

Letter 195
The Hague, 1 May 1882

Dear Theo,

I received your letter with enclosed 100 fr. and thank you very much for it.

Your letter has given me more light than all my own worry and fretting about that problem of Mauve and Tersteeg. I congratulate you on finding it out, for now I think I understand it better. And if I understand you correctly, the only thing I have to do is to work on quietly without worrying and thinking about it as much as I did. If I think too much about it, I get that same dizzy feeling which you say a person who has not studied perspective gets, when he tries to follow the fugitive lines in a landscape and to account for them. And just as the whole perspective changes with the shifted position of the eye, which does not depend on the object, but on the man who is looking (whether he stoops or stands on an elevation), so I think the change in Mauve and Tersteeg has been in part only imaginary, and can be accounted for by my own state of mind. I do not see clearly in such things, but your letter showed me distinctly that there is no reason for me to worry if only I work on. And now enough of this, there are other things I want to write about.

I was greatly touched by Heyerdahl's sympathy. Give him my best regards, and tell him I certainly hope to make his acquaintance someday, and shall greatly appreciate it.

Now I have finished two larger drawings. First, "Sorrow" in a larger size – only the figure, without any surroundings [F 929a, JH 130]. The pose has been changed a little: the hair is not hanging down the back, but falls over the shoulder partly in a plait, so more of the shoulder, neck and back is in view. And the figure has been drawn more carefully. The other, "The Roots," shows some tree roots on sandy ground [F 933, JH 142]. Now I tried to put the same sentiment into the landscape as I put into the figure: the convulsive, passionate clinging to the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of the struggle for life in that pale, slender woman's figure, as well as in the black, gnarled and knotty roots. Or rather, because I tried to be faithful to nature as I saw it, without philosophizing about it, involuntarily in both cases something of that great struggle is shown. At least it seemed to me there was some sentiment in them, but I may be mistaken; well, you must judge for yourself.

If you like them, they will perhaps be fit for your new home; and then I have made them for your birthday, for which I send you my best wishes. But as they are rather large (a full page Ingres), I don't know if I can send them immediately. Tell me, do you think Tersteeg would call me impudent or pretentious if I asked to have them enclosed when a box goes to Paris?

Though "The Roots" is only a pencil drawing, I have brushed it in with lead pencil and scraped it off again, as I would if I were painting.

This is how I reason about the carpenter's pencil. What did the old masters use for drawing? Certainly not Faber B, BB, BBB, etc., etc., but a piece of rough graphite. Perhaps the instrument which Michelangelo and Dürer used somewhat resembled a carpenter's pencil. But I was not there to see it for myself, so I don't know; I only know that with a carpenter's pencil one can get effects quite different from those with thin Fabers, etc.

I prefer the graphite in its natural form to that ground so fine in those expensive Fabers. And the shininess disappears by throwing some milk over it. When working outdoors with conté crayon, the strong light prevents one from seeing clearly what one is doing, and one perceives that it has become too black; but graphite is more grey than black, and one can always raise it a few tones by working in it with the pen, so that the strongest graphite effect becomes light again in contrast to the ink.

Charcoal is good, but if one works at it too long, it loses its freshness, and one must fix it immediately to preserve the delicacy of touch. In landscape too, I see that draughtsmen like, for instance, Ruysdael and Van Goyen, and Calame and Roelofs too among the moderns, used it to great advantage. But perhaps there would be more pen drawings in the world if somebody invented a good pen for use outdoors, with an inkstand to go with it. One can do great things with charcoal soaked in oil, I have seen Weissenbruch do it; the oil fixes the charcoal and at the same time the black becomes warmer and deeper.

But I say to myself that it's better to do it in a year than to do it now, because I do not want the beauty to come from the material, but from within myself. When I am a little more advanced I shall occasionally dress up nicely – that means I shall work with a more effective drawing material. And then if only I have some power within me, things will go doubly smoothly and the result will be better than I expected.

But before any success there must first come the hand-to-hand struggle with the things in nature.

Last year I wrote you a great many letters full of reflections on love. Now I no longer do so because I am too busy putting those same things into practice. She for whom I felt what I wrote you about is not in my path, she is out of my reach in spite of all my passionate longing. Would it have been better to have kept

thinking of her always and to have overlooked what came my way? I cannot decide myself whether I acted consistently or inconsistently.

Suppose I began today a drawing of a digger, for instance, but he said, I must go, I will not or cannot pose any longer. As I had begun to draw him without asking his permission, I have no right to be angry with him for leaving me with an unfinished drawing. But must I now give up drawing a digger entirely?

I think not, especially if tomorrow I may meet another who says, I will come not just today, but tomorrow and the day after tomorrow; I understand what you want, do as you like, I have the patience and goodwill to help you. Though I should not then remain true to my first impression, would it have been better to have said, No, I must decidedly have that first digger, even though he says, I cannot and I will not? And once I begin No. 2, I certainly can't work with the thought of No. 1, for then I should not be true to nature; that is the point. And I add this to my previous letter. I want your help in order to succeed, but I think the expenses would not be more, but rather less than what you have sent these past months.

I will and dare undertake it if I may count on 150 fr. a month for another year.

Well, I hope to earn something besides, and if this fails, I shall have to stint myself, it's true; but I shall manage. And then afterward when that year is past? –

I think nothing in my work indicates I shall fail, if I only can continue to work and do my best. And I am not a person who works slowly or irresolutely. Drawing becomes a passion with me, and I throw myself into it more and more; and where there's a will, there's a way.

Where [there] is a will, [there] is a way¹, but it must come from both sides. The will in me must be the making of things; the will in those who have or might get sympathy for me must be the buying or selling of those things. The will being there, I think the way may be found.

But if everybody talked like Tersteeg about “unsaleable” and “without charm,” heaps of annoyances would be in store for me. However this may be, I will try even harder to conquer the “unsaleable” and “without charm.”

It has been very stormy for three nights. Last Saturday night the window of my studio gave way (the house I live in is very shaky); four large window panes broke and the frame was torn loose. You can imagine it was not pleasant. The wind came blowing across the open meadows and my window got it firsthand – the drawings torn from the wall, the easel upset, the railing downstairs also thrown down. With my neighbour's help I have been able to tie up the window, and I nailed a blanket in front of the hole, which is at least three feet square.

I didn't sleep a wink all night, as you can imagine. And there was great trouble about getting it fixed the next day, because it was Sunday. The landlord is a poor devil; he gave the glass, I paid for the labour. But this is another reason why I want to take the house next door. It is arranged thus:

The studio, larger than mine, the light very good. The attic is finished, so that you do not see the rafters and tiles; very large, so that you can divide it into as many rooms as you like (I have the partitions for it). The rent is 12.50 guilders a month for a strong, well-built house; it is that cheap because it is “only in the Schenkweg,” and the rich people whom the owner expected to get do not want to live there. I should like to take it very much, and the owner would like to have me; he spoke to me about it first, and then I went to see it.

And now I close by saying that I assure you I often think of home, and I suppose when six months have passed by and the thing I wrote you about has happened, and Father and Mother come to see me, on both sides this would produce a change in our feelings. But alas, the moment has not arrived yet, and first we must try to get things started. For Father and Mother, whom I consider outsiders in this respect, will like it very much when it is more finished (has more finesse, as the Belgian dealers say, according to Mauve); but the rough sketch that you would understand if you were here would make them dizzy, to say the least.

Adieu, best wishes,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

I will not send the drawings if you intend to come soon. But it is time you received some of my things now and then; I do my best, and if these two, for instance, please you, I will send you some more of various kinds.

If you show those you think suitable to people who happen to come to your room, it may be the beginning of selling them. When more and different ones by the same hand are together, they show to better advantage, and one explains and compliments the other.

The thing I value most is your sympathy. If I win that, the selling will follow.

But that sympathy of yours cannot be forced by either you or me. I think I can produce a great deal – I mean I can work quickly, without dawdling. After you returned the old studies as I asked you, I sent you two new ones (“Laan van Meerdervoort” and “Sorrow”) to prove I can do more if you like them. If you say it is not ripe yet, I will work on without sending them; what I sent was no accident – I am really able to do what I’m doing now. I shall have to study for some time to do better. But what I want to say is: If the last ones I have sent you are good enough for you to show, then I can begin to send what I have ready.

Those you think the best ought to be mounted in grey, and so by degrees you will get a small collection. Think it over. I have some more drawings – an old man by the hearth [F 116a, JH 139], an old woman of the Geest, a few female figures – which, added to the others, would do well, I think. Also more small sketches.

I am not saying this to hurry you, but it will do no harm to think it over. You began to help me without knowing what the result would be and when others refused their help. I should be glad if the result were that you could say quite coolly to those who think it foolish of you to help me that you have not lost by it. And that stimulates me to work even harder, and I think you must begin to take a few drawings, and every month I will send some more. There are days when I make five of them, but one has to count on the fact that out of twenty drawings one is successful. But that one of the twenty is no accident – I can count on it. There will be one every week, of which I feel, it will last.

It is better if you keep those that are “lasting” for the present than if I sell them for 10 guilders to somebody here who takes them out of pity or charity. Here they all criticize the technique, but they all say the same hackneyed things about the English drawings, for instance. Only Weissenbruch – when I told him, I see things like pen drawings – said, “Then you must draw with the pen.”

He, Weissenbruch, has not seen the small but the large “Sorrow,” and has said pleasing things about it to me. That’s why I dare to speak as I do about the large one. I have had no “guidance or teaching” from others to speak of, but taught myself; no wonder my technique, considered superficially, differs from that of others. But that’s no reason for my work to remain unsaleable. I feel pretty sure that the large “Sorrow,” “The Old Woman of the Geest,” the “Old Man,” and others, will find a purchaser someday. But maybe I shall work a little more on them later. I have worked on the “Laan van Meerdervoort” again. In front of me is a drawing of a woman in a black merino dress; I know for sure that after you have had it for a few days, you will be quite reconciled to the technique, and not wish it were done differently. I did not understand the English drawings the first day either, but “I took the trouble to become acquainted with them,” and have not regretted it.

Adieu, enough for today.

1. Vincent wrote the underlined words in this paragraph in English, missing out the word ‘there’ twice.