

Letter 137  
Brussels, 15 October 1880

Dear Theo,

As you can see, I am writing you from Brussels. I thought it better to change my domicile for the present. And that for more than one reason.

In the first place, it was urgently necessary because the little room where I lived – which you saw last year – was so narrow and the light so bad that it was very inconvenient to draw there. It is true that if I could have had another room in that house, I would have stayed; but the people of the house wanted that room for their cooking and washing, and I could not have had it even if I had paid more. It is true that in spite of everything I drew *Les Exercices au fusain* and *Les modèles d'après la bosse de Barye* [Plaster-cast Models by Barye] there – either in the little room or outside in the garden; but now that I am as far as the portraits after Holbein in the third part of the *Cours de Dessin*, it has become impossible.

That is why I moved, and in order to remedy things somewhat radically, this is the plan which I have begun to carry out. I went to see Mr. Schmidt here in Brussels and told him about the affair, that is, I asked him if he could help me make an arrangement with some artist so that I could continue my study in a good studio. For I feel that it is absolutely necessary to have good things to look at and also to see artists at work. Then I am more aware of what I lack, and at the same time I learn how to do better.

It had already been a long time since I have seen enough pictures or drawings etc., and the very sight of some good things here in Brussels has given me new inspiration and has strengthened my desire to make good things myself.

If Mr. Schmidt would have the kindness to talk seriously about it to someone or other, I do not doubt that the thing could be satisfactorily arranged. He received me cordially, but still, if you yourself would put in a word or two in my behalf to recommend the thing to him, it would have more effect on him than I could make myself. It would be quite natural if he perhaps looked at me with some suspicion, because formerly I was with Goupil & Co., left, and have now returned to the art field.

So if you write him by return mail, you would render me a great service, and it would prevent my losing time.

I immediately took up my work here, namely the third part of Barye, and I have a much better room here in a little hotel on the Bd. Du Midi than the small cabinet I used to have.

Father wrote me that for the present I may count on receiving 60 fr. a month through his intermediary.

There are several young men who are beginning to study drawing and are in the same position of not being rich either. The thing that gives one strength in such circumstances is not to be always alone, but to be in contact and relation with others in the same position. So you see, this is my great desire – that through Mr. Schmidt I may have some chance to make the acquaintance of some of the young artists here. Will you do what I ask you to that effect, that is, write a little note to Mr. Schmidt?

I have made another pen drawing after “The Woodcutter” by Millet (the woodcut that you sent me). I think pen drawing is a good preparation, in case one should later want to learn etching. The pen is also very useful in accentuating pencil drawings, but one does not succeed in it at once. As to the drawing after “Le Buisson” by Ruysdael, I will work with the pen on it especially, and prepare myself by using it on other drawings. Among others, I have made one of the head of Dante which looks somewhat like an etching. But it is not as easy as it seems.

In our interview Mr. Schmidt spoke about my entering L'École des Beaux Arts here, but I told him frankly that I thought in my particular case it would be much better to work with some artist – especially since I have already finished two series of the Baryes and am on the third, which I could perhaps complete with the charcoal drawings by Allongé. However, I have not quite dismissed the idea of L'École des Beaux Arts; I might go there in the evening while I'm here if it is free or not too expensive.

But for the moment my aim must be to learn to make some drawings that are presentable and saleable as soon as possible, so that I can begin to earn something directly through my work. Because that is the necessity which is forced upon me. If you write me, please address your letters care of Mr. Schmidt, for I do not know whether or not I shall stay at this hotel any longer. I think you will approve of what I say, for to progress, it is necessary to continue with vigour.

Once having mastered my pencil, or watercolouring, or etching, I can go back to the country of the mines or weavers and work from life better than I can now; but first I must learn more of the technique.

Well, I shall finish this letter, hoping you will approve of what I have said.

I think that lodgings and perhaps food somewhat better than that of the Borinage will also help to set me right again. For I have undergone some misery in the Belgian “Black Country,” and my health has not

been very good lately. But if I can only succeed someday in learning to draw well what I want to express, I shall forget all that and remember the good side of things, which also exists if one looks for it. But still I must try to regain some strength, for I need all my energy.

With a handshake,  
Vincent