hard drinking and one can have a first-rate time all evening, or at least I can, just watching the people's en-train [high spirits].

I must do a lot of work from the model, it's the only way to ensure real progress.

I've discovered that my appetite has been held in check a bit too long and when I received your money I couldn't stomach any food. But I shall certainly do my best to remedy that. It doesn't take away from the fact that I have all my wits and energy about me when I'm painting. But when I'm out of doors, work in the open air is too much for me and I come over all weak.

Well, painting is something that wears one out. However, Van der Loo [the van Gogh's doctor in Brabant] said, when I consulted him shortly before I came here, that I am reasonably strong après tout. That I needn't despair of reaching the requisite age to produce a complete body of work. I told him that I knew several painters who, for all their nervousness, etc., had reached the age of 60, or even 70, fortunately for themselves, and that I should like to do the same.

I also believe that if one aims for serenity, and retains one's zest for living, one's state of mind helps a great deal. And in that respect I have gained by coming here, for I've new ideas and new means of expressing what I want; the better brushes are going to prove a great help, and I'm very excited by those two colours carmine and cobalt.

Cobalt – is a divine colour and there is nothing as fine for putting an atmosphere round things. Carmine is the red of wine and is warm and lively like wine. The same goes for emerald green too. It's false economy to dispense with them, with those colours. Cadmium as well.

Something about my constitution that has pleased me a great deal is that a doctor in Amsterdam, with whom I once discussed a few things that sometimes made me think that I wasn't long for this world, and whose opinion I didn't ask for directly, wanting simply to gauge the first impression of someone who didn't know me at all and availing myself of a small upset I had at the time to bring the conversation round to my general constitution – I was absolutely delighted that this doctor took me for an ordinary worker, saying, “I daresay you're an ironworker by trade.” That's exactly what I'd been trying to achieve – when I was younger you could tell that my mind was overwrought, and now I look like a bargee or an ironworker. And changing one's constitution so that one gets “le cuir dur” [a thick skin] is no easy matter. However, I must go on being careful, try to hold on to what I have and to improve on it still.

Above all, I should like you to tell me if you think it absurd of me to suggest that now might be a good time for us to sow the seeds of a future business. As far as my present work is concerned, I feel I can do better – however, I do need more air and space, in other words I must be able to spread my wings a little. Above all, above all, I still haven't enough models. I could soon produce work of higher quality, but my expenses would be heavier. Still, one should aim at something lofty, genuine, something distinguished, shouldn't one?

The female figures I see among the people here impress me enormously – far more for the purpose of painting them than having them, though if the truth be told I should like both.

I am again reading de Goncourt's book, it is first-rate. In the preface to *Chérie*, which you should read, there is an account of what the de Goncourts went through – and of how, at the end of their lives, they were pessimistic, yes – but also sure of themselves, knowing that they had done something, that their work would last. What fellows they were! if only we got on together better than we do now, if only we too could be in complete accord – we could be the same, couldn't we?

By the way, since, après tout, I've been virtually fasting for 4 or 5 days at this year's end – send your letter no later than 1 January.

You may well find it difficult to imagine, but it is a fact – when I receive the money my greatest craving will not be for food, though I shall have been fasting, but even more so for painting – and I shall

immediately go on a hunt for models and continue until all the money has gone. Meanwhile what will be keeping me going is my breakfast with the people where I live, and a cup of coffee and some bread in the crêmerie in the evening. Supplemented, when I can, by a second cup of coffee and bread in the crêmerie for my supper or else some rye bread I keep in my trunk. As long as I am painting that is more than enough, but when my models have left, a feeling of weakness does come over me.

The models here appeal to me because they're so completely unlike the models in the country. And more especially because their character is completely different. And the contrast has given me some new ideas for the flesh colours in particular. And though I'm still not satisfied with what I've achieved with my last head, it does differ from the earlier ones.

I think you value the truth enough for me to speak freely to you. For much the same reasons that if I paint peasant women I want them to be peasant women – so I want to get a whore's expression when I paint whores.

That is precisely why a whore's head by Rembrandt struck me so forcefully. Because he had caught that mysterious smile in such an infinitely beautiful way, with a sérieux [gravity] of his very own – the magician of magicians.

This is something new for me, and I want to achieve it at all costs. Manet has done it and Courbet – well, sacrebleu, I've the same ambition too, the more so as I've felt the infinite beauty of the study of women by the giants of literature – Zola, Daudet, de Goncourt, Balzac – in the very marrow of my bones.

Even Stevens fails to satisfy me, because his women are not like any I know personally. And those he chooses are not the most interesting there are, I find.

Well, be that as it may – I want to get on à tout prix [at all costs], and – I want to be myself. I am feeling obstinate, too, and no longer care what people say about me or about my work.

It seems more difficult to get a nude model here – the girl I used wouldn't do it, at any rate. Of course, that "wouldn't" is probably relative, but you certainly can't take it for granted. Still, the fact is she would be splendid.

From a business point of view I can only say that we are in what people have already begun to call "la fin d'un siècle" – that the women have the same charm as at the time of revolution – and just as much to say – and that one would be "retiré du monde" if one worked without them. It is the same everywhere, in the country as much as in the city – one has to take women into account if one wants to be up to date.

Goodbye, have a happy New Year, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent