

Letter 271
The Hague, c. 3 March 1883

Dear Theo,

I enclose a little sketch which I made in the soup kitchen. They sell the soup in a large passage where the light falls from above, through a door to the right.

Now I tried to find that same effect in the studio. In the background I put a white screen, and on that I drew the hatch, according to its real position and measurements; I closed the farthest window entirely, and the middle window at the bottom, so that the light falls from P, exactly as in the place itself.

You see, when I have the models posing there, I get exactly the same effect as in the real soup kitchen.

In the sketch above, you see the grouping in the studio. I have put a line around the part I wanted to draw.

Of course I can study the poses of the figures as long and as much and as correctly as I like, yet generally remaining true to what I have seen.

I should like to try this again in watercolour, for instance, and work hard on it to develop it more. It seems to me that there is more opportunity for figure painting in the studio now. Before the change, when I tried it last summer, the figures got such a neutral, cold tone that one didn't feel strongly inclined to paint them. The picturesqueness disappeared, so to speak, as soon as they came into that strong light.

Do you know what I shall still need very much? Different pieces of grey or brown cloth, to get the right shade of background.

In the above sketch, the wall is white, with wainscot painted grey, the floor, darker. By paying attention to those things, one gets the local colour so much more correctly. I have a few of these things already, and also many real clothes. Yesterday, for instance, I bought a very picturesque patched smock of coarse linen. I am always on the lookout for such things; by paying some attention to them, the models give more satisfaction than if one leaves it all to chance.

I love my studio the way a sailor loves his ship. I know that in time it will become just what I want, but my purse doesn't always allow me to do what I should like. But the things which one buys in this way are things that last, and now I have a chance which perhaps I shouldn't get again later.

The change in the studio brings even more expenses – indirectly rather than directly – for I won't consider it finished before I have many more things which are necessary to make it practical.

Your patient will cause you a great deal of expense; if you can't send anything extra just now, I needn't stop working because of that. Besides, not long ago you did send something extra, so I want to emphasize that I should be able to pull through if necessary. But I have a burning desire to push on, and to make progress.

There is another thing spurring me on, namely that Rappard is also working at top speed, more than he used to, and I want to keep up with him, because then we'll get on better together, and can profit more from each other's experience.

He has painted much more than I, and has drawn longer, but we are both on just about the same level. I don't try to compete with him as a painter, but I won't let him beat me in drawing. I wish that in the future he and I should keep working in the same direction, that is, types from the people, scenes in a soup kitchen, hospital, etc. He has promised to come to see me one of these days. I wish I could make some arrangement with him about making a series of drawings from the people, which we should lithograph as soon as they are good enough – not before.

This and many other things give me a strong desire to push on vigorously.

At all events, whether you can send me something or not, I can promise you better drawings before long.

The change in the studio itself, as far as it goes, enables me to undertake some new things already.

But there would be fewer obstacles in the way, if you could send me something extra just now. I am afraid that otherwise I should be checked by some things, either by the lack of drawing materials or by not being able to take models, or by the making of a few more alterations.

I mention "better drawings," this is meant comparatively.

Among the studies of heads – old men, etc. – which I still have, there are some which I will not be able to improve at once, because there is unquestionably some touch of nature in them, and at the same time something with which I am, of course, not quite satisfied; so I dare not say "I shall do it better in a few days."

But I mean something else by "better drawings," that is, drawn from a different point of view, and with more chiaroscuro in them, of which there is little or none in this winter's studies.

At all events, one thing I can promise you now, tomorrow I'll have the house full of people, that is, the woman's mother, and her younger sister, and a boy from the neighbourhood, and all these persons, together with my own people, will pose for the drawing of which this is the first rough sketch.

Rappard always works with models, too, and in my opinion there is no better way. Especially if one sticks to one model, one finds more and more qualities in it. So this letter complements yesterday's, in so far as you will see from it that today I made a plan for a new watercolour of the same kind I sent you, and that tomorrow I shall have the models for it. I hope to finish this one more thoroughly than the one I sent you. Shall I succeed? I can't tell beforehand.

I started, though I am still short of a few things. But one thing I have now that I didn't have before, and that is the better light. And it is worth more to me than ever so many colours. If I can have the colours too, please let me have them; but I have had so many things from you already, and in many respects I am so little satisfied with the result, till now, that I hardly dare to ask for them. As in algebra the product of two negatives is a positive, so I hope that the product of failures may be success.

Adieu. My best wishes for your patient, or rather, your convalescent.

Yours sincerely, Vincent