

Dear Theo,

In de Goncourt's book I found the following sentence in the article about Chardin marked by you. After having talked about the bad financial conditions of painters, he says: "Que faire, que devenir? Il faut se jeter dans une condition subalterne ou mourir de faim. On prend le premier parti" [What to do, what to become? One must throw oneself into a subordinate condition or starve. One chooses the first], so, he continues, except a few martyrs, the rest become fencing masters, soldiers or actors. After all, this has remained true up to now. As you had marked the above, I thought it possible, especially as I had just mentioned to you that I am going to give up my present studio, that you might want to know what I intend to do. The present days are not quite exactly like those of Chardin, and there are a few things which can hardly be argued away at present. The number of painters is much larger.

Now it always makes a fatal impression on the public when the painter "takes a job on the side." I don't feel above this at all, but I should say, Go on painting, just make a hundred, and if that is not enough, two hundred studies, and see if this doesn't help you more than the "job on the side."

Accustoming oneself to poverty, seeing how a soldier or a labourer lives and thrives in wind and weather, with ordinary people's fare and dwelling, is just as practical as earning a few guilders more a week.

After all, one is not in the world for one's own comfort, and one does not need to be better off than one's neighbour.

Being a little better off helps so little after all. Anyhow, we cannot prevent the days of our youth slipping from us. If that were possible! But the real thing that makes one happy, materially happy – being young, and remaining so a long time – does not exist here – that doesn't even exist in Arabia or Italy, though it is better there than here.

And I personally think that one has the greatest chance of remaining strong and renewing oneself under the present-day tiers état. Well, so I say that I try to find it in painting without any thoughts on the side. But I shall do well to keep my eye on portrait painting if I want to earn something. I know it is difficult to satisfy people as to the "likeness," and I dare not say beforehand that I feel sure of myself on that point. But I don't think it entirely impossible, for the people here are not much different from people elsewhere. Now the peasants here and the people from the village don't make mistakes and immediately say, contradicting me even when I say they are wrong: This is Reinier de Greef, that is Toon de Groot and that is Dien van de Beck, etc. And sometimes they even recognize a figure seen from behind. In the city the honest middle-class citizens, and certainly not less the prostitutes, attach great importance to portraits. And Millet discovered that sea captains even "respect" somebody who knows how to do them (probably these portraits are destined for their mistresses ashore). This has not yet been exploited. Do you remember this in Sensier? I have always remembered how Millet kept himself afloat in Le Havre this way.

Now I certainly intend to go to Antwerp; it is impossible for me to tell how or when beforehand.

I found six art dealers' addresses, so I shall take some things with me; and further, as soon as I get there – I intend to paint a few city views – rather large size – and to exhibit them at once.

Thus concentrating everything on the work there, and going there as a poor man, I have nothing to lose in any case.

As to this region here, I know the country and the people too well and love them too much to be positively leaving them for good. I shall try to rent a room where I can put my things, and shall be safe then, in case I want to leave Antwerp for a time or if I get homesick for the country.

As to that "job on the side," from the very beginning, Tersteeg, for instance, had bothered me with it. And that was nonsense, whatever Tersteeg may say. Those who talk most about it are unable to decide what it must be. And as to that, to make my case quite clear, if I should take up a "job on the side" the only thing would be that if I knew dealers or painters, I should try to do something with pictures, for instance by going to England for them, etc.

Such things, of course, which are directly connected with painting, are an exception, but otherwise, as a matter of principle a painter must be only a painter.

And then, don't forget that I am not a born melancholic. The general nickname I have in this neighborhood is "t schildermenneke," [The little painter fellow] and it is not without a certain dose of malice that I go abroad. Now I have also thought of Drenthe, but it is more difficult to carry out. That, however, would be a good thing, in case my painting of rural life might please in Antwerp. Sooner or later when the things from here have some success, I would go on with them and vary them with the same kind of things from Drenthe.

But the fact is that I can do only one thing at the time, that when I am busy painting peasants, I cannot occupy myself with business in town. Now is just the moment to break free for a while, as I have had trouble with my models, and in any case I am going to move.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

In this Studio, just next door to the priest and the sexton, the trouble would never end, that is clear, so I am going to change this. But then it does not make an absolute impression on people, and by renting another room and taking no notice of it for a few months, the intrigue will lose most of its virulence.

Now wouldn't it be best if I could spend the next two months, December and January, in Antwerp?

In Amsterdam I stayed at a People's hostel for 50 cents. I would do the same there, or better still, I should like to make an arrangement with some painter to work in his studio. Another reason is that it is not absolutely improbable that I shall find an opportunity somewhere to paint from the nude. They would not want me at the academy, nor would I want to go there – but – perhaps a sculptor, for instance (there surely must be a few living there), might be sympathetic. Of course one can get as many models as one likes with money; but without it, it is a difficult problem. But there will certainly be some people there who take models for the nude, and with whom one might make an arrangement as to the expenses. I need it for many reasons.

I received your letter while writing this.

If necessary I am willing to go to Doctor Van der Loo; however, you know that doctors do not always tell everything, particularly in doubtful cases. Also you should understand that that slight clouding of her mind I told you about will presumably recur, a thing that many people are afflicted with as they get older. At any rate, I think it a practical idea not to let her be present at the bustle of moving, unless she should insist on it.

For the rest, old fellow, I myself am convinced that Van der Loo has advised Mother everything, absolutely everything, that could be advised, and would not say anything new. I mean he would already have warned us if a danger threatened that might be averted. But if he said nothing it might be a sign that, if there is anything the matter with Mother, he would not be able to do anything about it, and that nothing ought to be done. If he leaves nature to her own devices, he does it because it is the best thing to do. Van der Loo is awfully precise and, Zola-like, cool-headed and equable.

Well, I think I shall speak about it some time or other, either I might go to him, or Mother might meet Van der Loo when he is visiting the village. We shall try to do something. But I think things will have to take their course without our being able to do much. Well, in such cases worrying or being exaggeratedly uneasy is insupportable to the patient, if she is aware of it; I think you will admit this. And with old people it is absolutely impossible to predict anything, because often the heart is no longer normal, for instance because of fatty degeneration, and then they may be gone all at once, or they may go on for another five or ten years. Of course emotions may have a great influence, and that is why there is a much better chance of keeping alive if the mind is no longer so very clear as in the periods of lucidity. And there is something else – with Mother I am quite sure that, at least at times, there is a substratum of deep thoughts (for her inner mental life is rather complicated, and has different floors or layers) which she neither would nor could talk about. In many cases she used to be rather chary of speech, so I for one prefer to say that I don't know everything about her. Because of the very fact that her mind is now quite lucid, letting her do what she wants to do is certainly the easiest way, in the first place for herself, and secondly it is the most justifiable way for us.

Silently understanding that to her it would mean anything but a misfortune if she should not have much longer to live, and departed this life without much suffering, serenity in this matter is reasonable; but serenity too if there should prove to be many years yet of practically mechanical life.

You see that I wanted to fix my going to Antwerp at about the same time as Mother's trip, which will be over by February, between then and their definite moving, I shall either be back in Nuenen or, if I were kept there for some reason or other, I should always be ready to come back at once if necessary.

This letter must go, but in a few days I shall write you again about what I arrange with Wil. I shall propose that she go with Mother to Van der Loo before the trip; to Mother this is an entirely natural thing to do. After Van der Loo has seen her, it will be the moment for either Wil or me to ask him outright whether he can tell anything about her life expectancy. If necessary, according to what you and Wil think, I am willing to go and prepare Van der Loo before Mother's visit, and to tell him what we should very much like to know, and ask him to give her an especially thorough check-up.

Good-by,

Yours, Vincent

Write me soon what you think of my going to Antwerp. I don't suppose there will be any objection.