

Dear Theo,

Here are two photographs of the weavers – next week I hope to send you two more sketches for Hermans' decorations.

You know well enough that your criticism of this past year and a half only seems like some kind of vitriol to me. But never suppose I don't know it is possible to protect oneself from such vitriol by a sort of leather which it cannot pierce so easily, and that as soon as one's hide is tanned so as to keep it out, it does not matter so much – so – what do I care?

Apart from this I believe you mean well. So what more do you want?

But I declare that it is not in the least my fault if the money you give me yields such a poor interest, not only to you, but also a poor interest to me. The former – that it yields a poor interest to you – grieves me more than the latter, it's yielding a poor interest to me too.

Things may improve, you will say – yes, but in that case not only I but you too would have to change a good deal. I just want to tell you that this winter, perhaps next month, I intend to leave here for a time; I have thought of Antwerp – I have thought of The Hague.

But during the last few days I have thought of something that is perhaps even better. In the first place I now want at all events some city life, some change of surroundings, having been either in Drenthe or in Nuenen for a full year or more. And I believe this will be a good distraction for me, for my spirits in general, which have not been and could not be as cheerful as I should like, especially recently.

Look here now, the sculptor Stracké lives in Bois-le-Duc; at the same time he is director of the drawing academy there. I saw a terre cuite by a pupil of his, and heard on that occasion that Stracké is not at all unkind or indifferent to anyone who practices art in this vicinity. That at Bois-le-Duc he has several models for the academy, and that there are people to whom he affords the opportunity to draw from the nude or to model in clay.

Probably, however, one would have to pay the model oneself, but that is not so very expensive, and then one has a spacious room for which one doesn't pay anything. I am going to see for myself how things are, and then it is not impossible that, just as Breitner, for instance, went to Cormon, I shall go to Stracké. It is in the neighbourhood, and would be the cheapest thing too.

I have bought a very beautiful book on anatomy, Anatomy for Artists; by John Marshall. It was in fact very expensive, but it will be of use to me all my life, for it is very good. I have also what they use at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and what they use in Antwerp.

But such things make great holes in my pocket. I tell you this only to make you understand that my not paying Father and Mother for my board while I stay here is not because I do not want to pay, but because I have had many expenses which I for my part don't consider superfluous.

The key to many things is the thorough knowledge of the human body, but it costs money to learn it. Besides, I am quite sure that colour, that chiaroscuro, that perspective, that tone and that drawing, in short, everything has fixed laws which one must and can study, like chemistry or algebra. This is far from being the easiest view of things, and one who says, "Oh, one must know it all instinctively," takes it very easy indeed. If that were enough! But it isn't enough, for even if one knows ever so much by instinct, that is just the reason to try ever so hard to pass from instinct to reason. That's what I think.

You must not imagine that I have earned anything by doing that work for Hermans; the first day I got two bills for the stretchers, canvases and a number of tubes, amounting to more than I had received from him to pay for them. I told him that I did not want these bills to remain unpaid, and asked him if he wanted to have them put in his name or if he would pay me something in advance. Oh no, he said, let it wait, they need not be paid at once. I said, Yes, they must be paid at once. Then he gave me 25 guilders.

Then came all my other expenses for models, not counting my time, work, etc.; but since then I have not seen any of his money, nor have I asked for it. On the contrary, because my work pleased him from first to last, I consider myself already sufficiently paid, if need be. Besides, the pictures remain my property, and I must judge for myself what I am willing to lay out for them. But enough of this, since those stretchers, canvases, etc., I have had at least 20 guilders' worth of expenses, perhaps even more, and have not even got them back. But the man is satisfied and pleased with me. Is it then good policy to ask for money? One must be very careful in this, in my opinion, just when people are satisfied, one must lower the price rather than raise it. Especially when, after all, the sum is not so considerable that receiving it or not makes that much difference. If I succeed, it will perhaps be for the very reason that I work more cheaply than others, and make it easy for the art lovers.

As to Hermans, he is very good, and a man to remain on good terms with, and he is certainly rich, but – has always been stingy rather than generous. Quite different from a real miser, but after all, I am earning less, much less than nothing.

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But notwithstanding this, I for my part have been very kind and obliging to him. I find in him a very pleasant, jovial friend, and it is really touching to see how a man of sixty tries hard to learn to paint with the same youthful enthusiasm as if he were twenty.

What he makes is not beautiful, but he works hard, and has already copied four of my six compositions, in quite a different sentiment, and it has something medieval, something like Peasant Breughel.

You once told me that I should always be isolated; I don't believe it, you are decidedly mistaken in my character there.

And I do not at all intend to think and live less passionately than I do. By no means – I may meet with rebuffs, I may often be mistaken – often be wrong – but that only as far as it goes – basically I am not wrong.

Neither the best pictures nor the best people have no faults or partis pris.

And I repeat, though these times may seem tame, they aren't really. I also positively deny that my assertion of certain parties still being as strongly opposed to each other in '84 as in '48 should be exaggerated. It is something quite different from that ditch of yours, I assure you – I am speaking of the parties now, rather than of you and me in particular, but you and I also belong somewhere, don't we? – standing either on the right or on the left, whether we are conscious of it or not.

I for my part have at all events a parti pris if you like, and if you think you, for your part can manage to stand neither on the right nor on the left, I take the liberty of doubting most strongly its feasibility. And especially the practical use.

I have had a fairly good letter from Utrecht, she has recovered enough to go to The Hague for a time. But I am still far from easy about her. The tone of her letters is much more self-confident, much more correct, and less prejudiced than when I first knew her. At the same time, something like the wail of a bird whose nest has been robbed; she is feeling perhaps less indignant than I toward society, but she too sees in it “the boys that rob the nests,” who do it for fun and laugh about it.

But now there is a piece of news, that the pastor at Helvoirt has died, so that there is now a vacancy in that parish. I think it probable that they want to get Father back there, at least that the family at Helvoirt is going to sound Father out on the subject. But seeing that it was only the day before yesterday that the dear reverend gentleman over yonder dropped dead, I do not know in the least whether they are going to call Father or not.

However I think it highly probable.

Father is not going to accept the call, this much is certain.

As to what I call barricade and you call ditch, it can't be helped, but there is an old civilization that, in my opinion, is declining through its own fault – there is a new civilization that has been born, and is growing, and will grow more.

In short, there are revolutionary and anti-revolutionary principles.

Now I ask you whether you yourself have not often noticed that the policy of wavering between the old and the new isn't tenable? Just think this over. Sooner or later it ends with one's standing frankly either on the right or on the left.

It is no ditch. And I repeat, then it was '48, now it is '84; then there was a barricade of paving stones – now it is not of stones, but all the same a barricade as to the incompatibility of old and new – oh, it certainly is there in '84 as well as in '48. Goodbye,

Yours sincerely,

Vincent