

Letter 197
The Hague, 12 or 13 May 1882

Dear Theo,

Today I sent you some drawings and sketches; what I want to show you first of all is that what I told you about does not keep me from my work; on the contrary, I am literally absorbed in my work and enjoy it, and have good courage.

Now I hope that you will not be angry at my saying so, but I am rather anxious because you have not yet answered. I do not believe that you will disapprove of my being with Christine. I do not believe that you would completely desert me for such a reason, or for appearances' sake or I do not know what else. But after what happened with Mauve and Tersteeg, can you wonder that I sometimes think with a certain sadness, Perhaps he will do the same?

At least I am eagerly waiting for a letter from you, but I know that undoubtedly you are very busy and that it is not so very long since you wrote. But perhaps sooner or later you will experience it yourself when you are with a woman who is with child – a day seems like a week, and a week, longer than a month. And that is why I write you so often these days, as long as I have no answer.

I wrote to you about intending to take the house next door, it being more suitable than this one, which seems to get blown apart so easily, etc. but surely you know, don't you, that I don't ask imperatively for anything whatever. I only hope that you will remain to me what you were; I do not think I lowered or dishonoured myself by what I did, though perhaps some will think so. I feel that my work lies in the heart of the people, that I must keep close to the ground, that I must grasp life in its depths, and make progress through many cares and troubles.

I can't think of any other way. I do not ask to be free from trouble or care, I only hope the latter will not become unbearable, and this need not be the case as long as I can work and keep the sympathy of people like you. In life it is the same as in drawing – one must sometimes act quickly and decisively, attack a thing with energy, trace the outlines as quickly as lightning.

This is not time for hesitation or doubt; the hand must not tremble, nor must the eye wander, but remain fixed on what is before one. And one must be so absorbed in it that in a short time something has been brought onto the paper or the canvas which was not there before, in such a way that later one hardly knows how it was hammered off. The period of discussing and thinking must precede the decisive action. There is little room for reflection or argument in the action itself.

To act quickly is the function of a man, and one has to go through much before one is able to do it. The pilot sometimes succeeds in using a storm to make headway, instead of being wrecked by it.

What I wanted to say to you again is this: I have no great plans for the future; if momentarily I feel rising within me the desire for a life without care, for prosperity, each time I go fondly back to the trouble and the cares, to a life full of hardship, and think, It is better this way; I learn more from it, it does not degrade me, this is not the road on which one perishes. I am absorbed in my work and I have confidence enough so that with the help of such as you, Mauve, Tersteeg – though we disagreed last winter – I will succeed in earning enough to keep myself, not in luxury, but as one who eats his bread in the sweat of his brow. Christine is not a hindrance or a trouble to me, but a help. If she were alone, perhaps she would succumb; a woman must not be alone in a society and during a time like the one in which we live, which does not spare the weak but treads them underfoot, and crushes a weak woman under its wheels when she has fallen down.

Therefore, because I see so many weak ones trodden down, I greatly doubt the sincerity of much of what is called progress and civilization. I do believe in civilization, even in a time like this, but only in the kind that is founded on real humanity. I think whatever destroys human life is barbarous, and I do not respect it.

Well, enough of this. If it might be that I could rent the house next door and could have regular weekly wages, that would be delightful. If it cannot be, I will not lose courage and will wait awhile longer. But if it can be, I should be so happy, and it would save much of my strength for work, which is otherwise absorbed by cares.

You will see there are all kinds of drawings in the portfolio. Keep whatever you think best of what I send, then you can show them whenever there is a chance. I should like to get the rest back some time or other. If I thought you would come soon, I would of course keep these things until you came. But now it is perhaps as well for you to see the things together, and I hope that from it you will see that I do not live idly on your money. Considering it superficially, you would perhaps view the affair with Christine quite differently from what it really is. But when you have read this letter and the previous one, it will be easier for you to understand.

I wish those who mean well by me would understand that my actions stem from a deep feeling and need for love, that recklessness and pride and indifference are not the springs which move the machine, and this step is proof of my taking root in a lowly station on the road of life. I do not think I should do well to aim for a higher station or to try to change my character. I must have much more experience, I must learn still more, before I shall be ripe, but that is a question of time and perseverance.

Adieu, write soon. If you can send me something, it will certainly not be unwelcome. Believe me, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

If I thought my leaving The Hague would please anyone, I would do it, and go anywhere rather than be in anybody's way.

But I do no harm to anybody, and after what you wrote me, I suppose I must not take what Tersteeg said too seriously.

The house which I wrote you about is for rent now, and I am afraid someone else will take it if I don't do it soon. That is another reason why I am looking for your letter. For you will understand that after what happened with Mauve and Tersteeg, and after what I told you about Christine, I must ask you frankly: Theo, will these things cause a change or separation between you and me? I would be so happy if they don't, and will be twice as glad of your help and sympathy as before; if it does, it is better for me to know the worst than to be kept in suspense.

I like to look things in the face, whether adversity or prosperity. I have your answer on the problem of Mauve and Tersteeg, not on the other one. That is something quite apart – there is a barrier between artistic and personal matters – but it is right to settle how we look at those things beforehand.

And therefore I say to you:

Theo, I intend to marry this woman, to whom I am attached and who is attached to me. If unfortunately this should bring about a change in your feeling toward me, I hope you will not withdraw your help without giving me warning some time in advance, and that you will always tell me frankly and openly what you think. Of course, I hope that your help and sympathy will in no way be withdrawn, but that we shall continue to join hands like brothers, notwithstanding things which the "world" opposes.

So, brother, if you have not already written when you receive this letter, answer me by return post, for after the things I wrote you, I must be reassured or must know the worst. Adieu, I hope the sky will remain clear between you and me.