

Letter 184
The Hague, early April, 1882

Dear Theo,

I have sat down to write you several times, but I couldn't bring myself to finish the letter. The reason was that I wanted to write about several things which had made me think the necessity of your becoming a painter so very evident. But what I had written wasn't quite right, and I couldn't find words strong enough. Your objections are true, but on the other hand there are many other things which counterbalance them. By thirty you would have made such progress that people would have to acknowledge you as a painter and value your work. And at thirty you will still be young.

What you have learned at Goupil's, your knowledge of many things, will simply enable you to overtake many who "started early." For those early beginners often have a sterile period, remaining on the same level for years; someone who begins energetically later on need not go through such a period.

Painting is a profession in which one can earn a living just as well as a blacksmith or a physician. At all events an artist is the exact opposite of a man who lives on his income, and I repeat, if one wants to make a comparison, there is more similarity between an artist and either a blacksmith or a physician.

I remember quite well, now that you write about it, that at the time when you spoke of my becoming a painter, I thought it very impractical and would not hear of it. What made me stop doubting was reading a clear book on perspective, Cassange's Guide to the ABC of Drawing; and a week later I drew the interior of a kitchen with stove, chair, table and window – in their places and on their legs – whereas before it had seemed to me that getting depth and the right perspective into a drawing was witchcraft or pure chance. If only you drew one thing right, you would feel an irresistible longing to draw a thousand other things. But one sheep has to cross the bridge to get the others to follow.

If a painter seized you by the arm and said, Look, Theo, you must draw that field like this: the lines of the furrows go this way, for such and such reasons and no other; they are brought into perspective this way. And that pollard willow being so tall, the other one higher up is so small, and you can measure the difference in size in this way. Look, when you hammer that onto the paper, those lines will be correct, and you have a solid foundation under your feet on which to work.

Such a conversation, provided he can put his theory into practice, would be much more effective in my case than many talks on either abstract or financial matters. I will not continue that train of thought much longer, but you are just on the verge of someday getting an insight into this practice, and if you happen to draw something correctly – in other words, if you learn to see the perspective of things – then you will be through with art dealing and will feel, like Correggio, I too am a painter. At the same time you will see that you are in your element, and then – then you will be younger and more hopeful than ever before; then your second youth begins: it is better than the first, for, thank God, the second one does not pass away – does not pass away like the first. For my first youth is gone, and yours will soon be gone too.

As to Cor's education or Mother's support, the money for these two things will not be lacking, even if you become a painter. And as to yourself, your food, drink, sleep, your studio, your model...they are not far off; if the thought of painting should be aroused in you, you would see that it can be done.

But so that you won't suspect me of overlooking the financial end, I should like to say – though with all respect for your present position as a dealer – unless one has a real handicraft and can make something with one's own hands, I doubt the soundness of the position. For instance, I think Jaap Maris's social position sounder and more independent than Tersteeg's. I have great respect for thought and intelligence; where these are wanting, one will be ruined in spite of one's handicraft because one cannot make a firm stand and defend one's own work, as is proved by Thijs Maris. But people who possess thought and intelligence, and of course I count you among them and should also like to count myself among them, are the best fitted for handicraft.

To sum up. If you take up painting, you will succeed, and at about your thirtieth year you will have a good position as a painter – anyway, no worse than the one you have now. If you begin to paint, you will certainly not be a mediocrity in the bad sense of the word.

Now, I see a chance of making my money do if you can arrange to send another 100 fr. about the middle of this month; it will last me until the beginning of May. I have not been able to pay Tersteeg out of the 100 fr. you just sent me: I have so many expenses, and, for instance, I could no longer put off paying the rent or buying a pair of trousers. If you send again about the middle of April, I can return it to him then (and will do so if you insist). But I would rather make a drawing for it sometime. I must not do it this way – I must not pay cash to dealers. My debt to you is different, we don't know how things will go. If you remain an art

dealer, you will get drawings and pictures for it in time; if you become a painter, I will pay you back the money with interest into the bargain.

As to the money for Tersteeg, when I first arrived here, he and Mauve were so kind and said I need not worry; but in less than a month they suddenly changed and spoke quite differently, thinking perhaps that I should give up. At first it hurt me, and then later it left me rather cold, and I thought, I will try not to mind. Breitner is in the hospital; I visit him now and then to bring him either books or drawing materials. C. M. has paid me and given me a new order, but a very difficult one – six special detailed views of the town. However, I will try to make them, for if I understand it correctly, I shall get as much for these twelve as for the first twelve. And later perhaps he will still want some sketches of Amsterdam.

Blommers came to see me about the exhibition of wood engravings. He looked at them for three hours and was angry at the committee of Pulchri for saying something like, “Those things one sees now and then in the South Holland café.” If that’s all they know about wood engravings, they are indeed competent to judge them! However, Pulchri had objections. But Blommers wants to have his way, and has asked me to keep them ready for next Saturday. It is very curious to hear some painters talk about what they call “illustrators,” about Gavarni, for instance, or Herkomer. Not knowing anything about the matter is what makes up part of their so-called general information. Much good may it do them. With a handshake
Yours sincerely, Vincent

My thanks for the package of splendid Ingres paper and for the studies. Perhaps someday when people begin to say that I can draw a little but not paint, I shall suddenly come out with a picture at a moment when they least expect it. But I certainly won’t as long as it looks as though I were obliged to, and as though I must not do something else.

There are two ways of thinking about painting, how not to do it and how to do it: how to do it – with much drawing and little colour; how not to do it – with much colour and little drawing.