

Letter 249
The Hague, 1 December 1882

Dear Theo,

A few days ago I received a letter from Rappard, with whom I have been corresponding about the experiments in lithography, and who is also making some experiments himself.

I had incidentally written him, "I have had another obstacle, a letter with money which was especially intended for the experiments got lost."

In answer to this, he wrote: "Don't let this trouble you, and count on me if you cannot continue or if you need something." I had not written it to him because I expected him to say such a thing, but because I wanted him, for his part, to make a few more experiments. Still, it pleased me, because such proofs of sympathy are rare. I answered him, For the moment there is no need of it, but if it really became a question of my not being able to continue, I would accept your aid. And I told him how much I appreciated it. You see now that this is one of the cases which I wrote you about in my last letter.

Of course the drawing, the stone, the printing, the paper, cause expenses, but, relatively speaking, they are small. Sheets such as the last one I sent you, for instance, as well as a new one I finished last night and which is ready, would, I think, be perfectly suitable for a popular publication, which is so very, very necessary, here in Holland even more than anywhere else.

Now, an enterprise such as the drawing and printing of a series of, for instance, thirty sheets of workmen types – a sower, a digger, a woodcutter, a ploughman, a washerwoman, then also a child's cradle or a man from the almshouse – well, the whole immeasurable field lies open, there are plenty of beautiful subjects – can one undertake it or not? The question goes even deeper: it is a duty, and is it right or is it wrong? That's the question.

If I were a man of means, I shouldn't hesitate to decide, I should say, "En avant et plus vite que ça. [Quick march, and hurry up.]

But here it is different – may one, must one, can one involve and carry along others whom one needs, without whom one cannot accomplish it, in an enterprise doubtful of success? I wouldn't spare myself. By helping me, you have shown that you do not spare yourself either. But others think it both wrong and foolish of you to have anything to do with me, and they think my own actions even more foolish; and many who at first were full of good will changed their opinion, and their courage and enthusiasm were as short-lived as a straw-fire.

In my opinion they are indeed quite wrong, for neither you nor I act foolishly in this matter. The whole thing started a short time ago with a word from you, "I met Buhot, who knows a certain way of lithographing which I will tell you more about later; you ought to make some experiments with the paper he is going to send you." This matter, with its relatively insignificant beginning at first, has in a short time assumed more important proportions to me.

I see that with persistence and perseverance it might become something not at all unnecessary, but definitely good and useful.

It has always been said that in Holland we cannot make prints for the people – I have never been able to believe it, I see now that it can be done

The Society for General Welfare has bolstered up Elsevier in Rotterdam with thousands of guilders for the publication of The Swallow. Did The Swallow become a good thing? No, though it had a few beautiful sheets, it was too uninteresting, not serious, not powerful, not strong enough; an imitation of what the English do, not original enough.

There are two systems: How not to do it and How to do it. How not to do it was, I'm afraid, Elsevier's underlying motive, otherwise he would have done it, even if he had had to pay for it himself. How-not-to-do-it argues thus: The Society gave me so and so much; I get so and so much from the sale; I must have so and so much of this for my own pocket. I must follow my colleagues' custom, otherwise they will call me a mauvais coucheur or a spoil-sport, etc.

So, instead of saying what was written under a picture by Millais,¹ "It might be done, and if so, we should do it," Elsevier and thousands like him say it can't be done, or they do it sloppily and without enough energy. I do not know the publishers of The Swallow well enough to be able to say exactly whose fault it is; however, I know their magazine well enough to take it upon myself to say, "You have not made it what it might have been, it should and might have been better."

And in addition to this I say, whatever the case may be now, at all times there have been clever, true, brave, honest Dutchmen – even during times when everything was generally slack and enervated and wrong, the

fire was found burning here and there in some hidden corner. How much more so during those periods when the Dutch people were ranked among the first and best.

So what is needed is courage and self-sacrifice and risking something, not for gain, but because it is useful and good; one must retain one's trust in one's fellow creatures and fellow countrymen in general.

Before I go further, however, I want to state this: I personally will have nothing to do with this business of prints for the people, except for making them if such a thing is undertaken. It must be a public service, not a publishing venture. However, as it is necessary to come into some contact with the "book trade," if only about the printing or such, for once I speak to you about it, not to ask, "Do you think it would be a success?" from their point of view, but only to discuss, how to do it.

I should think the following would be the best way:

As it is useful and necessary that Dutch drawings be made, printed and distributed which are destined for workmen's houses and for farms, in a word, for every working man, a number of persons should unite in order to use their full strength toward this end.

This combination must try to operate as practically and well as possible, and should not disperse before the work is finished.

The price of the prints must not be more than ten, at the most fifteen cents.

The publication should start when a series of thirty sheets has been made and printed and when the expenses for stones, wages and paper have been paid

Those thirty sheets would be published together, but could be bought separately; they would form a whole in a linen cover with a short text, not referring to the drawings – which speak for themselves – but explaining in a few concise, vigorous words how and why they are made, etc.

The reason for this combination is the following. If the draughtsmen undertook it alone, they would be saddled with everything, the work as well as the expenses, and the undertaking would be a failure before it was half finished. Therefore the burden must be equally divided, so that everyone has his share to carry and the thing can be brought off.

The profits from the sale would serve first to pay back the money to those who furnished it, and second, to pay each draughtsman an equal amount to be fixed later.

Once these things have been settled, the rest would be used for new publications to continue the work.

Those who begin this work will consider it a duty. Self-interest not being their aim, if the undertaking doesn't pay, and the deposits are lost, neither the money-lenders nor the draughtsmen nor anyone who might have contributed may retrieve what they have put into it; neither may they claim more than they furnished if the undertaking should succeed beyond all expectation.

In the latter case, the surplus would be used for the continuation of the work; in the former case, the original group would keep the stones, from which at all events the first 700 copies would be reserved not for the combination but for the public: if the combination fails, those copies must be spread free of charge. Immediately after the publication of the first series of thirty, a consultation must be held, and it must be decided whether to continue or not; and then, but not before, whoever wants to withdraw from the combination may do so.

This is the idea I've formulated, and now I am telling you how to do it. Will you join?

I haven't spoken to others about it because the idea only became clear to me while at work. But I have already been discussing the question of prints for the people for a long time with Rappard, with the result that both he and I are interested in it; so that, as I already told you, he voluntarily said to me, I will give you a helping hand.

However, Rappard does not view the matter as I wish he would – that is, he doesn't agree with me on questions of technique. As to his proposal to lend me money, I resolved to refuse it for myself personally, because I should only want it if a combination such as the one I wrote you about could not be established: then I should try to carry out the idea myself. Once as far as that, I should have to see what more I could do. For the present I tell him my ideas about the matter, and ask him as I do you: couldn't we take such a thing in hand?

And for myself, I should wish that in this combination everybody should be quite equal, no rules or president or any such thing, only a memorandum regulating the matter, which could only be changed by a unanimous vote once it had been definitely drawn up and signed by the founders; further, the names of those who pledged themselves (but these are not to be made public, the whole thing being an artistic, a private enterprise), listing in what way they are contributing. A pledges himself to make this or that, B gives so much, etc., that's all.

Meanwhile it is December 1. If you have not written already, do so as soon as possible, for I haven't a cent left.

Adieu, believe me with a warm handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

It ought to be a combination which acts, not deliberates, acts quickly and resolutely and without loss of time, considering the whole thing a matter of public service, not a publisher's speculation.

Another thing. One must calculate the expenses beforehand; thirty stones, printing wages, paper, how much would it be? I do not know exactly, but I think that 300 guilders would cover a great deal. The drawings would be contributed by members who could not give any money. I will take them all upon myself if there is nobody else. But I would rather that artists better than myself undertook it.

In any case I think it is desirable to bring the first thirty sheets before the public, and I should like to see this through, even if for the present no other contributors should present themselves to make the drawings. Because artists who could do it better than I may hope to might perhaps be induced to join if they were shown the series. Many people will begin only when they know for sure that the undertaking is serious, and will refuse to have anything to do with it as long as the first steps have not been taken.