

Dear Theo,

Your letter and its contents, literary as well as financial, were very welcome, and I thank you warmly for it. In the first place, I was especially glad to hear that perhaps it will not be so very long before you come to Holland again. I should like very much to know as soon as it is possible for you to decide whether it will be before or after New Year's. Am very glad that you sent off the studies. These days, when I am making many new ones, I feel so strongly that I must try to keep my studies after the model together. How delightful it would be if I could consult with you about the work more, but we are too far away from each other.

Recently I saw, and I also have it in my collection, a large wood engraving after a picture by Roll, "Une Grève de Charbonniers" [Miners' Strike]. Perhaps you know that painter, and if so, what have you seen of his work? This one represents the entrance to a mine, before which there are groups of men and women and children who have evidently stormed the building. They are standing or sitting around an overturned cart, and are kept in order by mounted police. One fellow is about to throw a stone, but a woman is trying to seize his arm. The characters are excellent, and it is drawn roughly and vigorously; I am certainly sure it is painted quite in accordance with the nature of the subject. It is not like Knaus or Vautier, but done with more passion, as it were – hardly any details, everything massed and simplified – but there is much style in it. There is such expression and atmosphere and feeling, and the movements of the figures – the different actions – are masterfully expressed. I was greatly impressed by it, so was Rappard, to whom I also sent one. It was in L'Illustration, but in an old number.

By chance I have another one by an English draftsman, Emslie, whose subject is men going down into a mine to assist, if possible, the injured, while women stand waiting. One seldom comes across such subjects.

As to the one by Roll, I myself was once present at such a scene, complete in every detail, and I think the beauty of his picture is that it expresses such a situation so accurately, though one finds but very few of the details in it. I thought of a saying by Corot, "Il y a des tableaux où il n'y a rien et pourant tout y est." [There are pictures in which there is nothing and yet everything is in them.] There is something grand and classic in the whole, in the composition and in the lines, in a beautiful historical painting; and that is a quality which is as rare nowadays it always has been and always will be. It reminds me a little of Géricault, namely, "Le Radeau de la Méduse" [The Raft of The Medusa], and at the same time of Numkaczy, for instance.

This week I have drawn a few heads and also some children's figures and a few old men from the almshouse.

I agree with you in what you say about those small drawings, namely that the one of the little bench is done in more of an old-fashioned manner. But – I did it more or less on purpose, and will perhaps do it again sometime. However greatly I may admire many pictures and drawings that are made especially with a view to the delicate grey harmonious colour, and the local tone, yet I believe that many artists, who aimed less at this, and are called old-fashioned now, will always remain green and fresh because their manner had, and will keep, its own raison d'être. To tell you the truth, I couldn't spare either the old- or the new-fashioned manner. Too many beautiful things have been done too unusually well for me to prefer one to the other systematically. And the changes which the moderns have made in art are not always for the better; not everything means progress – neither in the works nor in the artists themselves – and often it seems to me that many lose sight of the origin and the goal, or in other words, they do not stick to the point.

Your description of that night effect again struck me as very beautiful. It looks very different here today, but beautiful in its own way, for instance, the grounds near the Rhine railway station: in the foreground, the cinder path with the poplars, which are beginning to lose their leaves; then the ditch full of duckweed, with a high bank covered with faded grass and rushes; then the grey or brown-gray soil of spaded potato fields, or plots planted with greenish purple-red cabbage, here and there the very fresh green of newly sprouted autumn weeds above which rise bean stalks with faded stems and the reddish or green or black bean pods; behind this stretch of ground, the red-rusted or black rails in yellow sand; here and there stacks of old timber – heaps of coal – discarded railway carriages; higher up to the right, a few roofs and the freight depot – to the left a far-reaching view of the damp green meadows, shut off far away at the horizon by a greyish streak, in which one can still distinguish trees, red roofs and black factory chimneys. Above it, a somewhat yellowish yet grey sky, very chilly and wintry, hanging low; there are occasional bursts of rain, and many hungry crows are flying around. Still, a great deal of light falls on everything; It shows even more when a few little figures in blue or white smocks move over the ground, so that shoulders and heads catch the light.

I think, however, that in Paris everything probably looks much cleaner and less chilly. For the chilliness even penetrates the house, and when one lights a pipe, it seems damp from the drizzling rain. But it is very beautiful.

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But it's on days like this that one would like to go and see some friend or would like a friend to come to the house; and it's on days like this that one has an empty feeling when one can go nowhere and nobody comes. But it's then that I feel how much the work means to me, how it gives tone to life, apart from approval or disapproval; and on days which would otherwise make one melancholy, one is glad to have a will.

I had a model for a few hours today, a boy with a spade, hod-carrier by trade, a very intriguing type – flat nose, thick lips and very coarse, straight hair – yet whenever he does something, there is grace in the figure, at least style and - character [F 986, JH 231]. I think I shall have some good models this winter; the owner of the yard has promised to send me the ones who come to ask for work, which often happens in the slack season. I am always glad to give them a few sixpences for an afternoon or morning, for that is just what I want. I see no other way than to work from the model. Of course one must not extinguish one's power of imagination, but the imagination is made sharper and more correct by continually studying nature and wrestling with it. Next Sunday I hope to have the same boy again. Then I should like to draw him as if he were towing one of the boats filled with stones, which one often sees in the canal here.

Working out-of-doors is over now – I mean, sitting quietly, for it is getting too chilly – so we shall have to take up our winter quarters.

I look forward to the winter with pleasure; it is a delightful season, when one can work regularly. I have some hope I shall get on well. I need not tell you that I sincerely hope you will get back the money in question. As you know, I carried painting and watercolours further than I originally intended, and now I have to pay for it by being hard up. But we shall get over that, and it must not be a reason for slacking off. I now vary my work by drawing a great deal from the model, though that is also rather expensive, but it fills my portfolios in proportion to its emptying my purse. If you do not have the whole sum by the twentieth of the month, send me part of it; but I would rather receive it a day sooner than later, as I have to pay the week's rent on that day.

The house continues to please me, except that one wall is very damp. I can work here with a model much better than at the other studio. I can even work with several people at the same time, for instance, two children under an umbrella, two women standing talking, a man and woman arm-in-arm, etc.

But how short a spring and summer we have really had. Sometimes it seems to me as if there had been nothing between last autumn and this one, but perhaps it is because of my illness lying between. I feel quite normal now, except when I am very tired; then I sometimes have a day or half a day when I feel indescribably weak and faint, much more so now than before. However, I do not pay attention to it any more, for I'm getting sick of it, and I can't afford to be ill, as I have too much work to do. At such times taking a long walk to Scheveningen or somewhere often helps me.

Well, be sure to write by the twentieth, I have had to buy some Whatman paper and brushes. You cannot believe how many things one sometimes needs. Well, it's the same with every painter.

A handshake in thought, and believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent