

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter of yesterday and the enclosure. Fortunately they have also changed the other note for 23 guilders. So I have been able to pay off the most pressing debts, though not all, for there was so much to pay at once for the colours I had used in the meantime.

I wonder if you intend to do as you did last year, first go home for a few days, and then come straightway here. Promise me that you won't mention misgivings about the future at home, or the small chance of selling my work. At least not immediately; first let's talk things over and see what there is.

Theo, I am enormously eager to paint the potato diggers. I think it would be a good thing. And even if it weren't sold, it would help us make progress, as some people sometimes change their opinion when they have seen something they did not expect.

Well, I made a few studies for it already, but I haven't been able to take enough models; and I feel sure of doing them much better now if I could spend more money on them.

It is exactly the right time now, therefore there can be no question of taking a holiday, for I keep at work as best I can. But your idea of doing as Weissenbruch does is the same as mine. However, I literally cannot carry it out, because going to the polders for two weeks would cost me more than it would to stay home for two weeks, and I don't even know how to struggle through those first two weeks at home.

But for the rest, as I already wrote you, I am also quite absorbed in landscape; I am making landscape studies or marines to give myself a change from the figure and it does me good. But after all the figure calls me back, and so strongly that I try to do whatever circumstances allow; if I could go on as I liked, autumn would not pass without my doing those potato diggers.

I don't know whether the studies I paint from the drawings will be satisfactory, but "quand bien même," I will try to make something of it.

Models are not easy to get at present, because there is a great deal of work in the fields; I wish I could spend more on them, for then it would be possible to overcome that difficulty. Well, as soon as I can possibly afford it – now it is absolutely impossible – I will try to get two fellows for a whole day out in the dunes to pose for the potato diggers. That would be the shortest and safest way.

In the days which must elapse before you come, I hope to paint a few more things. I don't feel entirely well yet, but fortunately the work is so animating that as long as I am busy, I don't feel the weakness so much; but it overtakes me occasionally during the intervals when I am not in front of my easel. Sometimes it's a kind of dizziness, and at times a headache too. Well, it's nothing but weakness. I have repeatedly put off taking more nourishing food because there were other things more pressing, but it has lasted a little too long.

But you will understand that the work is rather important, and I could not drop it now for the very reason that so much of it is already done. When you come, you will see for yourself that it is necessary to go on steadily. You are right in saying that what I wrote you about the finances weighs on your mind, but on the other hand, we cannot now be far from the moment when I shall make something that is saleable, even if it be for a small price.

The work becomes more and more clear to me.

And when I think it over, it is only a question of hurrying or slackening speed, and we shall make up for it later, even for the past; but after all it is a damn thorny, difficult and hard time we are going through now.

If it were possible for me to get enough money to have sufficient colours and models this season, things would clear up more than a little, I think. At all events, it's fine that you will be here soon.

Recently a very heavy care has fallen on my shoulders. Last year I repeatedly tried to paint figure studies, but the way they turned out made me desperate. Now I have begun again, and now there is nothing that keeps me from carrying it out, because drawing comes so much more easily to me than last year. I used to get in a muddle then whenever I lost hold of my sketch while painting; and it took me a long time to make that sketch, so that when I could only have the model for a short time, I made an absolute mess of it.

But now I don't care in the least if the drawing is wiped out; and I am now only doing them directly with the brush, and then the form stands out enough for study to be of use to me. Therefore I say that I see the way before me more clearly. I know that I'll have to make many studies, but they won't cost me more trouble than the drawings, and therefore a great deal of painting must be done this year, and then there will come more light. I am fully convinced of that. So next winter I intend to paint the same kind of studies of heads as those which I sent you a few drawings of. I would even do it at once now if it were not more important to get hold of figures in the field while the season is in full swing.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

Van der Weele is out of town during the holidays – I heard he got the silver medal at Amsterdam for his picture, “The Loaders of Sand.” When he comes back to town, I hope to see a great deal of him, because I believe those potato diggers will intrigue him, and perhaps he would give me some useful hints for the execution of my plan. And Rappard, too, when he comes back.

The first two figures I painted this year were done in the way I tried last year, drawing them, and then filling in the outline. That is what I’d like to call the dry manner. The other way is to make the drawing last of all, and first find the tones without caring too much about the drawing, only trying to put the tones in their right places; and then gradually make the form and the subdivisions of the colours more exactly. That surrounds the figure with more atmosphere and gives it a mellower aspect, while the colours become more delicate for the very reason that one often brushes them over, and mixes one colour with another.

You will see the difference when the first two I made now remain in their present condition.

There is an exhibition of drawings which was held last year in the Gothic Hall, but I think it very meager this year; there is little one has not already seen before, and then generally of a better quality. I counted a few drawings by J. van Berg among the best there. Generally it is such that Schipperus and the like are among the best.

As to the painting of those potato diggers, I just saw Van der Weele’s last picture being painted, and at Rappard’s I saw all the studies for the pictures he made last year. So that I can well imagine beforehand what the difficulties I shall have to overcome for the ultimate picture will be.

If I can afford it, I shall make a few studies for it in the dunes before you come, namely, I shall go with my model to those fields behind Loosduinen early in the morning or in the evening twilight. I think I can make something of it. The composition of the drawing will probably be altered a little, and especially the effect more thoroughly studied, but in general I would keep it as it is. I think the figures must stand out strongly, and all the rest in a violet-grey haze.

In the drawings I think the division of dark and lighter planes too complicated, the figures being partly light and partly dark, and the ground likewise. Either the ground and the figures must be brought more into harmony and form a dark silhouette against a light sky – or sky and ground must form together a misty grey whole, against which the toneful planes of the figures stand out.

Both these effects exist, but that of the drawing is not right the way it is now, for it is too dry, and too meager, and because the figures have too many tones in common with the ground, they do not stand out, and the sky is not part of it. Well, the tone must become quite different, but the composition needs very little alteration.

It gives me a certain restful feeling to think that we shall see each other soon, and can consult together about how to go on with the work. Meanwhile, I will try to make a few new things, and therefore I should very much like to receive the money a few days before the tenth if possible. Then I would try to make those studies in the dunes before you come. I cannot afford it now, as I had so much to pay. You remember what you wrote about the possibility of being disappointed in your share of the profits in business. Well, I hope that catastrophe will not occur, but we must consider it a piece of good luck if it turns out well, and we must not lose a minute of time that it is still before us. I should be very astonished if, in the long run, some people did not alter their opinion about my doing or planning absurd things. I think you will see what I mean by the studies, and you will remember some of our previous talks on art. We must try to keep courage and persevere. A thing that gave me a good deal of courage recently is that though I had not painted for several months, I believe there is progress in the present painted studies compared to last year’s. It is because matters of drawing and proportion which gave me a lot of trouble then have been mastered now, so that when sitting before nature, instead of having to think of two things at once, drawing and painting, I only have to think of the painting. Of course when intensifying the painting, one has to think of both at once, but even that is different.

Well, I shall live these days in the hope of your coming. If I have some luck with my painting, perhaps things will become a little easier.

The two weeks between now and your coming will not be easy to get through, however.

If possible, think of what I asked you, to send something a few days before the tenth, for then I could try to make those figure studies in the dunes before you come. Adieu and once more thanks for your letter, and good luck in everything; believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent