

Dear Theo,

In reply to your two good letters, and as a result of Father's visit, for which I had been longing for some time, I have a few things to tell you.

In the first place this. I hear from father that without my knowing it you have been sending me money for a long time, in this way effectively helping me to get on. Accept my heartfelt thanks, I firmly believe that you will not regret it. In this way I am learning a handicraft, and though it certainly will not make me rich, I will at any rate earn my 100 fr. a month, which is the least one needs to live on, as soon as I become a better draughtsman and get some regular work.

What you told us about the painter Heyerdahl has greatly interested Van Rappard, as well as me. [Norwegian painter, temporarily in Paris at Bonnat's studio]

As the former undoubtedly will write you about it himself, I speak about this question only in so far as it concerns me personally, more or less.

I find much truth in your remarks about the Dutch artists, that it is very doubtful if one could get from them any clear counsel on the difficulties of perspective, etc., with which I am struggling. At least I quite agree with you that someone like Heyerdahl would be far preferable (as he seems to be such a versatile man) to many others who do not possess the ability to explain their method and to provide the necessary guidance and teaching. You speak of Heyerdahl as one who takes great pains to seek "proportions for drawing"; that is just what I need. Many a good painter has not the slightest, or hardly any, idea of what proportions for drawing are, or beautiful lines, or characteristic composition, and thought and poetry. Yet these are important questions which Feyen-Perrin, and Ulysse Butin, and Alphonse Legros – not to mention Breton and Millet and Israëls – take extremely seriously, and never lose sight of.

Many a Dutch painter would understand nothing, absolutely nothing, of the beautiful work of Boughton, Millais, Pinwell, du Maurier, Herkomer, and Walker, to name only a few artists who are real masters as draftsmen, not to mention their talent in other directions.

I say many of them look with contempt on such work, as many do on the work of De Groux, even among the painters here in Belgium who ought to know better. This week I saw some things by De Groux which I did not know, namely, a picture, "Departure of the Conscript," and a full-length drawing, "The Drunkard" – two compositions which resemble Boughton so much that I was struck by the resemblance, as of two brothers who had never met and who were yet of one mind.

So you see, I quite agree with your opinion on Heyerdahl, and I shall be very happy if later on you could put me in touch with that man; further, I will not insist on carrying out my plan of going to Holland, at least not if I have the prospect of going to Paris later and can more or less count on it.

But in the meantime what must I do? What do you think would be best? I can continue to work with Rappard for a few weeks, but then he will probably leave here. My bedroom is too small, and the light is not good, and the people would object to my partly shutting out the light from the window; I am not even allowed to put my etchings or my drawings up on the wall. So when Rappard leaves in May, I shall have to move; I should like to work awhile in the country – at Heyst, Calmpout, Etten, Scheveningen, Katwijk, anyplace, even nearer here, as Schaerbeek, Haeren, Groenendael. But preferably a place where there is a chance of coming into contact with other painters, and if possible of living and working together, because it is cheaper and better.

Wherever it may be, living expenses are always at least 100 fr. a month; if one has less, it means want, either physical or of the necessary material and tools. This winter I have spent, let us say, 100 fr. a month, though in reality it has scarcely been as much. And I spent a great deal of that on drawing materials and also got myself some clothes. I bought two workmen's suits of rough black velvet, of that material known as veloutine. It looks well, and one can wear it everywhere besides, the suits will be of use to me later, because I shall want a great many workmen's clothes – as I do already – for my models, which of course I need like everybody else. Gradually I must make such a collection, of all kinds of garments, secondhand if necessary, men's as well as women's; but of course I need not do it all at once, though I have started, and am going on with it.

What you say is true, financial questions have either advanced or handicapped many people in the world. It is so, and Bernard Palissy's saying remains true, "Poverty prevents the good spirits from arriving." But when I think it over, I cannot help wondering, Isn't it right that in a family like ours – in which two Messrs. Van Gogh are very rich, and both in the art field, Uncle Cor and our uncle of Prinsenhage, and in which you and I of the younger generation have chosen the same line, though in different spheres – isn't it right, I wonder, that, this being so, I should be able to count in some way on 100 fr. a month during the time which must necessarily elapse before I can

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get regular work as a draughtsman? Now three years ago I quarreled with C. M. about quite a different question, but is that any reason for C. M. to remain my enemy forever? I would much rather think that he had never been my enemy and consider it a misunderstanding, for which I gladly take all the blame, rather than argue about how much was really my fault, for I have no time for such things. Uncle Cor so often helps other draughtsmen – would it be so unnatural now if someday, when I needed it, he showed me his good will? However, I do not say this to get financial help from him. He could help me in quite another way than by giving money: for instance, if it were possible, he might bring me into contact with persons from whom I could learn many things, or help me get regular work from some magazine.

This is the way I expressed myself to Father. I noticed that people talked about the strange and unaccountable fact that I was so hard up, although I belonged to such and such a family. I replied that I thought it was only temporary, and would come right after a time. Still, I thought it better to talk it over with Father and you, and I wrote something about it to Mr. Tersteeg. But he seems to have misunderstood my intention, as he got the impression that I planned to live on the bounty of my uncles; this being his opinion, he wrote me a very discouraging letter, and said I had no right to do such a thing. I certainly do not pretend to have the right, but I want to prevent this affair from ever becoming the subject of gossip in the studios; therefore I think that it is necessary for good relations between myself and the family to be re-established, at any rate provisionally and outwardly, in expectation of their changing their minds about me. If they are unwilling, que soit, but then I should not be able to prevent gossip here and there. Were I immediately to write C. M. or go to see his Honour, it is to be feared he would not read my letter, or would receive me too uncordially. That's why I am talking it over with Pa and yourself, as you might possibly drop a word occasionally, so that he will not misunderstand my intentions. I was not hoping to get money from his Honour, as Mr. Tersteeg seemed to think, but only hoping that if he gained faith and confidence in my future after a talk with me, he might see me with new eyes. And if he did, it stands to reason that I most certainly would not scorn his help; and in that case he might smooth the way for me by means other than by giving me money, for instance, in the interval between now and my going to Paris.

I wrote back that I was not at all astonished at his misconstruing my letter in this way because you yourself had spoken one time of "living on my rents." And as I now gather from the tone of your letter that you no longer see my difficult position in that miserable light and as I infer it from your strong assistance, so I hope that Mr. Tersteeg's opinion will also change eventually. The more so because he was the first to help me with those Bargues, for which I shall always be grateful to him.

You write me about a manikin. I am not in a special hurry for it, but it would be of great service to me in composing and finding the right positions, you understand that. But I would rather wait awhile and have a better one than take one now that is too defective.

But please look out for all possible prints or books on proportion, and gather as much information about them as you can. It is of the greatest value to me, for without it, one cannot make a composition of figures quickly. Furthermore, I want something about the anatomy of the horse, and sheep, and cow – not from the veterinary point of view, but rather in relation to drawing those animals. If I ask you for these things, it is because you may occasionally find such prints cheaply, as I have. For instance, if you ever have the opportunity to ask Bague or Viollet-le-Duc about those papers on proportion, they would perhaps be the best source of information.

Of course, I should be delighted to live with you later, but we haven't come to that yet. If C. M. would help me to find some job for the time being, I certainly would not refuse it.

Even from relatively bad artists one can learn much indirectly, for instance, as Mauve learned much from Verschuur about the perspective of a stable and a wagon, and the anatomy of a horse, and yet how far Mauve is above Verschuur.

If you can recommend a picture by Madiol for the Salon, do so, for there is much that is beautiful in his work; the man is hard up and has a great many little children. He is now painting a forge; it is very good. Not long ago he painted a little old woman in which the drawing and especially the colouring are superb. But the quality of his work is uneven. His charcoal drawings are often excellent.

This letter is rather long, but I cannot make it shorter. I speak about the possibility that C. M. and others should change their opinion of me at least outwardly but I would much rather it were truly so. For example, somebody like Roelofs doesn't know what to make of such a false position – either there must be something wrong with me, or with the others; but what he is sure of is: anyhow there is something wrong somewhere. So he is overprudent and will have nothing to do with me just at the moment when I most need advice or help.

Such experiences are not pleasant. The main question is, Am I making progress by working on with patient energy? I think I am. "Where there is a will, there is a way." And should I be to blame later if I took my revenge? An artist

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does not draw for the sake of revenge, but for the love of drawing; it urges you on more than any other motive. So perhaps some things that are now amiss will come right after all.

This winter I collected many wood engravings. Your Millets have increased in number, and you will see that I did not keep your capital of wood engravings, etc., without their bringing interest. I now have twenty-four wood engravings, by and after Millet, counting "Les Travaux des Champs."

But the main thing for me is to draw, and everything must contribute to that end. The cheapest way would perhaps be for me to spend this summer at Etten – I can find subjects enough there. If you think this right, you may write to Father about it. I am willing to give in about dress or anything else to suit them, and perhaps would meet C. M. there some day this summer. There are no real objections to it, as far as I know. Either inside or outside the family, they will always judge me or talk about me from different points of view, and you will always hear the most divergent opinions about me. And I blame no one for it, because relatively few people know why an artist acts as he does. But in general, he who searches all kinds of places to find picturesque spots or figures – holes and corners which another passes by – is accused of many bad intentions and villainies which have never entered his head. A peasant who sees me draw an old tree trunk, and sees me sitting there for an hour, thinks that I have gone mad and, of course, laughs at me. A young lady who turns up her nose at a labourer in his patched, filthy dirty clothes, of course cannot understand why anyone visits the Borinage or Heyst and goes down the shaft of a coal mine; she also comes to the conclusion that I am mad.

Naturally, I do not care at all what they think if only you and Mr. Tersteeg, and C. M. and Father, and others with whom I come into contact, know better, and instead of making remarks about it, say, Your work demands it, and we understand why it is so.

So I repeat, under the circumstances there is after all no urgent reason why I should not go, for instance, to Etten or to The Hague, if that were preferable, even though it may be criticized by some fops and silly girls. As Father said when he was here, "Just write to Theo, and arrange with him what is best, and what will be the cheapest way." I hope you will let me know your opinion soon.

Heyst and Calmpout are very picturesque. In Etten I could also find subjects enough, even here if necessary, though then I would move to Schaerbeek.

Scheveningen or Katwijk would perhaps be possible if C. M. changed his opinion of me, and then I could profit directly or indirectly by the Dutch artists. As to the expenses, I suppose they would amount to at least 100 fr. a month; to do with less is impossible: "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn."

So I wait for your reply about these things, and in the meantime I am working with Rappard.

Rappard has painted some good studies, among others a few after the models at the academy, which are well done. A little more fire and passion would not hurt him, a little more self-confidence and more courage. Somebody once said to me, "Nous devons faire des efforts de perdus, de désespérés." [We must make the same efforts as lost, desperate beings.] He does not do that as yet. His pen-and-ink drawings of landscape are very witty and charming, but in these, also, a little more passion, please.

And now I take my leave, with a handshake, and am always

Yours sincerely, Vincent