

Letter 170  
The Hague, c. 12 – 16 January 1882

Dear brother,

In my last letter I gave you, as I have before, a short and concise answer to some things; but for all that, you must not think that I am always in a freezing, unfriendly mood, which Mauve would perhaps call a yellow-soap or salt-water mood. Well, and even if I had written a yellow-soap or salt-water letter, that would not be worse than if I had taken things too sentimentally.

You say, "you will deeply regret it someday." My dear boy, I think I have done much of that regretting before this. I saw it coming and tried to avoid it; well, I did not succeed, and by-gones are by-gones. Shall I continue to have regrets? No, I really haven't time for regret. Drawing becomes more and more a passion with me, and it is a passion just like that of a sailor for the sea. Mauve has now shown me a new way to make something, that is, how to paint watercolours. Well, I am quite absorbed in this now and sit daubing and washing it out again; in short, I *am* trying to find a way. "Puisqu'il faut faire des efforts de perdu. Puisque l'exécution d'une aquarelle a quelque chose de diabolique. Puisqu'il y a du bon en tout mouvement énergetique." [Because one must make efforts like those of the lost souls. Because there is something diabolical about executing a watercolour. Because there is something good in every energetic motion.] Although I intended to write you more explicitly about what happened at home and to try to explain things as they seemed to me, although I wanted to speak to you about some other subjects too, I have no time for it now, and I think it better to write you about drawing again. I started at once a few smaller watercolours and also a large one, at least almost as large as one of those figure studies which I made at Etten. Now of course it doesn't all succeed right away. Mauve himself says that I shall spoil at least ten drawings before I know how to handle the brush well. But behind it is a better future, so I work with as much composure as I can, and am not disheartened even by my mistakes.

This is a little sketch of one of the smaller watercolours; it is a corner of my studio with a little girl grinding coffee.

You see, I am seeking for tone, a head or little hand which has light and life in it, and which stands out against the drowsy dusk of the background, and then boldly against it all that part of the chimney and stove – iron and stone – and a wooden floor. If I could get the drawing as I want it, I would make three-fourths of it in a yellow-soap style, and would treat only the corner where the little girl sits tenderly, softly and with sentiment.

You understand that I cannot express everything as I feel it, but the problem is to attack the difficulties; the yellow-soap part is not yet yellow-soapy enough, and, on the other hand, the tenderness is not tender enough.

But at any rate I have hammered the sketch onto the paper, and the idea is expressed, and I think it a good one.

Of course, one cannot master the technique in a day.

This is the subject of the large drawing [F 910a, JH 090], but I made it in a hurry and the sketch is horrible. They tell me somebody came to see me today, I think Mr. Tersteeg. I hope so, for he has promised to come and I should like to talk with him about a few things.

He said he would be back tomorrow morning.

Theo, I have great trouble with models: I hunt for them, and when I find them, it is hard to get them to come to the studio; often they do not come at all. For instance, this morning a blacksmith's boy could not come because his father wanted me to pay a guilder an hour; of course I refused to do it. Tomorrow that old woman will sit for me again, but she could not come for three days.

When I go out, I often make sketches in the soup kitchens or in the third-class waiting room, and such places. But outside it is so deuced cold, especially for me, as I do not draw as quickly as the more advanced, and must finish my sketches in more detail if they are to be of any use.

So you see that I do not sit idle, and for the present I think no more about Etten, but try to get rooted here. Of course the models cost a lot of money, and I must tell you that I also spend what is necessary for myself, though living as cheaply as possible. (I take my meals in the soup kitchen.) Yet I hope you will not object to my going on.

But I repeat what I already said in my last letter, let me know as nearly as possible what I can expect; and I wish you could make some arrangement with Mr. Tersteeg, so that in case of difficulties, I can go to him without any scruples. For my part, I promise you to work as hard as I can; but with models, for instance, whether I can work full speed, half speed, or not at all often depends on the money I have or haven't got in my pocket. So now I am making arrangements with a mother and her baby, but I am afraid it will be too

expensive. Of course you understand that I like best to go full speed, but...well, you know what I mean. I must hold myself in until I have a little more scope and freedom.

Write me soon, and do send me the money for February as early as possible, for I am quite sure I shall not have a cent left by that time. Meanwhile I intend to go on making those little pen drawings, but in a style different from that of last summer's large one. Somewhat more fiercely and savagely.

This is a little sketch of the Schenkweg, the view from my window.

Well, adieu, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent