

Letter 169
The Hague, 7 or 8 January 1882

[Letterhead Goupil & Cie., Paris. Letter from Theo to Vincent.]

[Vincent's handwriting] Please don't think I'm sending your letter back to offend you, I simply believe this is the quickest way of answering it clearly. And if you didn't have your own letter to hand, you might not be able to understand quite so well what my answer refers to. Now the numbers will guide you. I'm short of time, I'm still expecting a model today.

[Theo's handwriting]

Paris, 5 January 1882

My dear Vincent,

I have received your two letters and thank you for keeping me in the picture. I think it is a very good thing that you have settled permanently in The Hague and hope to do as much as I can to help you out until you can start earning your own money. But what I do not approve of is the way in which you contrived to leave Father and Mother, (1)

That you could not bear it there is possible and that you should differ in your views from people who have lived in the country all their lives and who have had no chance of participating in modern life, is only too natural, but what the devil made you so childish and so shameless as to embitter Father and Father's life and render it almost impossible by setting about things in the way you did? (2) It isn't hard to fight with someone who is already weary. (3)

When Father wrote to me about it, I thought it must be a misunderstanding, but you yourself say in your letter, "As far as the relationship between Father and me is concerned, it will not be remedied in a hurry." (4) Don't you know him then, and don't you realize that Father cannot live while there is all this bickering between the two of you? (5) Coûte que coûte [at all costs], you are in duty bound to ensure that matters are put right and I guarantee that one day you will be extremely sorry for having been so callous in this matter. (6)

It is Mauve who attracts you at the moment, and, carried away as usual, you find anyone who is not like him objectionable, because you look for the same qualities in everybody. (7) Is it not a bitter pill for Father to swallow to see himself belittled by someone who claims to be more of a freethinker, (8) and whom, au fond [deep down], he possibly envies from time to time for his clearer insights? (9) Does his life count for nothing then? (10) I don't understand you. (11) Write to me again when you can (12) and give my regards to Mauve and Jet.

Ever yours, Theo

[Vincent's handwriting]

7 or 8 January 1882

Because I have only a little time to spare, I can think of no better means of replying to your letter than by doing it in this way, answering your points one by one in orderly sequence.

(1) I did not 'contrive' anything, on the contrary, when Father was here, Mauve, Father and I talked about my renting a studio in Etten – spending the winter there – and returning to The Hague in the spring. Because of the models and because I had settled down to my work in Etten and had begun to make headway.

That does not alter the fact that I should have liked to prolong my stay in The Hague a bit more, seeing that I was here already, but it was nevertheless my definite intention to continue my studies of the Brabant peasant types. And when my plans were thwarted, after they had been discussed with M. and I had already entered into correspondence with him about the studio in question (a shed in need of some repair), I could no longer contain my anger.

Do you recall a letter I wrote to you in which I expanded at some length on my plan to continue those studies? I mean the letter in which I asked you to impress upon Father and Mother once more in plain terms that working in Etten was of the greatest importance to me, etc. I remember the way I put it: it would be too bad if, because of a whim of Father's, I had to abandon work that had begun to make headway and on which I had been engaged for months. Give it some thought yourself – despite Mauve's help I am in much more of a fix here than at home, and I'll be blowed if I know how I am going to get through it.

- (2) The reproach that I set about embittering Father's and Mother's life is not really your own. I know it, and of old, as one of Father's Jesuitisms and have told Father, and Mother too, that I considered it to be a Jesuitism and that I didn't take the slightest notice of it.

Whenever one says something to Father to which he has no reply, he comes out with a reproach of that sort and says, for example, "You will be the death of me," while he sits there perfectly calmly reading his newspaper and smoking his pipe. So I take such reproaches for what they are.

Or else Father flies into an enormous rage, is used to people being frightened by it and is astonished when somebody does not give way before his anger.

Father is extremely touchy and irritable and obstinate in domestic affairs and is used to having his way. And the heading 'the rules and regulations of this house', with which I am obliged to comply, includes literally anything that comes into Father's head.

- (3) It's easy enough to fight with an old man, etc. Because Father is an old man, I have spared his feelings a hundred times and tolerated things that are little short of intolerable. Anyway, there wasn't any fighting this time either, but just an "enough!" And because he wouldn't listen to reason and common sense, I spoke straight out and it can only be to the good that for once Father should have heard a few home truths expressed that others too think now and then.
- (4) That it will not be remedied in a hurry. For the sake of appearances I have put matters straight by writing to Father again and telling him that I have rented a studio, that I wished him a happy New Year, and that I hoped we would have no more quarrels of this or any other kind in that New Year. I shall do no more about it, nor do I need to. If this last row had been an isolated case then it would be a different matter, but it was preceded by other rows, yet whenever I told Father a few things in a calmer though still resolute way, His Honour would fling it all systematically to the winds. So as far as the things I have said in anger are concerned, I think the same even in a calmer mood, though for diplomatic reasons I have usually kept quiet about them or put them differently. But this time I lost my temper, my diplomacy went by the board, and well, for once I had my say. I offer no apology for that and while Father and Mother continue in this mood I shall take nothing back. Should they later behave in a more humane, more sensitive and more sincere way, then I shall be happy to take everything back. But I doubt if that will happen.
- (5) That Father and Mother cannot live while there is all this bickering going on, etc., that's true, in so far as they are creating a desert around themselves and are earning themselves an unhappy old age when they could have a happy and contented one. But as to such expressions as "I cannot bear it", "it's killing me", "my life is embittered", I no longer attach any importance to them, for that's only their little way. And if they do not change, then, as I have already said, I'm afraid they are storing up many bad and lonely days for themselves.
- (6) That I shall be sorry, etc. Before things came to their present pass, I used to have many regrets and be very sad and reproach myself because things between Father and Mother and me were going so badly. But now that matters have gone this far, well, so be it, and to tell you the truth, I have no regrets anymore, cannot help feeling a sense of deliverance. If I should later come to see that I did wrong, well, then I shall of course be sorry, but as it is I have been unable to see how else I could possibly have acted. When somebody tells me decisively, "Get out of my house, the sooner the better, in half an hour rather than an hour," well then, my dear fellow, it doesn't take a quarter of an hour for me to leave, never to return either. That was going too far, and you surely understand that, if only to spare you and others further financial trouble, I should not lightly have left on my own accord, but once that "Get out" has been said, by them and not by me, well then, my course is clear enough.
- (7) As for Mauve – yes indeed, I am very fond of M. and am in sympathy with him. I love his work – and I count myself fortunate to be learning from him, but I can no more withdraw into some system or school than Mauve can himself, and apart from Mauve and Mauve's work, I also love others who are quite different and work quite differently. And as for myself and my own work, perhaps there is a similarity between us at times, but there is certainly a difference as well. If I love someone or something, then I do so in earnest and sometimes with real passion and fire, but that doesn't make me think as a matter of course that only a few people are perfect and all the others worthless – far from it.
- (8) Freethinker, that is really a word I detest, although I have to use it occasionally *faute de mieux* [for want of anything better]. The fact is that I do my best to think things through and try in my actions to take account of reason and common sense. And trying to belittle someone would be quite contrary to that. So it is perfectly true that on occasion I have said to Father, "Do try to think this or that through," or, "To my mind, this or that does not stand up," but that is not trying to belittle someone. I am not

Father's enemy if I tell him the truth for a change, not even that time I lost my temper and did so in salty language. Only it did no good, and Father took it amiss.

In case Father refers to my saying that, ever since I have acquired so much *dessous les cartes*, I haven't given two pins for the morality and the religious system of the clergy and their academic ideas, then I absolutely refuse to take that back, for I truly mean it. It is just that when I am in a calm mood, I don't talk about it, although it is a different matter when they try to force me to go to church, for instance, or to attach importance to doing so, for then I naturally tell them that it is completely out of the question.

- (10) [*sic*] Does father's life count for nothing? I have already said that when I hear someone say, "You will be the death of me," while in the meantime that man is reading his paper and half a minute later is talking about goodness knows what advertisement or other, I consider that phrase fairly irrelevant and superfluous and take no notice of it. As soon as that kind of phrase is repeated to others, who are then going to consider me more or less a murderer or even a parricide, I say, these slanders are nothing more nor less than Jesuitisms. There you are. Anyway, the murderer has left the house now, and so, in short, I take not the slightest notice of any of it and even consider it ridiculous.
- (11) You say, "I don't understand you." Well, I readily believe that, for writing is really a wretched way of explaining things to each other. And it takes up a great deal of time and you and I have a great deal to do as it is. But we must have a little patience with each other until we can see, and speak to each other.
- (12) Write to me again. Yes, of course, but first we must agree how. Would you like me to write in a kind of businesslike style, dry and formal, weighing my words carefully and actually saying nothing at all? Or would you like me to continue to write as I have done recently, telling you all the thoughts that come into my head, without being afraid of rambling on now and then, without censoring my thoughts or holding them back? That's what I would prefer – that is, being free to write or say exactly what I mean.

So much for my direct answer to your letter, but I still have some things to say to you about drawing, etc., etc., and I would sooner talk about that. Consider it a point in my favour that for the time being I am behaving as if Father and Mother did not exist. It would have been much better if I had spent this winter in Etten, and things would have been much easier for me, too, especially for financial reasons – if I were to start thinking and fretting about that again, it would make me melancholy, so that's over and done with, once and for all. I am here now and I must try to muddle through. If I wrote to Father about it again, it would be adding fuel the fire. I don't ever want to get angry again and am throwing myself with might and main into life and affairs here, and, what can I do, Etten is lost and so is Heike, but I shall try to obtain something else in their stead.

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Let me now thank you warmly for what you sent me, I don't need to add that I am still extremely anxious in spite of it. Of course my expenses are greater than in Etten and I cannot get down to work half as energetically as I should like and should be able to if I had greater resources.

But my studio is turning out well. I wish you could see it sometime. I have hung up all my studies and you must send me back those you still have because they could still be useful to me. They may not be saleable and I readily acknowledge all their faults, but there is something of nature in them because they were done with some passion.

And you know, I am toiling away at watercolours right now and when I have got my hand in, they will be saleable. But Theo, believe me, when I went to Mauve for the first time with my pen drawings and M. said, "Now try it with charcoal and crayon and stump," I had the devil of a job working with that new material. I was patient, but that didn't seem to help, then I grew so impatient at times that I would stamp on my charcoal and become utterly dejected. And yet, a little while later, I sent you drawings done with chalk and charcoal and the brush, and I went back to Mauve with a whole lot of similar ones, in which, naturally, he found something to criticize, and with reason, and you did as well, it was a step forward.

Now I am once again passing through a similar period of struggle and dejection, of patience and impatience, of hope and despair. But I have to struggle on and, well, in good time I shall understand watercolours better. If it were easy, there would be no pleasure in it. And ditto, ditto with painting. Added to this, the weather is inclement so that I have yet to go out just for the fun of it this winter. Still, I am enjoying life, and in particular having a studio of my own is too glorious for words. When are you coming to have some tea or coffee with me? Soon, I hope. You can spend the night too, if necessary – how very nice and how enjoyable. And I even have some flowers too, a few small bowls of bulbs.

And what's more, I have obtained yet another ornament for my studio. I got an amazing bargain of splendid woodcuts from the Graphic, in part printed, not from the clichés, but from the blocks themselves. Just what I've been looking for for years. Drawings by Herkomer, Frank Holl, Walker and others. I bought them from Blok the Jewish bookseller, and for five guilders picked the best from an enormous pile of Graphics and London News. They include some superb things, for instance, the Houseless and Homeless by Fildes (poor people waiting outside a night shelter) and two large Herkomers and many small ones, and the Irish emigrants by Frank Holl and the 'Old gate' by Walker, and above all a girls' school by Frank Holl, and then another large Herkomer, The Invalids.

Anyway, it's just the stuff I need.

And I keep such beautiful things at home with some contentment because, my dear fellow, although I am still a long way from doing anything as beautiful myself, I have nevertheless hung a few of my studies of old peasants, etc., on the wall, which proves that my enthusiasm for those artists is not mere vanity, but that I struggle and strive to make something myself that is realistic and yet done with feeling.

I've got about 12 figures of diggers and people working in the potato field, and I wonder if I couldn't do something with them. You still have a few of them, for instance a man putting potatoes into a sack. Well, I'm not sure when, but sooner or later I must get down to that, because last summer I made some careful observations, and here in the dunes I should be able to do a good study of the earth and the sky and then put in the figures boldly. Still, I'm not setting too much store by these studies, and hope, of course, to do something quite different and better, but the Brabant types are characteristic, and who knows whether they can't still be used to good account. If there are any you would like to keep, feel at liberty to do so, but I should be very glad to have back those in which you are not interested. By studying new models I will automatically discover the mistakes in proportion I made in last summer's studies, and so they may yet prove useful to me.

When your letter took so long to come (since it went to Mauve first, I received it even later) I had to go to Mr. Tersteeg, and he gave me 25 guilders until I received your letter. It might be a good idea if I, with your knowledge, or you, with my knowledge, made some sort of arrangement with Mr. T. For you realize, Theo, I must know with as much certainty as possible what to expect, and I must be able to calculate and be able to tell in advance whether I can do this or that or must give it up. So you will do me a great favour by agreeing with me to a definite arrangement, and I hope you will write to me about it soon.

Mauve has promised me to put my name forward immediately as an associate member of Pulchri [the artists' society and headquarters of the Hague school], because I shall then be able to draw from the model there 2 evenings a week and shall have more contact with artists. Then as soon as possible after that I shall become a full member. Well, my dear fellow, thanks for what you sent, and believe me, with a handshake, Ever yours, Vincent