

The Hague, c. 14 – 18 March 1882

My dear Theo,

On second thoughts, it occurred to me that you must have found it odd to see a reference in my last letter to something I have never mentioned before, and a reference made, moreover, in a rather peremptory tone, something like: Theo, throw the whole lot overboard and become a painter, there is a famous paysagiste [landscape painter] inside you.

These words might well have escaped me at the moment when my passions were aroused. But that doesn't alter the fact that it happens like that with other things that I allow to slip out in spite of myself sometimes, once I've got in a passion or have been aroused in some way or other. In other words, what I say at such times is what I've been bottling up for a long time and then blurt out, sometimes quite bluntly. But although in a calmer mood I would put it better, or keep it to myself, the fact is that, especially in a calm mood, I am most decidedly of that particular opinion.

Now it is out, and out it must stay, I have said it at last in spite of myself – inadvertently – in short, bluntly – but now you know my innermost thoughts. And when I wrote, “remain something better than H. G. T.”, and when I intimated that I do not hold art dealers in general in high esteem – it's true, I could well have kept those things to myself, but now that my silence is broken and I have spoken – well then, that is how I will speak.

As to H. G. T., I knew His Honour during a curious period of his life, when he had just ‘worked his way up’ as they say, and, moreover, was newly married. At the time he made a strong impression on me – he was a practical man, tremendously able and good-humoured, energetic in small and large things, in addition he radiated poetry, so to speak, but poetry of the genuine, unsentimental sort. I felt so much respect for him at the time that I always kept my distance and looked upon him as a being of a higher order.

Since – since – since then – I have come – more and more – to have my doubts – but I lacked the courage to take up an analytical scalpel to dissect him more closely. Now, however, having reached the point at which I must be very much on the qui vive and not allow my career to be ruined for no matter whom, the above-mentioned scalpel has not spared him. And all the time I sat in his small office or talked to him in the gallery with a perfectly natural expression on my face and asked him some very ordinary questions, I was taking his measure as cold-bloodedly as I knew how.

I used to think he was the sort of person who put on the air of a man of means, of an homme du monde, I don't know how to put it in one word, I'm sure you'll take my meaning, and who hid a great deal of feeling and a warm heart behind that iron mask. But I found his armour enormously thick, so thick that I cannot make up my mind for sure whether the man is made of solid metal, be it steel or silver, or whether deep, deep down inside the iron there is one small corner in which a human heart still beats. If there is no heart in him, then my affection for him has truly run its course, making way for a “Qu'est ce que tu me fais – toi? Tu m'agaces.” [What are you doing to me? You are getting on my nerves.] So that in six months or a year he will either leave me utterly cold, or, or I will perhaps have found a way of getting on better with His Hon. Meanwhile – he is still His Hon. to me. Those are not the terms in which one thinks of somebody for whom one feels warm sympathy. “His Hon.” expresses something trite. Enough, suffit [that will do].

Theo, I am definitely not a landscape painter, when I do landscapes there will always be something of the figure in them. However, it seems to me a very good thing that there are also people who are essentially ‘paysagistes’. And – the thought that you might be just such a person – sans le savoir [without knowing it] – greatly preoccupies me. I am just as preoccupied with the antithesis, namely whether you, Theo, are really cut out to be a dealer.

If I had to prove the thesis, I might perhaps try to do so by indirect reduction. Quoi qu'il en soit [however that may be], do think it over. I don't need to tell you to consider carefully before you begin to paint, but perhaps you won't take it amiss if I add: Theo, until now you were free to do as you please but should you ever come to an arrangement with Messrs. G. & C^{ie} and promise to stay on in their business for the rest of your life, then you would be a free man no longer. And – it seems quite possible to me that there may come a moment in life when one regrets having committed oneself in that way.

You will no doubt tell me, the moment may well arrive when one regrets having become a painter. And what could I then reply on my own behalf? They who have such regrets are those who neglect solid study in the beginning and who race hurry-scurry to be top of the heap. Well, the men of the day are men of just one day, but whoever has enough faith and love to take pleasure in precisely what others find dull, namely the study of anatomy, perspective and proportion, will stay the course and mature slowly but surely.

When, pressed for money, I forgot myself for a moment and thought, I'll try to produce something with a particular appeal, the result was dreadful, I couldn't do it. And Mauve rightly became angry with me and said, that's not how to do it, tear that stuff up. A first I found that hard to do, but later I did cut them up. Then when I began to draw more seriously, Tersteeg took exception and became angry – and overlooked the good things in my drawings and asked straight out for ones that were 'saleable'.

Well, you can see immediately from this that there is a difference between Mauve and Tersteeg. Mauve appears more and more serious the more one thinks about him, but is Tersteeg going to be able to pass this test? I hope so, but doubt if he will stand up to it as well as M. And how about those who are serious at heart, although they often have something disagreeable about them? One gets to like them and to feel at home with them – one quickly gets bored with those who are not serious enough.

You mustn't imagine that I have overlooked the change in your financial circumstances which a change of career would entail. But what makes me mention this matter to you at all is that although I find myself in financial difficulties, I nevertheless have the feeling that there is nothing more solid than a 'handicraft' in the literal sense of working with one's hands. If you became a painter, one of the things that would surprise you is that painting and everything connected with it is quite hard work in physical terms. Leaving aside the mental exertion, the hard thought, it demands considerable physical effort, and that day after day.

Well, I shall say no more about it now, except to add just this: when you come to Holland, I should like to speak to you alone, not just for half an hour but for, say, a whole morning, about some practical things which I have picked up – either from my own experience or from Mauve and others – just as if I had to explain them to you, teach them to you. I hope you won't have any objection – at worst you will be bored for a morning, but perhaps you won't be bored. I only hope that in the meantime you won't be thinking about the "selling" of pictures, but about the "how to do it." And that you won't consider it being tempted by Satan. Enfin, nous verrons. [Well, we shall see.]

If you could send me some money towards the end of this month, it would be very welcome. By then I also hope to have finished the 12 for C. M.! If he pays for them straight away, that will put 30 guilders in my pocket. If something from you were added to that, I would risk buying a few shirts and drawers which I need very, very badly, seeing that the shirts, etc., I own are really getting into a deplorable state and I have only a very few of them.

Since I wrote to you I have been working with the same models the whole time and I must say I'm glad to have found them. I am busy drawing heads, and I urgently need to draw hands and feet as well (but it can't be done all at once). And when summer comes and the cold is no longer a handicap, I must needs in one way or another do some studies of the nude. Not exactly academic poses. But I would, for example, be tremendously pleased to have a nude model for a digger or a seamstress. From the front, from the back, from the side. To learn to see and sense the shape properly through the clothes and to have an idea of the movement. I estimate that about 12 studies, 6 men, 6 women, would throw a lot of light on the matter. Each study takes a day's work. However, it is difficult to find models for this purpose, and if I can I shall avoid having a nude model hanging about in the studio in case I frighten the other models away.

The fear "that they will have to strip naked" is usually the first scruple one has to overcome when approaching people about posing. Or at least that has been my experience here already more than once. Actually it even happened with a very old man, who would probably have been very Ribera-like as a nude model. But après tout, I am not looking for a Ribera, still less a Salvator Rosa, I don't see things that way. I am not even enthusiastic about Decamps. I am ill at ease in front of their pictures and cannot visualize them without the feeling that I am missing something and losing sight of something. I'd rather have Goya or Gavarni, although both of them say "Nada". As the last word? 'Nada,' it seems to me, means precisely the same as Solomon's saying 'Vanité des vanités, tout est vanité' [vanity of vanities, all is vanity], but that is something on which I cannot lay down my head without having nightmares. So there you are.

However, it's too late to philosophize, seeing that I must be up at half-past five tomorrow morning, because the carpenter is coming round to do a job for me before he goes off to work. So goodnight and believe me, I mean it very seriously when I talk about your becoming a painter. Goodbye,
Ever yours, Vincent

I've done two more small drawings for C. M., a bit of the Scheveningen road [F 920, JH 113] and workers in the sand dunes [F 922, JH 114].

Now that I've paid the money back to Tersteeg, I'm afraid that when the landlord comes round at the end of March I shan't have much left for him. So if you can, I do hope you will send me what you can towards the end of March.

Theo, on Sunday I went round to De Bock's again – I don't know why, but every time I go and see him I get the same feeling: the fellow's too weak, he'll never make good – unless he changes, unless – unless – I see something weary, something blasé, something insincere in him that oppresses me, there is something consumptive about the atmosphere in his house.

And yet – it doesn't hit you in the eye – and there are probably few among his acquaintances who think of him as I do.

Well, anyway, he does do things that are nice sometimes, or at least not without charm and grace, but, ça suffit-il? [Is that enough?] So much is demanded nowadays that painting seems like a campaign, a military campaign, a battle or a war.