

My dear Theo,

Now that I have been here for a few days and have done a good deal of walking about in various directions, I can tell you more about the area in which I have ended up. I am enclosing a quick little scratch of the first study I painted here, a cottage on the heath. A cottage made entirely of turfs and sticks. I have seen the inside of some 6 or so like this, too, and more studies of them will follow.

I can't convey the way they look outside in the dusk or just after sunset better than by reminding you of a certain painting by Jules Dupré, which I think belongs to Mesdag and shows two cottages, their moss-covered roofs standing out surprisingly deep in tone against a misty, hazy evening sky. That could have been here. Inside, these cottages, dark as a cave, are very beautiful. There are drawings by certain English artists who have worked on the moors in Ireland that portray most realistically what I have found here. Alb. Neuhuys does the same with somewhat more poetry than is apparent at first sight, but he never does anything that is not basically true. I saw some superb figures in the country – striking in their sobriety. A woman's breast, for instance, has that heaving movement which is the exact opposite of volupté [voluptuousness], and sometimes, when the creature is old or ailing, can arouse compassion or respect. And the melancholy which things in general have here is of a healthy kind, as in drawings by Millet. Fortunately, the men here wear short breeches, which show the shape of the leg and give the movements more expression.

To mention one of the many fresh impressions and feelings I have gained on my exploratory outings, let me tell you for instance about the barges drawn by men, women, children, white or black horses, laden with peat, in the middle of the heath, just like the ones you see in Holland, say on the Rijswijk towpath.

The heath is magnificent. I've seen sheepfolds and shepherds more beautiful than those in Brabant. The ovens are more or less as in Th. Rousseau's four communal [communal oven], and stand in the gardens under old apple trees or among the cabbages and the celery. Beehives, too, in many places.

One sees many individuals who have something wrong with them – I think it can't be very healthy here, perhaps because of foul drinking water. I have seen a few girls of perhaps 17 or even younger with something lovely and youthful about them, whose features were striking, but more often than not they look faded [faded] at an early age. Still, that does not detract from the fine and noble bearing of some of the figures, even if they do appear quite faded when seen from close to.

There are 4 or 5 canals in the village, to Meppel, to Dedemsvaart, to Coevorden, to Hollands Veld. Following them, one now and then sees a curious old mill, farmhouse, boatyard, or lock. And always the bustle of peat barges.

To give you an example of the true character in these parts: as I sat painting that cottage, two sheep and a goat came and started to graze on the roof of the house. The goat climbed up on to the ridge and looked down the chimney. The woman, who had heard something on the roof, rushed out and flung her broom at the said goat, which leaped down like a chamois.

The two hamlets on the heath where I went and where this incident occurred are called Stiefzand [Shifting Sand] and Swartschaap [Black sheep]. I have been to various other places too, and you'll have some idea now of how primitive it all is here – Hoogeveen is après tout [after all] a town and yet right next to it one has shepherds, those ovens, those turf huts, etc.

I often think with melancholy of the woman and the children, if only they were provided for; oh, it's the woman's fault, one might say, and it would be true, but I am afraid her misfortunes will prove greater than her guilt. I knew from the beginning that her character was spoiled, but I hoped she would improve; and now that I do not see her any more and ponder some things I saw in her, it seems to me more that she was too far gone for improvement. And this only increases my feeling of pity, and it becomes a melancholy feeling because it is not in my power to redress it. Theo, when I meet on the heath such a poor woman with a child on her arm, or at her breast, my eyes get moist. It reminds me of her, her weakness; her untidiness, too, contributes to making the likeness stronger. I know that she is not good, that I have an absolute right to act as I do, that I could not stay with her back there, that I really could not take her with me, that what I did was even sensible and wise, whatever you like; but, for all that, it cuts right through me when I see such a poor little figure feverish and miserable, and it makes my heart melt inside.

How much sadness there is in life, nevertheless one must not get melancholy, and one must seek distraction in other things, and the right thing is to work, but there are moments when one only finds rest in the conviction: "Misfortune will not spare me either."

Goodbye, write soon and believe me,
Ever yours, Vincent