

Letter 175
The Hague, 13 February 1882

Dear Theo,

This morning when I wrote you I was still in doubt about something that worried me exceedingly, but about which I am now reassured for a time. I must tell you some bad news, which is that Mauve is far from well – of course the usual thing.

But also some good news – I have the assurance that it is only due to his illness that he has treated me so very unkindly of late, and that it was not because he thought my work was going wrong.

I have already told you in a previous letter that I had a visit from Weissenbruch. At present Weissenbruch is the only one allowed to see Mauve, and I thought I would go and have a talk with him. So today I went to his studio, the attic which you know too. As soon as he saw me, he began to laugh and said, “I am sure you have come to talk about Mauve”; he knew at once why I came, and I did not have to explain.

Then he told me that the reason for his visiting me was really that Mauve, who was doubtful about me, had sent Weissenbruch to get his opinion about my work.

And Weissenbruch then told Mauve, He draws confoundedly well, I could work from his studies myself.

And he added, “They call me ‘the merciless sword,’ and I am; I would not have said that to Mauve if I had found no good in your studies.”

Now as long as Mauve is ill or too busy with his large picture, I may go to Weissenbruch if I want to find out anything, and Weissenbruch told me that I need not worry about the change in Mauve’s attitude toward me.

Then I asked Weissenbruch what he thought of my pen drawings. “These are the best,” he said.

I told him that Tersteeg had scolded me about them. “Pay no attention to it,” he said. “When Mauve said you were a born painter, Tersteeg said No, and I will take your part too, now that I have seen your work.” I do not care so much about that “taking my part,” but I must say that sometimes I cannot bear Tersteeg’s saying to me over and over again, “You must begin to think about earning your own living.” I think it is such a dreadful expression, and then it is all I can do to keep calm. I work as hard as I can and do not spare myself, so I deserve my bread, and they ought not to reproach me with not having been able to sell anything up to now.

I tell you these details because I do not understand why you have neither written nor sent me anything this month.

Is it possible that you have heard something from Tersteeg that has influenced you?

I can assure you once more that I work hard to make progress on things which would be easy to sell, that is, watercolours, but I cannot succeed immediately. If I succeed in making them by and by, it would still be rapid progress, considering the short time I have been working. But I cannot succeed right away. As soon as Mauve is better and comes to see me again or I go to see him, he will give me some useful hints on the studies I am making meanwhile. Lately Mauve has done very little for me, and once he himself said, I am not always in a mood to show you things; sometimes I am too tired, and then you will damn well have to wait for the right moment.

I think it a great privilege to visit such clever people as Weissenbruch occasionally, especially when they take the trouble, as Weissenbruch did this morning, for instance, to show me a drawing they are working on but which is not yet completed, and explain how they are going to finish it. That is just what I want.

Whenever you have an opportunity to see anyone paint or draw, watch carefully, for I think many an art dealer would judge many pictures differently if he knew how they were made. It is true one can understand it somehow by instinct, but this much I know – I got a clearer insight into many things by having seen artists at work and by trying some things myself.

I should like to have some more of that Ingres paper someday; perhaps the weather will soon be good enough to work outdoors, and then it will be of great use to me. I am getting more sparing with my studies and should like to get back those you have.

Adieu, dear fellow, a handshake in thought; poor Mauve, he will not get better until his large picture is finished, and after that he will be exhausted.

Ever yours, Vincent