

Letter 438
Antwerp, 6-7 December 1885

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosed 150 fr. I want to tell you that I am glad I came here. Last week I painted three more studies, one with backs of old houses, seen from my window [F260, JH 970], two in the park. I have exhibited one of those at a dealer's. Further, I have given the ones I brought along from the country to two others on commission. At a fourth, I can exhibit a view of the quay as soon as the weather permits me to make it, because he had a Mols, along with which he could exhibit another one. Then I have got an address from this dealer, where he assured me I should be well received.

Now these dealers are not the biggest ones in Antwerp, but at all their places, among many things I did not like, I saw things which pleased me: for instance one had a picture by Van Goyen and a study by Troyon; at another's I saw a Mols and small Dutch pictures; at another place there was that small picture I mentioned to you, like Raffaelli (it is by Moormans), and a few good watercolours; at another's I found various good marines by young Belgians. I saw very little of figure painting, and so I intend to try and do some. The address that dealer in question gave me happens to be of one of the big dealers, Nicolíé, one of those who do not have show windows, but exhibit in private houses. But I want to come there with figure paintings.

Further, I have discovered useful resources for colours, etc., where I shall be able to get them fairly cheaply. I have also traced Linnig, whom you mentioned to me this summer when I asked you whether you knew people in Antwerp; but he has nothing but a few miserable little old pictures, paints himself somewhat like Vertin, but seemed to me a discouraged man – if he ever had any courage, which I doubt.

All these gentlemen, however, complain bitterly that trade is so slack, but that's not news.

Shortly I hope to be able to go and see that picture you wrote about. But I have been busy going backward and forward, and also tracing those people, and with model-hunting too. The latter is always tremendously difficult, but I have found them elsewhere, and so I shall find them here too. For tomorrow I have an appointment with a splendid old man – will he come?

Today I received the supply of colours which they forwarded to me from Eindhoven, and I paid more than 50 fr. for it.

It is hard, terribly hard, to keep on working when one does not sell, and when one literally has to pay for one's colour out of what would not be too much for eating, drinking and lodgings, however strictly calculated. And then the models besides. But all the same there is a chance, and even a good one, because comparatively speaking, there are only a few painters at work nowadays.

In my opinion they are only half to blame for that (for the other half, they are), for sometimes it is too hard. All the same they are building State museums,¹ and the like, for hundreds of thousands of guilders, but meanwhile the artists very often starve.

But, however this may be, I wanted to look into things myself again, and I find the chance of doing something not smaller, but bigger than I thought. I have seen several photos of pictures by Jan van Beers, some of his things have, after all, much character. But I imagine that someone like Manet, for instance, is much more of a painter than Van Beers, and paints more beautifully and artistically.

If only I were better known here, if only I could get hold of the models I saw! Yesterday I was at the Café-concert Scala, something like the Folies Bergères;

I found it very dull, and of course insipid – but the public amused me. There were splendid women's heads, really extraordinarily fine, among the good middle-class folks on the back seats, and on the whole I think what is said about Antwerp true, that the women are handsome.

I say it again, if only I had my choice of models! The mass of German girls one sees at the café-concerts leave me quite cool, one would say they are all manufactured after one model.

It seems that one sees that same race everywhere, just like Bavarian beer, it seems to be an article exported wholesale.

I find all those German elements, which nowadays nestle themselves wherever one goes, so terribly annoying. It is sure to be just the same in Paris, those Boches intruding everywhere. But it is an unpleasant thing to talk about.

Through seeing some pictures by others, I get all kinds of ideas for the time when

I shall be in the country again next spring; at the same time my conviction that I must go on with all the vigour I possess is also getting stronger.

Antwerp is beautiful in colour, and it is worth while just for the subjects. One evening I saw a popular sailors' ball at the docks; it was most interesting and they behaved quite decently. However, that will not be the case at all those balls.

Here, for instance, nobody was drunk, or drank much.

There were several very handsome girls, the most beautiful of whom was plain-faced. I mean, a figure that struck me as a splendid Jordaens or Velásquez, or Goya – was one in black silk, most likely some barmaid or such, with an ugly and irregular face, but lively and piquant à la Frans Hals.

She danced perfectly in an old-fashioned style. Once she danced with a well-to-do little farmer who carried a big green umbrella under his arm, even when he waltzed very quickly.

Other girls wore ordinary jackets and skirts and red scarves; sailors and cabin -boys, etc., the funniest types of pensioned sea captains, who came to take a look, quite striking. It does one good to see folks actually enjoy themselves.

Well, you see, I don't sit still, but I can't tell you emphatically enough how difficult it is to be court d'argent [short of money].

My best chance is in the figure, because there are relatively very few who do it, and I must seize the opportunity. I must work myself into it here, until I get into touch with good figure painters – Verhaert, for instance, and then I imagine portrait painting is the way to earn the means for greater things.

I feel a power within me to do something, I see that my work holds its own against other work, and that gives me a great craving for work; lately, when I was in the country, I began to doubt, because I noticed that Portier does not seem to care for my things any more.

If I were better off, I should be able to paint more, but as far as producing goes I am partly dependent on my purse.

I also have an idea for a kind of signboard, which I hope to carry out. I mean, for instance, for a fishmonger, still life of fishes, for flowers, for vegetables, for restaurants. I think that if one takes well-composed subjects, 1 meter by $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ meter in size, for instance, such a canvas would cost me 50 fr., not more, even perhaps 30 fr., and if possible I will try to make a few.

One thing is certain, that I want my things to be seen. Later on we may lose courage, but we will try and put it off for a long time.

Write me again if you should have the time. The end of the month will certainly be terrible unless you can help me a little more. A great deal may depend on my being able to stick to my guns. And one must not look too hungry or shabby either. On the contrary, one must try to make things hum.

Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. An allusion to the building of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (1885).