

Letter 235
The Hague, 1 October 1882

My dear Theo,

Just a word to acknowledge the safe receipt of your letter, for the contents of which my hearty thanks.

I have done hardly anything but watercolours these last few days. Enclosed is a small sketch of a large one [F 970, JH 222]. You may remember Mooijman's State Lottery office at the top of Spuistraat. I passed it one rainy morning when a crowd of people were standing outside waiting to get their lottery tickets. Most of them were little old women and the sort of people of whom one cannot tell what they do or how they live, but who evidently scrape and struggle to make their way through life.

Of course, superficially a small crowd of people like that so patently interested in "Today's Draw" is something to make you and me smile, neither of us giving two pins for the lottery.

But I was struck by that small group and their expectant expressions, and while I did the sketch it assumed a greater and deeper significance for me than it had at first sight. It seems to me that it takes on more significance when one views it as: the poor and money. However, that is true of nearly all groups of figures – one must think about them before one can tell what one is looking at. The keen interest in, and the illusions about, the lottery may seem rather childish to us, but are serious indeed when we think of their counterpart, the misery and the sort of efforts de perdu [forlorn efforts] of those poor wretches to find salvation, as they think, through a lottery ticket possibly paid for with their last pennies, money that should have gone on food.

Be that as it may, I am trying my hand at a large watercolour of it. And am also doing one of a pew, which I saw in a small church in the Geest attended by the almshouse people (in these parts they are called, very expressively orphan men and women).

Once again hard at work drawing. I sometimes think there is nothing nicer than drawing.

This is a part of that pews piece – there are other heads, of men, in the background [F 967, JH 225]. Things like this are difficult, however, and don't always work straight away. When they do work, it's sometimes the end result of a whole series of failures.

Speaking of orphan men, I was interrupted while writing these lines by the arrival of my model. And I worked with him until dark. He was wearing a large old overcoat (which lends him a curiously broad figure) [F 962, JH 212].

I think you may perhaps like this collection of orphan men in their Sunday best and their working clothes [F 969, JH 211; F 956a, JH 210; F 959, JH 244; F 958, JH 251; F 963, JH 297; F 965, JH 298].

Then I got him sitting with a short pipe as well. He has a nice bald head, large (N.B. deaf) ears and white side-whiskers.

I did this sketch at dusk, but perhaps you can just make out the composition. Once it's all together, it's quickly drawn, but it wasn't all that easy to put it together and I wouldn't say that I've put it together as well as I would have liked. I should like to paint it, with the figures about one foot high, or a little less, and the composition a little wider. But I don't know if I'll do it. It would need a large canvas, and if things go wrong it could mean quite a bit of money wasted. So, much as I should like to do it, I think that if I carry on with my typical figures, these things will come by themselves. They will spring naturally from the studies after the model, be it in this or in another form, but with the same sentiment.

I am beginning to see more and more how useful and essential it is to keep hold of one's studies after the model. Though they have less value for others, the one who made them will recognize the model in them and will be reminded vividly of how things were.

If you get a chance, please try to return some of my old studies. I hope that I shall be able to do better things with them in time.

It goes without saying that in that group of figures, of which I am sending you a quick black sketch, there were many splendid things in colour – blue smocks and brown jackets, white, black and yellowish workmen's trousers, faded shawls, an overcoat that had turned greenish, white bonnets and black top hats, muddy paving stones and boots setting off pale or weather-beaten faces. And it all cries out for watercolour or oils. Well, I am hard at it. I count on your writing again – you will, won't you? And once more thanks for the timely remittance which is indispensable if I am to carry on working hard. Goodbye, my dear fellow, let me shake your hand warmly in thought, and believe me,

Ever yours, Vincent

There is a bit more foreground in the watercolour – here, the figures are too prominent and the eye doesn't have enough command of the foreground.

[Sketch 'The State Lottery', JH 223, was enclosed with the letter.]