

Letter 141
Brussels, 16 February 1881

Dear Father and Mother,

I received your letter, which made me very happy, as I was already looking forward to it, especially because of Father's illness. I was glad to hear that there is some improvement.

I am getting on pretty well with my work, though it is still far from perfect, and must become much better still.

In the studio of that painter I found a very good reproduction of a skeleton. As those things are rather difficult to get, I asked him if he would lend it to me for a few days to copy. At first he raised some objection, probably because he thought I could not do it or that it would take me too long, but I insisted on having it, and he consented. That happened last Sunday afternoon, and as soon as I came home I began it; it was finished Monday night, and to his surprise I brought it back to him on Tuesday morning. He thought my drawing good, and indeed, it is not so bad after all. I shall profit more from his instruction if only he has time to spare. On some points, especially perspective, he is very well informed, and I at least can learn a great deal from him.

Now I must tell you another thing that I have done. As I told you, about a month ago I bought a pair of trousers and a coat, secondhand. It turned out so well that I bought another coat and pair of trousers from the same man. It's true that the first suit would have been quite sufficient, but it is much better to have two suits because they last longer when one can alternate them. Enclosed is a sample of the material. And I also had to replenish my underwear with three pairs of drawers, and paid 2.75 fr. apiece for them; besides, I bought a pair of shoes for 4 fr. The things I bought were really not superfluous. But altogether they have made a big hole in this month's money, and I shall have to stint myself in consequence, especially as I paid 5 fr. to that painter in advance for the lessons.

Do not worry about these expenses, however, and do not accuse me of extravagance, for really the contrary is rather my fault of character, and if I could spend more, I should get on quicker and make more progress. If you can send me something extra this month without depriving yourselves, I hope you will. But if you cannot, there is no immediate hurry. I told my landlord that I should be rather hard up this month, and he agreed that I could pay at my convenience because he now knows me well enough not to demand my paying in advance, at least not for a full month.

I bought that suit for a reason other than wearing it myself as long as possible: when I can wear it no longer, it will serve me in another way. For you should know that eventually I must have a small collection of workmen's clothes in which to dress the models for my drawings. For instance, a Brabant blue smock, the grey linen suit that the miners wear and their leather hat, then a straw hat and wooden shoes, a fisherman's outfit of yellow oilskin and a sou'wester. And certainly also that suit of black or brown corduroy which is very picturesque and characteristic – and then a red flannel shirt or undervest. And also a few women's dresses, for instance, that of De Kempen [region in Brabant] and from the neighbourhood of Antwerp, along with the Brabant bonnet and, for instance, that of Blankenberg, or Scheveningen or Katwijk.

I certainly do not intend to buy all this at once, but to collect it gradually piece by piece, when I have a chance. And as those clothes can be bought second-hand, they are not at all difficult to get. I shall only be able to manage this well when I have some kind of studio of my own.

Drawing the model with the necessary costumes is the only true way to succeed. Only if I study drawing thus seriously and thoroughly, always trying to portray truly what I see, shall I arrive; and then, notwithstanding the inevitable expenses, I shall make a living by it. For a good draughtsman can certainly find work nowadays: such persons are in great demand, and there are positions that are very well paid. So the thing is to try and become as skilled as possible. In Paris many a draughtsman earns from 10 to 15 francs a day, and in London and elsewhere the same and even more; but one does not reach this at once, and I am not so far advanced as yet. But I may become so if I have some good luck and can renew relations with persons like Mr. Tersteeg and Theo and others, especially with good painters and draughtsmen. But I must work and study very hard, that is the condition.

You will not be surprised when I tell you that I am eager to hear what Theo's proposition might be, or to hear something from Mr. Tersteeg. For one way or the other, before the month of March I must know what I can expect and how and where I shall be able to work during the spring and summer.

And if I should gradually succeed in earning something, that would not be unpleasant at all, though the principal thing is that I make progress and that my drawing becomes stronger – then everything will come right sooner or later. Models are expensive, at least relatively expensive, and if I had money enough to have

them often, I should be able to work much better. But then a studio becomes indispensable. And people like Mr. Tersteeg, Theo, and others know that quite well. Well, I must wait until they write me what they think, and meanwhile do what I can.

I made another drawing of miners in the snow which is somewhat better than last winter's – there is more character and effect in it. I am also collecting wood engravings again, like those albums that Theo and Willemien once had. For if I can more or less complete the collection, they will be of use to me, as it is quite possible that I shall work from wood engravings sometime.

I must tell you that those clothes I bought are well cut and look better on me than any others that I can remember. I tell you this because you might think they were something unusual or showy; this material is often worn in studios especially.

And now I finish, with greetings to all, and my best wishes for A.'s birthday, and believe me,
Your loving Vincent

The painter who gives me lessons now is making a very good picture of a Blankenberg fisherman.