

Letter 301
The Hague, 22 July 1883

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter, thanks for the enclosure, though I cannot repress a feeling of sadness at your saying, "I can give you little hope for the future."

If you mean this only in a financial sense, I shouldn't mind it so much, but if it's in reference to my work, I don't quite understand why I deserve it. It comes just at the moment when I can send you the prints of the photographs of a few of my largest drawings which I had promised you before, but couldn't get because I had no money.

I do not know what you mean by that expression, how can I know it? Your letter is too short, but it hit me unexpectedly right in the heart.

But I should like to know what you really mean by it, whether you have noticed that I have made some progress or not.

You will remember that when you wrote me a month ago about the finances being bad, my answer was, "All right, that much more reason to do our utmost on both sides; do try to send me what's strictly necessary; for my part, I will do my utmost to make progress, so that perhaps we can sell something to the magazines."

Since then I have started several larger compositions which have more in them than the studies of a single figure.

So now my first batch of photographs for you to show to some artists coincides with your "I can give you little hope for the future." Has anything happened?

It makes me nervous, you must write again soon.

As you see, the photos are: Sower, Potato Diggers, Peat Cutters. I've had some others made: Sand Pit, Burning of Weeds, Refuse Dump, Potato Digger, one figure, Coal Hewers, and now last week at Scheveningen I have been working on Mending of Nets (Scheveningen fisherwomen).

And then two other large compositions of labourers in the dunes (one of which I showed to Tersteeg) which, though they still require hard work, are the things I should most like to finish.

Long rows of diggers – poor people employed by the municipality – in front of a patch of sandy ground, which must be dug. But it is enormously difficult to make. You may find the first conception of it in the "Peat Cutters."

It wouldn't make me so melancholy, brother, if you hadn't added something which worries me. You say, "Let us hope for better times."

You see, in my opinion that is one of those things one should beware of. To hope for better times must not be a feeling but an action in the present. My actions depend on yours in that if you should stop sending money, I couldn't go on and should just be in a desperate position.

Just because I felt the hope for better times strongly, I threw all my strength into the present work, without thinking of the future other than to trust the work would find its wages, though we must pinch ourselves as to food, drink and clothes more and more every week.

There was the question of Scheveningen, the question of painting. I thought, "All right, let's carry it through." But now I could almost wish I had not started it, boy, for the expenses are heavy and I cannot meet them.

The weeks passed – many, many weeks and months of late – when the expenses were repeatedly heavier than I could afford, notwithstanding all my worrying and economizing and however much I racked my brains. As soon as your money arrives, I must not only manage to live ten days on it, but I have so many things to pay for at once that from the start those ten days which are ahead are bound to mean starvation. And the woman has to nurse the baby, and the baby is strong and growing, and it often happens that she has no milk for it.

And it happens to me, too: when I am sitting in the dunes or somewhere else, I have a faint feeling in my stomach because there isn't enough to eat.

The whole family's shoes are patched and worn out, and there are many more of such small miseries which put furrows in one's face.

Well, I should not care, Theo, if I could only stick to the thought, It will come out right, we must go on. But now your saying, "I can give you little hope for the future," is like "the hair that finally breaks the camel's back" to me. The burden is sometimes so heavy that one extra hair is enough to make the animal sink to the ground.

Now what am I to do? I saw Blommers twice in Scheveningen and spoke to him, and he saw a few of my things and asked me to come and see him.

I made a few painted studies there, a bit of the sea, a potato field, a field with net menders, and here in the studio, a fellow in a potato field planting cabbage in the empty spots between the potato plants; and then I am working on the large drawing of the mending of nets.

But I feel my ardour vanishing, one needs to have a fixed point somewhere. When you say, "Set your hopes on the future," it sounds to me as if you yourself had no confidence in me.

Is this true? I can't help it, my spirits are low because of all these cares. I only wish you were here.

You say that the effect of the lithographs is somewhat meager. I am not in the least surprised when I think of how a man's physique influences his work, and my life is too cramped and meager. Really, Theo, we ought to have had a little more to eat for the sake of the work, but I could not afford it, and it will remain so as long as I cannot breathe a little more freely.

Therefore, please do show the photographs to Buhot or somebody, if you cannot send more yourself, and try to get something accepted with his help.

I am almost sorry to have started painting again, for I wish I hadn't begun it if I can't carry on. I can't do without colours, and colours are expensive, and I can't get more on credit because I still owe a little to Leurs and Stam. And yet I love painting so.

While I was at it, some of last year's things caught my fancy again, and I have painted studies hanging in the studio once more.

The sea, which I love enormously, must be brushed in oil, otherwise one cannot get hold of it.

Look here, Theo, I only hope you won't get discouraged, for indeed, when you speak of, "giving no hope for the future," it makes me melancholy. You must keep courage and energy to send the money, otherwise I'm on the rocks and cannot go on, for those who might be friends have become enemies and seem to want to remain so. Think it over well – that in fact I never did anything which accounts for this – at least, I cannot account for it – for instance, Mauve's or Tersteeg's or C. M.'s being so indifferent that they refuse to see my work or to speak a word to me. It is human to be angry about something, but it is not right to cling to that anger, even after a year has elapsed and after repeated efforts to make up.

So for today I finish with the question, Theo, when you spoke to me about painting in the beginning, and if we had then foreseen my current work, should we have hesitated in thinking it right for me to become a painter (or draughtsman, what's the difference?)

I do not think we should have hesitated about going on then if we could have foreseen these photographs for instance, should we? For surely it takes a painter's hand and eye to create such a scene in the dunes, in some form or other.

But now it often happens that I feel so downhearted when I see people behave so hostilely and indifferently that I lose all my courage. But then I cheer up again, and go back to my work and laugh at it, and because I work in the present, and let no day go by without working, I believe that there is indeed hope for me in the future, though I do not feel it, for I tell you, there is no space left in my brain for philosophizing about the future, either for upsetting me or for comforting me. I think my duty is to stick to the present with regard to me, too, and let us persevere as far as we can persevere, today rather than tomorrow.

Yet, Theo, you need not spare me if it's only a question of money – if only as a friend and a brother you keep a little sympathy for my work, saleable or unsaleable. If only I may keep your sympathy in this respect, I care very little for all the rest, and we must calmly and deliberately find ways and means. In case there is no financial hope for the future, I should propose moving to the country, to some village quite in the country, saving half of the house rent; and for the same money one spends here on bad food, we should have good, healthy food, necessary for the woman and the children – in fact, for me too. At the same time it would perhaps have advantages for taking models too.

You know I painted last summer – I have hung several of these studies on the walls again, because while making new ones, it struck me there was something in them after all.

That painting helped me indirectly in my drawing during the winter months and in the spring, and I carried this on as far as these last drawings. Now, however, I feel that it would be good to paint for a time, and that I need this to get a stronger tone in the drawings, also. I intended to paint the women sitting in the grass mending nets on a rather large scale, but after your letter I shall postpone it till I have seen you. I got more copies of the lithographs, but they are still weak; the man says he ought to have used more ink, and he will soon give me some even better ones. "N'importe," I have tried the experiment of making a small-size sketch for illustration.

Oh, Theo, I could make so much more progress if I could spend a little more. But I can't find the way out, I am handicapped by expenses everywhere. When I read the biographies of other painters, I find that they all needed money and were miserable when they couldn't go on.

Do write soon, for I feel upset and doubt whether to dare go on with Scheveningen because of the expense of the painting materials.

Since then I have spoken to Breitner about the three compositions he had started on. It was indeed true that he had made them in a moment when he was not himself. He said he was sorry to have made them in such a manner, and showed me another composition of the drunkard and studies of common streetwalkers which were infinitely better. And I also saw a few watercolours he was working on and a picture of a smithy – all were done with a calmer and firmer hand and mind. I read a book he lent me: Soeur Philomène by de Goncourt, who wrote Gavarni. The story takes place in a hospital; it is very good.

I had hoped that you could send something; at all events – especially if you have no money – you must write me soon, for it is hard to keep courage the way things are. I think the drawings of which the photographs are taken not yet deep enough of tone; they do not sufficiently express the emotion roused by nature, but if you compare them with what I made in the beginning, with the figures I made at first, I think I am not mistaken if I see a current of progress, and we must not lose hold of this current.

So let us try to drudge on.

I only wish you could come here.

At all events write soon. Adieu, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

I do not approve, Theo, of spending more than one receives, but when it is a question of going on strike or working on, I vote for working on to the utmost.

Millet and the other masters worked on till writs were served on them, or some have been in prison, or have had to move from one place to another, but I do not see that any one of them gave up his work.

And I am only beginning, but I see it from afar, like a dark shadow, and sometimes it makes my work gloomy.