

Letter 221
The Hague, July 31 1882

Dear Theo,

Just a line to welcome you in anticipation of your arrival. Also to let you know of the receipt of your letter and the enclosed, for which I send my heartiest thanks. It was very welcome, for I am hard at work and need a few more things.

As far as I understand it, we of course agree perfectly about black in nature. Absolute black does not really exist. But like white, it is present in almost every colour, and forms the endless variety of greys, – different in tone and strength. So that in nature one really sees nothing else but those tones or shades. There are but three fundamental colours – red, yellow and blue; “composites” are orange, green and purple.

By adding black and some white one gets the endless varieties of greys – red grey, yellow-grey, blue-grey, green-grey, orange-grey, violet-grey. To say, for instance, how many green-greys there are is impossible; there are endless varieties.

But the whole chemistry of colours is not more complicated than those few simple rules. And to have a clear notion of this is worth more than seventy different colours of paint, – since with those three principal colours and black and white, one can make more than seventy tones and varieties. The colourist is he who, seeing a colour in nature knows at once how to analyse it. And can say for instance: that green-grey is yellow with black and blue, etc.

In other words, someone who knows how to find the greys of nature on his palette. In order to make notes from nature, or to make little sketches, a strongly developed feeling for outline is absolutely necessary as well as for strengthening the composition subsequently.

But I believe one does not acquire this without effort, rather in the first place by observation, and then especially by strenuous work and research, and particular study of anatomy and perspective is also needed. Beside me is hanging a landscape study by Roelofs, a pen sketch – but I cannot tell you how expressive that simple outline is, everything is in it.

Another still more striking example is the large woodcut of “The Shepherdess” by Millet, which you showed me last year and which I have remembered ever since. And then, for instance, the pen and ink sketches by Ostade and Peasant Breughel.

When I see such results I feel more strongly the great importance of the outline. And you know for instance from “Sorrow” that I take a great deal of trouble to make progress in that respect.

But you will see when you come to the studio that besides the seeking for the outline I have, just like everyone else, a feeling for the power of colour. And that I do not object to making watercolours; but the foundation of them is the drawing, and then from the drawing many other branches beside the watercolour sprout forth, which will develop in me in time as in everybody who loves his work.

I have attacked that old whopper of a pollard willow, and I think it is the best of the watercolours: a gloomy landscape – that dead tree near a stagnant pool covered with reeds, in the distance a car shed of the Rhine Railroad, where the tracks cross each other; dingy black buildings, then green meadows, a cinder path, and a sky with shifting clouds, grey with a single bright white border and the depth of blue where the clouds for an instant are parted [F947, JH 164]. In short, I wanted to make it as the signal man in his smock and with his little red flag must see and feel it when he thinks: “It is gloomy weather today.”

I have worked with great pleasure these last days, though now and then I still feel the effects of my illness.

Of the drawings which I will show you now I think only this: I hope they will prove to you that I am not remaining stationary in my work, but progress in a direction that is reasonable. As to the money value of my work, I do not pretend to anything else than that it would greatly astonish me if my work were not just as saleable in time as that of others. Whether that will happen now or later I cannot of course tell, but I think the surest way, which cannot fail, is to work from nature faithfully and energetically. Feeling and love for nature sooner or later find a response from people who are interested in art. It is the painter's duty to be entirely absorbed by nature and to use all his intelligence to express sentiment in his work, so that it becomes intelligible to other people. To work for the market is in my opinion not exactly the right way, but on the contrary involves deceiving the amateurs. And true painters have not done so, rather the

sympathy they received sooner or later came because of their sincerity. That is all I know about it, and I do not think I need know more. Of course it is a different thing to try to find people who like your work, and who will love it – that of course is permitted. But it must not become a speculation, that would perhaps turn out wrong and would certainly cause one to lose time that ought to be spent on the work itself.

Of course you will find in my watercolours things that are not correct, but that will improve with time. But know it well, I am far from clinging to a system or being bound by one. Such a thing exists more in the imagination of Tersteeg, for instance, than in reality. As to Tersteeg, you understand that my opinion of him is quite personal, and that I do not want to thrust upon you this opinion that I am forced to have. So long as he thinks about me and says about me the things you know, I cannot regard him as a friend, nor as being of any use to me; quite the opposite. And I am afraid that his opinion of me is too deeply rooted ever to be changed, the more so since, as you say yourself, he will never take the trouble to reconsider some things and to change. When I see how several painters here, whom I know, have problems with their watercolours and paintings, so that they cannot bring them off I often think: friend, the fault lies in your drawing. I do not regret for one single moment that I did not go on at first with watercolour and oil painting. I am sure I shall make up for that if only I work hard, so that my hand does not falter in drawing and in the perspective: but when I see young painters compose and draw from memory – and then haphazardly smear on whatever they like, also from memory – then study it at a distance, and put on a very mysterious, gloomy face in the endeavour to find out what in heaven's name it may look like, and finally make something of it, always from memory it sometimes disgusts me, and makes me think it all very tedious and dull.

The whole thing makes me sick!

But those gentlemen go on asking me, not without a certain patronizing air, "if I am not painting as yet?" Now I too on occasion sit and improvise, so to speak, at random on a piece of paper, but I do not attach any more value to this than to a rag or a cabbage leaf.

And I hope you will understand that when I continue to stick to drawing I do so for two reasons, most of all because I want to get a firm hand for drawing, and secondly because painting and watercolouring cause a great many expenses which bring no immediate recompense, and those expenses double and redouble ten times when one works on a drawing which is not correct enough.

And if I got in debt or surrounded myself with canvases and papers all daubed with paint without being sure of my drawing, then my studio would soon become a sort of hell, as I have seen some studios look. As it is I always enter it with pleasure and work there with animation. But I do not believe that you suspect me of unwillingness. It only seems to me that the painters here argue in the following way. They say: you must do this or that; if one does not do it, or not exactly so, or if one says something in reply, there follows a: "so you know better than I?" So that immediately, sometimes in less than five minutes, one is in fierce altercation, and in such a position that neither party can go forward or back. The least hateful result of this is that one of the parties has the presence of mind to keep silent, and in some way or other makes a quick exit through some opening. And one is almost inclined to say: confound it, the painters are almost like a family, namely, a fatal combination of persons with contrary interests, each of whom is opposed to the rest, and two or more are of the same opinion only when it is a question of combining together to obstruct another member. This definition of the word family, my dear brother, is, I hope, not always true, especially not when it concerns painters or our own family.

With all my heart I wish peace may reign in our own family, and I remain with a handshake.

Yours, Vincent

This is nearly enough the effect of the pollard willow, only in the watercolour itself there is no black, except a broken one.

Where in this little sketch the black is darkest, there in the watercolour are the strongest effects, dark green, brown and grey. Well, adieu, and believe me that sometimes I laugh heartily, because people suspect me of all kinds of malignity and absurdities, of which I do not nourish an inkling. (I who am really nothing but a friend of nature. of study. of work, and of people in particular.)

Well, hoping to see you soon, with a handshake,

Yours, Vincent