

Letter 441
Antwerp, c. 19 December 1885

Dear Theo,

Today I have painted another head of a model, whom I could not pay however; but having the opportunity, I profited by it.

I also have the firm promise that I shall paint somebody's portrait, and in return for it, two studies that I can keep.

But I must tell you that I am at the end of my rope, with my last remaining 5 fr. I had to buy two canvases for those two portraits, and the laundry woman has just brought me my clean linen, so that for the moment I have only a few centimes left.

So I must ask you most urgently, for Heaven's sake don't put off writing, and send me much or little, according to what you can spare, but remember that I am literally starving.

If I succeeded in getting about 50 heads, then there is some chance of getting work – that is, I can try to get employment at a photographer's, which I would not like to do permanently but only in time of need. The photographers seem to be quite flourishing here. One also finds painted portraits in their studios, which are obviously painted on a photographed background, which is of course both weak and ineffective to anybody who knows anything about painting.

Now it seems to me that one could get a much better colouring if one worked from studies painted directly from life on the photographs which one wants to have painted. And, after all, this is at least one of the chances one might have to earn something.

But whatever and wherever I may want to start, of course I must have things to show. Because I need all my good spirits, all my vitality, I must confess I am afraid of feeling physically weak.

I showed my view of "Het Steen" to another dealer, who liked its tone and colour, but he was too engrossed in making up his inventory, and besides, he has little room, but he asked me to come back after New Year's. It is just the thing for foreigners who want to have a souvenir of Antwerp, and for that reason I shall make even more city views of that kind.

So yesterday I made a few drawings of a spot with a view of the Cathedral [F 1352, JH 975].

I also made a little one of the Park.

But I prefer painting people's eyes to cathedrals, for there is something in the eyes that is not in the cathedral, however solemn and imposing the latter may be – a human soul, be it that of a poor beggar or of a streetwalker, is more interesting to me.

So I firmly believe that nothing helps so much to make direct progress as working from the model.

Of course it is a great nuisance to have to pay the models – now is the time when all energy is needed, and the pictures will have to be energetic in order to find buyers.

That there is business to be done here, I am sure. There seems to be a lot of beautiful women in this city, and I feel sure that money is to be earned by painting women's portraits or fantasy heads and figures of women.

It is a real delight to me to work with a better kind of brushes, and to have cobalt and carmine, and the right kind of brilliant yellow and vermilion.

The most expensive colours are sometimes the cheapest, especially cobalt – the delicate tones one can get with it cannot be compared with those of any other blue.

And although the quality of the colour is not everything in a picture, it is what gives it life.

As to whether I should like to settle down here for good or not – as the art trade does not seem exactly rose-coloured here, and as there seems to be a certain tendency for each of the painters to be his own art dealer, which I suppose will increase more and more – the most sensible thing would be perhaps to keep a studio here.

If you have any wishes or ideas about it, either in favour of it or against it, I shall be glad if you will tell me so straight out.

But it strikes me at once that, if after a longer or shorter time you might decide to set up yourself (independent of the Goupils), Antwerp might be the place where, given the dismal show windows at present, business might be done by showing good things, which the other firms do not understand.

And then it is so convenient to cross over to England from here.

Why are all pictures always in frames in the art-dealing business? It would be so much better for business if they were light and easy to handle and dispatch.

Trade is so old-fashioned and...three times mouldy.

There must be renovation, for the old systems no longer work.

The prices, the public, everything needs renovation, and the future is to work cheaply for the people, because the ordinary art lovers seem to get more and more tight-fisted. Starting with capital so very often leads only to losing everything at first, including one's courage and energy; whereas beginning with practically nothing rather makes one's character firmer and more decided. Goodbye, but try to write me by return mail, for I am feeling rather faint, as I have somewhat overstrained myself with one thing and another, and I need my strength.

Goodbye,
Ever yours, Vincent