

Letter 390  
Nuenen, 15 - 17 December 1884

Dear Theo,

I am working very hard on the series of heads from the people, which I have set myself to make; I just enclose a little scratch of the last one; in the evening I generally scratch them from memory on a little scrap of paper, this is one of them.

Perhaps I will make them later on in watercolour too. But first I must paint them. Now just listen – do you remember how in the very beginning I always spoke to you about my great respect and sympathy for the work of Father de Groux? Of late I think of him more than ever. One must not confront him only in his historical pictures, though these are also very good, nor in the first instance in a few pictures with the sentiment of, for instance, the author Conscience. But one must see his “Grace before Meat,” “The Pilgrimage,” “The Paupers’ Bench” and above all, the simple Brabant types. De Groux is appreciated as little as, for instance, Thijs Mans. He is different though, but this they have in common, that they met with violent opposition.

In these days – whether the public is wiser now I can’t tell, but this much I know, that it is not at all superfluous to weigh seriously one’s thoughts and one’s actions.

And at this very moment I could tell you some new names of people that hammer again on the same old anvil on which de Groux hammered. If it had pleased de Groux at that time to dress his Brabant characters in medieval costumes, he would have run parallel with Leys in genius, and also in fortune.

However, he did not do so, and now, years afterwards, there is a considerable reaction against that medievalism, though Leys always remains Leys and Thijs Maris, Thijs Maris, and Victor Hugo’s Notre Dame, Notre Dame.

But the realism not wanted then is in demand now, and there is more need of it than ever.

The realism that has character and a serious sentiment.

I can tell you that for my part I will try to keep a straight course, and will paint the most simple, the most common things.

For pity’s sake, how is it possible that you do not seem able or willing to understand that by having fixed my studio here, and by keeping it here for the present, I have made it possible to have money enough for painting, and if I had done otherwise it would have been a failure for myself as well as for others. If I had not done so I would have had to drudge at least three years more, before I had definitely overcome the difficulties of colour and tone, just because of the expenses. It is now just a year ago since I came here, driven by necessity. It is certainly not for my pleasure that I live here at home, but for my painting, and this being so I think it a great mistake of yours if you were to rob me of an opportunity, if I had to leave here now, before I had found something else. For my painting I must stay here somewhat longer still, then as soon as I have made more definite progress, I am willing to go anywhere where I shall earn the same money that I have here.

To be put back is not what I need or deserve, nor do I feel the least inclination for it, you see.

And attempt to get rid of you, that I never did, but where you showed me too clearly how little chance there was of our doing real business together, I do accept it for the future, that is true.

Recognize this once and for all, when I ask you for money, do not ask it for nothing; the work which I carry out with it is at your disposal, and if now I am in arrears, I am on the right road even to achieving some leeway.

I write this once more, for the same reason as I did the earlier letters; I shall be quite at bay at the end of the month, for I have only enough for two or three days to pay my model.

And I am wretched that I shall again be handicapped for ten or twelve days this month.

And most seriously I repeat, can you not find a way to help me to 20 francs, for instance, to cover those last days? What I mind most, is the time I should otherwise forfeit. Goodbye.

Yours,

Vincent