

Dear brother,

It is already late, but I felt like writing to you again anyway. You are not here – but I need you and sometimes feel that we are not far away from each other.

Today I promised myself something, that is, to treat my illness, or rather what remains of it, as if it didn't exist. Enough time has been lost, work must go on. So, well or not well, I am going back to drawing regularly from morning until night. I don't want anybody to be able to say to me again, "Oh! but those are only old drawings." I drew a study today of the baby's little cradle with a few touches of colour in it. I am also at work on one like one of those meadows I sent you recently.

My hands have become a little too white for my liking, but that's too bad. I'm going to go back outdoors again, a possible relapse matters less to me than staying away from work any longer.

Art is jealous, she does not like taking second place to an illness. Hence I shall humour her. So you will, I hope, be receiving a few more reasonably acceptable things shortly.

People like me really should not be ill. I would like to make it perfectly clear to you how I look at art. To get to the essence of things one must work long and hard.

What I want and have as my aim is infernally difficult to achieve, and yet I don't think I am raising my sights too high. I want to make drawings that touch some people.

"Sorrow" is a small beginning – perhaps such little landscapes as the "Meerdervoort Avenue," the "Rijswijk Meadows," the "Fish-Drying Barn," are also a small beginning. There is at least something straight from my own heart in them. What I want to express, in both figure and landscape, isn't anything sentimental or melancholy, but deep anguish. In short, I want to get to the point where people say of my work: that man feels deeply, that man feels keenly. In spite of my so-called coarseness – do you understand? – perhaps even because of it. It seems pretentious to speak this way now, but that is the reason why I want to put all my energies into it.

What am I in the eyes of most people – a nonentity, an eccentric or an unpleasant person – somebody who has no position in society and never will have, in short, the lowest of the low.

All right, then – even if that were absolutely true, then I should one day like to show by my work what such an eccentric, such a nobody, has in his heart.

That is my ambition, based less on resentment than on love malgré tout [in spite of everything], based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion.

Though I am often in the depths of misery, there is still calmness, pure harmony and music inside me. I see paintings or drawings in the poorest cottages, in the dirtiest comers. And my mind is driven towards these things with an irresistible momentum.

Other things increasingly lose their hold on me, and the more they do so the more quickly my eye lights on the picturesque. Art demands dogged work, work in spite of everything and continuous observation. By dogged, I mean in the first place incessant labour, but also not abandoning one's views upon the say-so of this person or that.

I am not without hope, brother, that within a few year's time, or perhaps even now, little by little you will be seeing things I have done that will give you some satisfaction after all your sacrifices.

I have had very little contact with other painters lately. I haven't been the worse for it. It isn't the language of painters so much as the language of nature that one should heed. I can understand better now than I could six months ago why Mauve said: don't talk to me about Dupré, I'd rather you talked about the bank of that ditch, or something of that sort. That may sound a bit strong, and yet it is absolutely right. The feeling for things themselves, for reality, is of greater importance than the feeling for painting; anyway it is more productive and more inspiring.

Because I now have such a broad, such an expansive feeling for art and for life itself, of which art is the essence, it sounds so shrill and false when people like Tersteeg do nothing but harry one.

For my own part, I find that many modern pictures have a peculiar charm which the old ones lack. To me, one of the highest and noblest expressions of art will always be that of the English, for instance Millais and Herkomer and Frank Holl. What I would say with respect to the difference between old and present-day art is – perhaps the modern artists are deeper thinkers.

There is a great difference in sentiment between, for instance, Chill October by Millais and Bleaching Ground at Overveen by Ruysdael. And equally between Irish Emigrants by Holl and the women reading from the Bible by Rembrandt. Rembrandt and Ruysdael are sublime, for us as well as for their contemporaries, but there is something in the moderns that seems to us more personal and intimate.

It is the same with Swain's woodcuts and those of the old German masters.

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And so it was a mistake when the modern painters thought it all the rage to imitate the old ones a few years ago. That's why I think old Millet is right to say, 'Il me semble absurde que les hommes veuillent paraître autre chose que ce qu'ils sont. [It seems absurd to me that people want to seem other than they are.] That may seem trite, and yet it is as unfathomably deep as the ocean, and personally I am all for taking it to heart.

I just wanted to tell you that I am going to get back to working regularly again, and must do so quand même [at that] – and I'd just like to add that I look forward so much for a letter – and for the rest, I bid you goodnight. Goodbye, with a handshake,

Ever yours,

Vincent

Please remember the thick Ingres if you can, enclosed is another sample. I still have a supply of the thin kind. I can do watercolour washes on the thick Ingres, but on the sans fin, for instance, it always goes blurry, by no fault of mine.

I hope that by keeping hard at it I shall draw the little cradle another hundred times, besides what I did today.