

Letter 095
Amsterdam, 19 May 1877

Dear Theo,

What a fine day we spent together, one we shall not easily forget. I want to make sure you find a letter on your return from Etten. You no doubt had a good time at home too, so write soon and tell me how you spent the day.

I am enclosing something for your portfolio, viz. a lithograph after J. Maris, which might well be called "A Poor Man in the Kingdom of God," and a lithograph after Mollinger – have you ever seen it before? I have not. At a Jewish bookseller's, where I buy all the Latin and Greek books I need, I had the chance of picking prints cheaply from a large batch, 13 pictures for 70 cents. I thought I would take a few for my little room, to give it some atmosphere, which is needed if I am to get new ideas and freshen my mind.

I will tell you what they are, so that you can have some idea of what it looks like now and what I have hanging up. 1 after Jamin (which is also hanging in your room), one after M. Maris: that little boy going to school. 5 pictures after Bosboom. Van der Maaten, Funeral Procession in the Cornfields. Israëls, a poor man on a snowy winter road, and Ostade, Studio. Then Allebé as well, a little old woman on a winter morning fetching hot water and coals with the snow lying on the streets – I sent that one to Cor for his birthday. The Jewish bookseller still had a great many more excellent ones, but I cannot afford any more, and though I do hang up one or two things I am not, after all, making a collection.

Yesterday Uncle Cor sent me a batch of old paper, like the sheet I'm using to write to you, won't it be wonderful for working on? There's a lot of work to do already and it isn't easy, but with steadfastness one should get used to it. I hope to keep in mind the ivy "which stealeth on though he wears no wings" as the ivy creeps along the walls, so the pen must crawl over the paper.

Every day I do some walking. Recently I went through a very pleasant district – when I walked down the Buitenkant to the Dutch railway station one could see men working there and alongside the Ij with sand carts – and went along all sorts of little narrow streets with gardens full of ivy. It had a feel of Ramsgate about it. At the station I turned left, where most of the windmills are, on to a road along a canal with elm trees. Everything there reminds me of Rembrandt's etchings.

One of these days I shall make a start with Streckfuss's *Algemene Geschiedenis*¹, or rather I have started it already. It isn't easy but I certainly hope that taking it one step at a time and doing the best one can will pay off. But it will take time – many testify to that, and not just Corot alone: "Il n'a fallu pour cela que quarante ans de travail, de pensée et d'attention." [It took only forty years work, thought and attention.] The work of men such as Father, the Rev. Mr. Keller van Hoorn, Uncle Stricker and so many others requires a great deal of study, and the same is true of painting. And a man may well ask himself: how shall I ever manage that? For one's own work, thoughts and observation are not enough, we need the comfort and blessing and guidance of a higher power, and that is something anyone who is at all serious and who longs to lift up his soul to the light is sure to recognize and experience. Pining for God works like leaven on dough. May it also prove to be true in the story of both our lives.

Let us just believe in God and, clinging to that belief, confide in Him:

God said: Set there on rock and mountain,
this in eternal writ,
Let all who there behold it
Read what it was He said:
One day hard rock will crumble
The greatest mount cave in,
Yet My covenant with you
In truth it wavers not.
(Evangelical Hymns 188: 1 – 2)

Who but the good Lord leaves to care
And trusts in Him in direst need,
Is safe and sheltered in Him,
Is godly, marvellously spared,
Who but in God on high does trust,
Cannot have built on sand.
(Evangelical Hymn 194 :1)

Doing what needs to be done, and, if we are thrust in the right direction and, as it were, a door is opened for us, proceeding in that direction, we may acquire something of the old faith which God pours into many a heart, into that of the simple no less than into that of the great, into that of Aertsen no less than into that of Father or Uncle Jan or Uncle Cor – the same also happened to Rembrandt, Miller, Bosboom and who knows how many others, indeed, we can discover it in greater or lesser measure in almost everyone, or at least traces of it. He is not far away from any of us.

Is Mrs. Tersteeg still keeping well and have you been round to see Mauve yet? Keep your spirits up, as you are no doubt doing, good times may be in store for us, if God spares us and bestows His blessing on what we do.

Will you ever be joining me in some little church or other? God grant that you may, and I believe that He will grant it. Meanwhile, let us be grateful for our ordinary lives – if nothing out of the ordinary ever happens to us, and the only thing we know is a good prayer, let us then pray it, as Father once prayed on a New Year's Eve, when it was bitterly cold and the winter not easy for anybody, our own family included. That prayer came from the depths of his heart: "Bind us, O Lord, closely to one another and let our love for Thee strengthen these bonds ever more, preserve us from all evil, above all from the evil of sin. Father, we do not pray Thee to deliver us from the world, but to preserve us from evil. Preserve us from too much self-reproach. Grant us favour in the eyes of those to whom we are most closely bound and in the eyes of those who shall come after us."

When I see a painting by Ruysdael, Van Goyen, Bosboom, or so many others, I am reminded again and again of the words, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" – of wee-moed. [Melancholy]

Will you come to my little study again some Sunday and shall we go together to the little church in Scheveningen again? I hope so.

Regards to everyone at your place and accept a handshake in my thoughts from
Your very loving brother, Vincent

Yesterday, I saw a portrait of Michelet and I studied it attentively, thinking of his life of ink and paper. I am so tired at night that I no longer get up as early as I would want. But that will pass and I trust I shall be able to force myself to do it.
I hope to be at Uncle Stricker's on Whit Monday afternoon and evening.

1. General History.