

The Hague, c. 20 – 24 February 1883

Dear Theo,

I wanted to write you last Sunday already, but I waited a little because I was trying to do something and its outcome was uncertain. A few weeks ago, I read Fritz Reuter's *Ut mine Festungstid*, in which he describes, in the most witty way, how Fritz Reuter and others who were confined in a fortress tried to make their life as comfortable as possible and to obtain several privileges from the town major.

That book gave me the idea of attacking my landlord about certain improvements which would make work easier for me.

And several times I have gone down to Voorburg, where he lives, in order to find out if he would do something for me.

There were old shutters and boards which I wanted to use lying around there, but it was hard to get them. But I have them now.

You know there are three windows in the studio. They let in far too much light, even when I cover them, and for a long time I have been thinking about how to remedy this.

But he refused to do anything unless I paid for it. But now, after a new attack, I have six shutters and about six long boards.

Those shutters are sawed in two now, so that both the upper and lower halves can be opened or closed at will, and the light let in or shut out from either above or below.

From this little scratch you will see that it is pretty slick. And the boards are for a big closet in the alcove to put away drawings, prints, books, and to hang up different smocks and jackets, old coats, shawls, hats, and last but not least, the sou'wester – all the things which I need for the models.

I have always paid the landlord regularly, and now I told him briefly and succinctly that if he thought the rent low, I wouldn't contradict this, but that I wanted him to consider that for me the rent itself was very heavy, and that I could not work well in this way and couldn't make progress before I had better light.

That if he wouldn't change it, I, for my part, should really have to take another studio.

That I wouldn't mind it if I had the money, but that under the circumstances I couldn't pay more than I did. So that to pay a higher rent was out of the question, and my staying or leaving would depend on his consenting to these improvements; if he didn't mind my leaving, well, we would separate on good terms, without more ado.

Well, then he said No, he would do something, and so we at last arranged that I should only have to pay a few guilders in wages. He has been to the studio several times and is not exactly a penny pincher, though he is rather sharp (something of a Yankee), and the studio looked better than he had anticipated (he hadn't been there since last July) – at least, once in the studio he gave his consent, and even more readily than I had expected.

If one had to deal with people only inside the studio! But personally I cannot get on well with people outside of it, and cannot get them to do anything.

I've been drawing a few figures, rather large-size, bust or half-length, which, with a few others I already had, will become a kind of decoration for the hall and stairs, though they are really nothing but ordinary studies.

So you can see from all this that I have thrown myself headlong into it again, in order to get new ideas.

For instance, in Voorburg, when I went with him to pick out that wood, I saw beautiful things of workmen in a shed, and digging a cellar, and laying the foundation of a house. Then I thought again of the description you once gave me of those workmen in Montmartre when you witnessed an accident in a stone quarry.

You know, I already had something in front of the windows, namely some canvas stretched on rods. This can be used for something else now, that is, it will make a very good background covered with a darker or lighter material – if one wants to draw heads, for instance.

You understand that I can also shut one or two of the windows now, and so get one general light which will make the effects much stronger; they used to be neutralized by reflections or diffuse light.

If I had had to pay for it myself, the job would have been quite out of the question because it would have been too expensive; but as it is, I am mighty glad to have it.

I had felt the necessity for better light, especially when making those last drawings – for instance, those heads I sent you in which I used a deeper black.

I hope everything will turn out well, but from this little scratch, you can see it is so simple that it must turn out well.

How miserably these modern houses are constructed nowadays, compared to what they might be if they tried to make them a little more cozy. Compare a window of the present with one of Rembrandt's time. At that time everyone seemed to feel the need for a special kind of tempered light which doesn't seem to exist any more – at least they seem to aim at making it cold, harsh and unfeeling.

The workmen's houses were all right in the beginning, but I don't see that they've progressed any in the last twenty or thirty years. Quite the opposite, the attractiveness is disappearing more and more, and is being replaced by something cold, systematic and methodical, which is becoming more and more unsatisfactory.

If I could have afforded it, I should have had the windows fixed this way. It wouldn't have cost so much more if we hadn't had to use the blinds we had. The only difference is that each pane would have had a separate shutter, so that the shutters would have been a little smaller. But this way one could easily build a nice, pleasant window. But one can't have everything. And, in fact, a broad windowsill which one can sit on goes with it, but this house hasn't anything like that.

I am very eager for your letter and news of your patient. I hope that she is in good spirits and that the recovery is normal and rapid. But sometimes things don't go so smoothly and rapidly, there is almost always some complication or other – at least, one must always be watchful.

Last week I again read Notre Dame by Victor Hugo, which I had already read, more than ten years ago. Do you know what I found in it, at least, thought I found in it, so that I don't doubt Victor Hugo meant such a thing? I found Thijs Maris in Quasimodo.

Probably most people who read Notre Dame have the impression that Quasimodo was a kind of fool. But, like myself, you would not find Quasimodo ridiculous, and, like myself, you would feel the truth of what Hugo says, "Pour ceux qui savent que Quasimodo a existé, maintenant 'Notre Dame' est vide. Car non seulement il en était l'habitant mais il en était l'âme." ["For those who know that Quasimodo once existed, 'Notre Dame' is now empty. For not only did he live there, but he was the soul of it."]

Taking Notre Dame as a symbol of that tendency in art which found its expression, for instance, in Leys and De Groux (sometimes), and Lagye, De Vriendt and Henri Pille, one can apply to Thijs Maris the words, "Maintenant il y a un vide pour ceux qui savent qu'il a existé, car il en était l'âme, et l'âme de cat art-là c'était lui." Well, Thijs Maris still exists, but not in his full bloom and strength, not unscathed; and disenchanted in so far as he can be disenchanted.

One of the most stupid things about the painters here is that even now they laugh at Thijs Maris. I think that as terrible as suicide. Why, as suicide? Because Thijs Maris is so much the personification of everything high and noble that in my opinion a painter cannot mock him without lowering himself. Whoever doesn't understand Maris, so much the worse for him; those who have understood him, mourn him, and regret that such a man has been broken. "Noble lame, vil fourreau" [A noble blade, a vile sheath] is applicable to Thijs Maris and to Quasimodo. "Dans mon âme je suis beau." [Within my soul I am beautiful.]

Well, write soon, if you haven't done so already. And believe me, with a handshake,

Yours, Vincent