

Letter 114
Amsterdam, 25 November 1877

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your nice letter, and also for that page from Michelet; I have copied it on the back of the map of Normandy and Brittany. How noble and beautiful it is – with a peculiar, weird beauty, the finest expression of which we find in that story of Elijah near the brook Kishon and with the widow – it is written in simplicity of heart and simpleness of mind by one who was sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

I am glad you are going to the library to see those maps by Stieler and Sprüner Menke; they have the same kind of beauty. Last night I was at Uncle Cor's and looked at them again; when you look through the Atlas, notice also the maps of Denmark, Sweden and Norway and especially that of Greece.

Father wrote from Brussels, and later wired both the uncles to come. When the letter came, Uncle Jan had just gone to the Leidsestraat ¹, and I went there, too, to bring him the letter, though rather afraid that Uncle might have just gone home and that we should miss each other. On the Dam I found Uncle standing under the light of a street lamp, waiting for a bus. We then entered the parcels express office of v. Gend & Loos there on the Dam and read the letter. Next day they both left for Brussels.

Uncle Cor has already come back. Things in Brussels are very, very sad. When one hears such things – so terrible, and yet they may befall us too, for what are we, and what distinguishes us? – one begins rather to realize why He said, "If a man hate not his life, he cannot be my disciple," for there is reason to hate that life, and what is called "this body of death." And with reason it is written, "Si vous désirez apprendre et savoir utilement quelque chose, aimez à rester inconnu à n'être compté pour rien, et l'étude la plus élevée et la plus utile, c'est de se bien connaître et de se mépriser" [If you want to learn and have a useful knowledge of something, prefer to remain unknown and to be counted for nothing; the most sublime and useful study is to know oneself well, and to despise oneself.]

I had to draw for Mendes a map of ancient Italy, or rather two, for I drew also one of middle Italy, just about from Rome to Naples.

When I saw Uncle Jan standing on the Dam that evening, his figure reminded me of Landseer's "The Highlander" (or is that engraving called "The Mountain Top"?).

This week I paid a visit to the Reverend Mr. Jeremie Meyes. I went there when it was raining, hoping to find him at home, but he was out; perhaps he had gone to visit somebody else for the same reason. But his wife was at home, and was sewing in a little room, like the little back room in Etten (but this one looks out on the street). She reminds me of Mrs. Jones. They are such nice people; I ran into them lately at a lecture, and they differed from the other people like an old moss-covered apple tree or a rosebush differs from all kinds of unnatural exotic plants.

Uncle Cor told me about the walk he took with Uncle Jan in the Bois de Cambre – you know its gnarled brushwood and trees with their weird forms; the sky was stormy, with big clouds reflected in the pools on the ground. It has been a deeply melancholy journey for them both, and for Father also. On the ninth day there is sometimes a change in such a condition; Uncle Jan will wait for that, and will probably stay until Monday.

The tidings from Prinsenhage are not very favourable either.

Next month I hope to send you the little book about the Crusades by Gruson; when you have read it, we can give it to Father together.

And so Brion is dead too; well, he left some beautiful work behind. Do you know his "Un enterrement sur les bords du Rhin" [A Funeral on the Banks of the Rhine], an old picture? I also like the one at the Luxembourg, "Noah," so much; how many things has he done! He had a great talent and has made the most of it, and gained by it. There are many illustrations by him in the illustrated edition of Erckmann-Chatrian. "The Invasion" is also one of his most beautiful pictures.

Tomorrow Martyn Aerssen is going to be married, and Father will officiate. Aerssen is a fine man – Brion would have painted him well.

If you find in the store an old lithograph, "A Church Meeting Somewhere in Lapland," and also the pendant by Meyer van Bremen, "Mothers with Children" – they are hanging at home – please put them aside and tell me what they cost.

How beautiful that portrait of De Ruyter is; it's an old aquatint, which hangs in Uncle's room. I look at it so often; it has a stormy or thundery expression, a look such as I think Cromwell must have had.

At Uncle Cor's I saw a new engraving after Erskine Nicol, "Sabbath," an old woman going home in the rain; it is very fine and well engraved.

Tomorrow morning I shall go to the little English church I told you about. In the evening it lies so peacefully in that quiet Beguinage, between the hawthorn hedges; it seems to say, "In loco isto dabo pacem," which means, In this place I will give peace, saith the Lord.

The view of the yard in the morning is intriguing now that the sun rises so late in the dark days before Christmas and the workmen do not arrive until seven o'clock. It is stormy outside; we have quite enough wind and rain these days.

In studying the history of Ancient Rome, I read that if a crow or an eagle landed on the head of anyone, it was a sign that heaven approved of them and blessed them. It is good to know this history; I am happy because it has given me a chance to understand what happened during this time.

Uncle Cor has offered me A Child's history of England by Dickens; I don't remember if I have written you that this book is fine gold, and that I have read notably the description of the Battle of Hastings. I know that when one attentively reads books of this genre, for example Motley, Dickens, and Gruson's Les Croisades, they convey to us a simplified but precise idea of history in general.

Old son, if I can pass my examinations, it will be a blessing! If I pass the first examination with all those subjects which seem simple but are difficult enough, I shall have good courage for what must follow...

I must set to work now, Latin exercises for tomorrow morning and other things. Write me soon if you can, and have as good a time as possible. I hope to have copied a few more of those maps by Stieler before Christmas. Now I am studying, though it may cost a little more effort, it must be done well, and I will try to do it the way I see others who take their work seriously do; it is a race and a fight for my life – no more, no less. Whoever gets through this course of study and perseveres in it to the end will not forget it as long as he lives; to have done this will be something to treasure.

What a good employee that Wierda is; he is very clever too, I think. There are a great many nice people in the book business; Uncle Cor, Mr. Braat, Schröder here (that is where Mendes gets his books, and I, too, sometimes). One might also count Mr. Tersteeg among them, and you, too, are in it; hold on to what you have, for you are also in the battle.

My compliments to the Roos family; à Dieu, boy, we must try to travel together at Christmas. A warm handshake in thought from

Your loving brother, Vincent

1. Where Uncle Cor lived.