

Letter 226
The Hague, 19 August 1882
Saturday evening

Dear Theo,

My sincere thanks for your letter and the enclosed. As soon as I received your letter I bought 7 guilders' worth of colours immediately, so as to have some provisions and to replenish my box. All during the week we have had a great deal of wind, storm and rain, and I went to Scheveningen several times to see it.

I brought two small marines home from there.

One of them is slightly sprinkled with sand – but the second, made during a real storm, during which the sea came quite close to the dunes, was so covered with a thick layer of sand that I was obliged to scrape it off twice [F004, JH187]. The wind blew so hard that I could scarcely stay on my feet, and could hardly see for the sand that was flying around. However, I tried to get it fixed by going to a little inn behind the dunes, and there scraped it off and immediately painted it in again, returning to the beach now and then for a fresh impression. So I brought a few souvenirs home after all.

But another souvenir is that I caught cold again, with all the consequences you know of, which now forces me to stay home for a few days.

In the meantime, I have painted a few studies of the figure – I'm sending you two sketches.

Painting the figure appeals to me very much, but it must ripen – I must get to know the technique better – what is sometimes called “la cuisine de l'art.” In the beginning I shall have to do much scraping, and shall often have to begin anew, but I feel that I learn from it and that it gives me a new, fresh view of things.

The next time you send money, I shall buy some good marten brushes, which are the real drawing brushes, as I have discovered, for drawing a hand or a profile in colour. Also, I see they are absolutely necessary for very delicate branches, etc. No matter how fine, the Lyon brushes make too broad stripes or strokes. My painting paper is also almost used up – toward the first of September I shall have to buy a few more supplies, but I shall not need more than the usual allowance.

Then I want to tell you that I quite agree with several points in your letter. Especially, I fully agree that, with all their good and bad qualities, Father and Mother are the kind of people who are becoming rare in the present time – more and more rare – and perhaps the new type is not at all better – and so one must appreciate them that much more.

Personally, I do indeed appreciate them. I am only afraid that the feeling about which you reassured them for the time being would come back, especially if they saw me again. They will never be able to understand what painting is. They cannot understand that the figure of a labourer—some furrows in a ploughed field – a bit of sand, sea and sky—are serious subjects, so difficult, but at the same time so beautiful, that it is indeed worth while to devote one's life to expressing the poetry hidden in them.

In the future, whenever they saw me toiling and pegging away at my work — scraping it out and changing it — now severely comparing it to nature then changing it a little so they can no longer exactly recognize the spot or the figure — it would always be a disappointment to them. They will not be able to understand that painting cannot succeed at once, and over and over again they will think, “He doesn't really know anything about it,” and that real painters would work in quite a different way.

Well, I dare not allow myself any illusions, and I am afraid that Father and Mother may never really appreciate my art. This is not surprising, and it is not their fault; they have not learned to look at things as you and I have learned to look at them. They look at different things than we do; we do not see the same things with the same eyes, nor do the same thoughts occur to us. It is permissible to wish this were otherwise, but in my opinion it is not wise to expect it.

They will hardly be able to understand my frame of mind, and they will not know what urges me on. When they see me doing things which they think strange and eccentric, they will ascribe them to discontent, indifference, or carelessness, whereas in reality there is something quite different at the bottom of it, namely, the wish to pursue, coûte que coûte, what I need for my work. Now they are perhaps looking forward to the “painting in oil.” Now at last it will come — and oh! how disappointed they would be, I am afraid, if they could see it; they would notice nothing but daubs of paint—besides, they consider drawing a “preparatory study” an expression which many years ago I learned to hate inexpressibly, and think as incorrect as it can be. As you well know. And when they see me still at it, the way I was before, they will think I am going to be doing that preparatory study forever.

Well, let us hope for the best and try to reassure them.

What you tell me about their new surroundings is very interesting. I should certainly love to paint such a little old church, and the churchyard with its sandy grave-mounds and old wooden crosses. I hope I shall have the chance sometime.

Then you write about the stretch of heath and the pine wood close by. I can tell you, I feel an everlasting homesickness for heath and pine trees, with the characteristic figures – a poor woman gathering wood, a poor

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

peasant carrying sand – in short, those simple things that have something of the grandeur of the sea. I have always had a wish to go and live somewhere quite in the country, if I had an opportunity and circumstances would permit. But I have plenty of subjects here – the woods, the beach, the Rijswijk meadows near by, and so, literally, a new subject at every footstep.

But it would also be to live more cheaply.

But for the moment, as far as I can see, there is no immediate reason, and so I am in no hurry.

I only tell you so you'll realize how sympathetic I am to scenery like that which you describe as Father and Mother's new surroundings.

It is the painting that makes me so happy these days. I restrained myself up to now, and stuck to drawing just because I know so many sad stories of people who threw themselves headlong into painting – who sought the solution of their problems in technique and awoke disillusioned, without having made any progress, but having become up to their ears in debt because of the expensive things they had spoiled.

I had feared and dreaded this from the start: I have considered drawing, and still do, the only way to avoid such a fate, and I have grown to love drawing instead of considering it a nuisance. Now, however, painting has unexpectedly given me much scope: it enables me to see effects that were unattainable before – just the ones which, after all, appeal to me most – and it enlightens me so much more on many questions and gives me new means by which to express effects. All together, these things make me very happy.

It has been so beautiful in Scheveningen lately. The sea was even more impressive before the gale, than while it raged. During the gale, one could not see the waves so well, and the effect was less of a furrowed field. The waves followed each other so quickly that one overlapped the other, and the clash of the masses of water raised a spray which, like drifting sand, wrapped the foreground in a sort of haze. It was a fierce storm, and if one looked at it long, even more fierce, even more impressive, because it made so little noise. The sea was the colour of dirty soapsuds. There was one fishing smack on that spot, the last of the row, and a few dark little figures.

There is something infinite in painting – I cannot explain it to you so well – but it is so delightful just for expressing one's feelings. There are hidden harmonies or contrasts in colours which Involuntarily combine to work together and which could not possibly be used in another way.

Tomorrow I hope to go and work in the open air again.

I have read most of Zola's *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* and *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, both beautiful. I think Pascal Rougon, the doctor who appears in his series of books, but always in the background, a noble figure. He really proves that no matter how degenerate a race may be, it is always possible for energy and will-power to conquer fate. In his profession he found a force stronger than the temperament he had inherited from his family; instead of surrendering to his natural instincts, he followed a clear, straight path, and did not slide into the wretched muddle in which all the other Rougons perished. He and Madame François of *Le Ventre de Paris* are to me the most sympathetic figures.

Well, adieu, I often think of you, and how I should love to see you now and then. A handshake in thought and believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

While writing this I have done another study, of a boy – grey, charcoal, oil, and very little colour, just for the tone.