

Letter 192
The Hague, 3 – 12 May 1882

Please feel free to tell Mauve anything you like about the contents of this letter, but there is no need for it to go any further.

My dear Theo,

I met Mauve today and had a most regrettable conversation with him, which made it clear to me that Mauve and I have parted for good. Mauve has gone too far to retract, and anyhow he certainly wouldn't want to.

I invited him to come and see my work, and then to talk things over. Mauve flatly refused: 'I will certainly not be coming to see you, that's all over.'

In the end he said, 'You have a vicious character.' I turned away then – it was in the dunes – and walked home alone.

Mauve takes it amiss that I said, 'I am an artist,' which I won't take back, because it's self-evident that what that word implies is looking for something all the time without ever finding it in full. It is the very opposite of saying, 'I know all about it, I've already found it.' As far as I am concerned, the word means, 'I am looking, I am hunting for it, I am deeply involved.'

I have ears, Theo – if somebody says, 'You have a vicious character,' what am I supposed to do? I turned away and went home alone, but with a very heavy heart that Mauve should have been prepared to say that to me. I shall not ask him for an explanation, nor shall I apologize.

And yet – and yet – and yet. I wish Mauve did feel some compunction. I am suspected of something...it is in the air...I am keeping something back, Vincent is concealing something that mustn't see the light of day. Well, gentlemen, I shall say to you, you people who prize manners and culture, and rightly so, provided it is the genuine article – which is more cultured, more sensitive, more manly: to desert a woman or to concern oneself with one who has been deserted?

Last winter I met a pregnant woman, deserted by the man whose child she was carrying. A pregnant woman who walked the streets in the winter – she had her bread to earn, you'll know how. I took that woman on as a model and have worked with her all winter. I couldn't pay her a model's full daily wages, but I paid her rent all the same, and thus far, thank God, I have been able to save her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her.

When I first came across this woman, she caught my eye because she looked so ill. I made her take baths and as many restoratives as I could manage, and she has become much healthier. I have been with her to Leyden, where there is a maternity hospital in which she will be confined.*

It strikes me that any man worth his salt would have done the same in a case like this. I consider what I did so simple and natural that I thought I could keep it to myself. She found posing difficult, yet she has learned, and I have made progress with my drawing because I have had a good model. The woman is now attached to me like a tame dove. For my part, I can only get married once, and when better than now, and to her, because it is the only way to go on helping her and she would otherwise be sent back by want on to the same old path which leads to the abyss. She has no money, but she is helping me to earn money with my work.

I am filled with zest and ambition for my job and my work, and the reason why I have put aside paintings and watercolours for a time is that Mauve's desertion gave me a great shock, and if he sincerely retracted I should start again with renewed courage.

At the moment I cannot look at a brush, it makes me nervous.

I wrote: Theo, can you enlighten me about Mauve's attitude? – perhaps this letter will help to enlighten you in turn. You are my brother, it is only natural that I should speak to you about private matters, but the moment someone tells me, 'You have a vicious character,' I don't feel like talking to him any more.

I could not do otherwise, I did what was ready to hand, I worked. I thought I would be understood without words. To be sure I thought of another woman for whom my heart was beating – but she was far away and did not want to see me, and this one – there she was, walking about sick, pregnant and hungry – in winter. I could not do otherwise. Mauve, Theo, Tersteeg, you people have my livelihood in your hands, are you going to reduce me to beggary, turn your backs on me? Now I have spoken and wait for whatever else will be said to me.

Vincent

I am sending you a few studies because you may perhaps see from them that she has helped me considerably with her posing. My drawings are 'by my model and me,' the one with the white bonnet is her mother [F 1009a, JH 106]. But since in a year's time, when I shall probably be working quite differently, I shall have to base my work on these studies, which I am doing now as conscientiously as I can, I should like to have at least these three back.

You can see that they are done with care. If I need an interior or a waiting room or something of the kind later on, they will prove useful, because I shall be able to look to them for the details. But I thought it would perhaps be a good idea to keep you up to date on how I spend my time. These studies demand a rather dry technique. Had I tried for effect they would have been less useful to me later. But I'm sure you will see this for yourself.

The paper I should really like best is that on which the female figure bending forward is drawn [F 935, JH 143 or F 937, JH 144], but if possible the colour of unbleached linen. I don't have any of it left in that thickness. I believe they call it double Ingres. I can't get any more of it here. When you see how that drawing is done, you'll understand that the thin stuff is hardly able to take it. I wanted to send you a small figure in black merino as well, but I can't roll it. The chair near the large figure isn't finished, because I want an old oak chair there [F 932, JH 145].

* Small wonder she wasn't well, the child was in the wrong position and she needed an operation, that is, the child had to be turned round with forceps. But there is a good chance that she will pull through. She is due to give birth in June.