

Letter 185
The Hague, early April 1882

Dear Theo,

You must not wonder at my writing urging you to become a painter. Because just now I myself am in a period in which my former drudgery has become more of a pleasure.

For every week I now do something which I couldn't do before, and as I have already mentioned, it is like growing young again. And the consciousness that nothing, except illness, can take from me the force which is now beginning to develop – this consciousness is what gives me courage for the future and helps me bear the many difficulties of the present.

It is splendid to look at something and admire it, to think about it and keep hold of it, and then to say, I am going to draw and work at it until I have fixed it on paper. Of course I do not mean to say I am so satisfied with my work that I think I need not do better still. But the way to do better later on is to work as well as one can today, then there will be progress tomorrow.

Of course I don't know what you will think of my drawings when you see them, but this much I do know – I long very much for your coming.

(I haven't many studies after the nude yet, but there are some which greatly resemble the Bargues; are they less original for that? Perhaps it is more because I have learned to understand nature from the Bargues.) And when I write you, Become a painter, it isn't, after all, because I think your present position without charm of its own. But I think it is even better to be a painter, and I wish you could work in a studio of your own instead of at a desk in your office. That's it.

I am sure that there in your studio something would be roused in you that you do not know now – a great hidden force of working and creating. And this, once roused, is roused forever.

When I hear Tersteeg talk about "charm" and "saleable," I merely think, Work which one has plodded hard at and which one has tried to put some character and sentiment into is neither unattractive nor unsaleable. And it is perhaps better not to please everybody at first.

What fine weather we are having, there are signs of spring everywhere. I cannot drop drawing from the figure, this comes first with me, but sometimes I cannot keep from working outdoors. But I am busy with very difficult things which I must not give up.

Recently I have made many studies of parts of the figure – head, neck, breast, shoulder. You will find a little sketch enclosed.

I should love to make more studies from the nude. You know I drew Exercices au Fusain, several times even, but no female figures are included.

Of course, it is quite different to draw it from life.

A little sketch such as the enclosed is quite simple in line. But when you are sitting in front of your model, it is difficult enough to get those simple characteristic lines. Those lines are so simple that one can trace them with the pen, but I repeat, the problem is to find those principal lines, so that the essence is expressed with a few strokes or scratches. It is not easy to select the lines which will seem entirely natural.

It is true, Theo, that recently, since I've been here in The Hague, I have spent more than 100 fr. a month; but if I didn't, I shouldn't be able to work with models and I shouldn't make any progress.

I see it in other painters, Breitner, for instance; they are afraid to take models regularly and they work little and slowly – and even then, not always well. Lately Breitner, however, has taken models again, and then there is much more character in his work; but now he is ill. The English painters, especially the draughtsmen for the Graphic, etc., have models almost every day. One really cannot do without it, I think. It's all right when somebody with years of experience draws the figure from memory after having studied it a great deal, but it seems to me too risky to work from memory systematically. Even Israëls, Blommers and Neuhuys don't do it, though they have so much experience.

So if I have spent more than 100 fr. a month here, it is because I couldn't do with less. And, believe me, I don't spend thoughtlessly or carelessly. I do wish I did not have to give Tersteeg back those 25 guilders, for I need the money so badly to continue working with energy. Tersteeg is no poorer for it, and at first he said himself that I need not worry about the money. My work must suffer for every 25 guilders I can't have, and if I can't do the things that ought to be done.

If I get my portfolios full of studies, they will repay me in money later on. I would rather earn more by and by than now; I would rather learn my profession well than hurry to get a little drawing sold for pity's sake. The little sketch enclosed is scrawled after a larger study which has a more melancholy expression. There is a poem by Thomas Hood, I think, telling of a rich lady who cannot sleep at night because she went out to buy a dress during the day, she saw the poor seamstress – pale, consumptive, emaciated – sitting at work in

a close room. And now she is conscience-stricken about her wealth, and starts up anxiously in the night. In short, it is the figure of a slender, pale woman, restless in the dark night.

If you want me to, I will send Tersteeg the 25 guilders from your next allowance and will not speak of it again; but, if possible, I would rather wait until later, when he will take a drawing for it.

Well, good luck, and I repeat, I wish you might be at work in a studio of your own someday. Adieu.

Ever yours, Vincent