

Letter 116
Amsterdam, 9 December 1877

Dear Theo,

I feel I must write you without further delay, especially because I have to thank you for three things. In the first place for your nice four-page letter; it was the greatest treat for me, for it does one good to feel that one still has a brother living and walking on this earth. When one has many things to think of and to do, one sometimes gets the feeling, Where am I? What am I doing? Where am I going? And one's brain reels. But then a well-known voice such as yours, or rather a well-known handwriting, makes one feel firm ground under one's feet again.

Then I must thank you for that number of the Galerie Contemporaine about Edouard Frère; it is very interesting, and I am glad to have it. I also thank you for the ten stamps – it really is too much, and you ought not to have done it. A warm handshake for everything.

Now, I still have something to tell you about St. Nicholas: I received a very good letter from Etten, and enclosed was some money for a pair of gloves. As I still have a pair, I bought something else with it, another map by Stieler, of Scotland alone. At present I can get them separately at Seyffardt's, but probably I shall not always have such an opportunity. I have copied the map, so I have a duplicate, and as I wished to give a Christmas present to Harry Gladwell, I hope to send it to you so you can enclose it for him in the first box that goes to Paris. One must build the house on a rock; Scotland, Normandy and Brittany are rather rocky, as you will see if you look at that big map of Scotland when you get it. When I compare my studies to the building of a house, with these months as the foundation of it, then these rocks are the base. But all this business is in parenthesis – I must still tell you about St. Nicholas Eve. Uncle Cor gave me the Bossuet's Oraisons Funèbres in a very pretty and handy edition, very complete; the beautiful sermon about Paul on the text, "When I am weak, then I am strong," is included. It is a noble book, you will see it at Christmas; I was so happy to get it that I carried it in my pocket all the time, but I must stop doing it, lest I damage it. Mendes gave me the works of Claudius, also a good, serious book; I had sent him Thomae Kempensis, De Imitatione Christi, and on the flyleaf I wrote: "In him there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor servant nor master, nor man nor woman, but Christ is all and in all." Uncle Stricker gave me a box of cigars – do you know what I did with them? The Roos'es have always been so kind to me, and I was wondering if I couldn't find something to send them when that box of cigars helped me out of the difficulty. And in the evening Uncle Jan had put my almond-paste initial on the table. I stepped in for a moment at Vos's, where Uncle and Aunt Stricker were spending the evening; I could not stay, however, as I had a lesson from Teixeira from eight to ten.

Uncle Jan spent the evening at Uncle Cor's.

It is a good idea of yours to write those names on the map of Brittany. Bring it with you at Christmas, then we can compare them. You talk about my coming to The Hague on my way to Etten, and I should like to do so – would there be room for me at Roos's for one night? If so, you need not write to me, then I will count on it if necessary. I should love to see your little room again, and the ivy-covered tree; I hope it may happen. I cannot tell you how I long for Christmas. I do hope Father will be satisfied with what I have done.

It was such delightful weather today, and it was so beautiful between the hawthorn hedges around the little church when the twilight began to fall.

This week I had a conversation with Mendes about "the man who hates not his own life, cannot be my disciple." Mendes asserted that the expression was too strong, but I held that it was the simple truth; and doesn't Thomas a Kempis say the same thing when he speaks about knowing and hating oneself? When we look at others who have done more than we and are better than we, we very soon begin to hate our own life because it is not as good as others'. Look at a man like Thomas a Kempis, who wrote his little book with a simplicity and sincerity unequalled by any other writer, either before or since; or, in another sphere, look at Millet's work or Jules Dupré's "The Large Oaks" – that is it.

I hope you are having a pleasant Sunday today – how I should like to be with you. Uncle Jan has gone to Haarlem, so I am alone tonight, but I have a lot of work to do.

You have given me a great deal of pleasure by sending that article about Edouard Frère. Once I saw the artist himself at Goupil's, his appearance is very simple. "Enfin il vainquit" says his biography; so it may be with us sometime – it may happen, and one should say, "I never despair." One does not get it all at once, and most people who have attained something have passed through a long and difficult time of preparation – the rock upon which their house was built.

Now I must hurry, for I have to set to work so that next week I can probably come to The Hague for a day, for instance Thursday, perhaps later. I must see how I can arrange my work. From The Hague I hope to go to Dordrecht; if you could leave on Saturday night, we could meet at the Dordrecht station. Then I should spend only two nights at Roos's; once at The Hague, I should like to stay somewhat longer there and visit some people.

It is a pity that Mauve is going to move to the country. I hope that we can go there together once more, like that evening last spring; it was so pleasant then.

At best, man is a thief by nature, but under the guidance and blessing of God, he may rise above it; thus the day came for Paul when he could say with boldness and confidence to Herod [sic]: I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were such as I am, except these bonds [see Acts 26:29].

Thanks for your comments about the lithographs. Another thing, you sent "Christus Consolator" and pendant, for which I was very glad.

It would not be a bad thing for you to have that map of Scotland, too; then you will have three out of that atlas, and as the proverb goes, "Third time is lucky." So count on getting it, and don't buy it in any case; I should have liked to send you this one, which will now go to Gladwell, but I think it my duty to make sure he hears from me once in a while; I hope he will be able to go to Lewisham at Christmas. You know the picture by Carp, here in the museum, an early Dutch family; when he saw it, he stopped and looked at it for a long time, and then he spoke of "the house built on the rock," and of his home in Lewisham. I, too, have my memories of his father's house, and I shall not easily forget it. Under that roof dwells much love, strong and great, of which there is something left in him; it is not dead, but sleepeth.

I have hung that page from the Cours de Dessin Bague, "Anne of Brittany," in my room again. Yes, a man is evil-minded by nature, but in the battle for life he may rise above it; that thought came to my mind after I had been looking at the expression on the face of that royal child, Anne of Brittany, for a long time – the expression reminds one of the phrases, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," "sorrowful yet always rejoicing."

À Dieu, my regards to the Rooses and believe me,
Your loving brother, Vincent

P. S. If I do not hear from you, I shall come Thursday or Friday, December 20 or 21.